From Models of God to a Model of Gods: How Whiteheadian Metaphysics Facilitates Western Language Discussion of Divine Multiplicity

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In today's society, models of God are challenged to account for more than the postmodern context in which Western Christianity finds itself; they should also consider the reality of religious pluralism. Non-monotheistic religions present a particular challenge to Western theological and philosophical God-modeling because they require a model of Gods. This paper uses an African traditional religion as a case study to problematize the effects of monotheism on philosophical models of God. The desire to uphold the image of a singular God tends to invalidate religious experiences that deviate from a given scientifically-verifiable norm. It also mischaracterizes the concept of divinity in religions that maintain divine multiplicity. That is, scholars of African traditional religions affirm that "polytheism" is not an accurate naming of their traditions; rather these religions affirm a community of gods. I propose a Whiteheadian process model that describes a community of gods that has active interaction with the temporal world. Such a model not only broadens conversations of religious pluralism for Western-trained religious scholars, but also acknowledges the Western context in which many practitioners of African traditional religions live.

The question before us is: Does process theism do that? Can if offer a plausible model of God? Or more accurately, can it give us the kind of "theology for today", about which McFague speaks? When I think about what a "theology for today" must do, both independent from and in light of the criteria that McFague articulates, my attention is immediately drawn to the issue of religious pluralism. While McFague is focused on the challenge of ecological destruction in the face of nuclear capacities, and is clearly and unapologetically working within a Christian context, I want to ask

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whether process theism can offer a model of God that can work with a non-Christian religion. My particular concern is African traditional religions, and other religions, that complicate the issue of religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue, because their understanding of the divine is so radically different from the God of Muslim, Jewish and Christian traditions. More particularly, can we speak of, think of, and conceptualize models of God when what is needed is a model of Gods? Can we, and if so how do we, do theology when certain religious traditions do not have a singular image of God, but a belief in a plurality of divinities?

I think it is clear that we must. McFague insists that the religious language and the images we use are connected to how we conceive of God and the world, and that is ultimately connected to how we live in the world in light of our understanding of the divine.[1] I think that Laurel Schneider, one of McFague's former students, best articulates where the theological sticking point is in this discussion, and why process theism can help to address it. In her lecture, "When Hell Freezes Over: Feminism, Ontology and Multiplicity", Schneider argues that the rigid adherence to monotheism creates a "logic of the One" that necessarily creates a marginalized or even demonized and condemned "other". This ultimately leads to the negation and invalidation of the diversity of women's embodied experience – the primary authority by which women can criticize a tradition that excludes them.[2] Let me explain: Looking at the history of Western Christianity, Schneider perceives a rigid (icy, she says) adherence to Oneness, best demonstrated in the radical monotheism of Christian theology. In the "logic of the One", an "other" is created, a condemned other (Hell, she states in this lecture), where we locate the multiplicity of the world that we cannot escape. Multiplicity always rears its head of reality in the face of the logic of the One – the Trinity is an excellent example of this – but there continues to be a drive towards Oneness that usually devalues multiplicity. This "logic of the One" carries with it two major problems. First, Schneider argues, the logic of the One "split[s] the empirical from the intuitive", creating a true/false dualism that is reduced to that which is (usually scientifically or empirically) verifiable. "Without the possibility of ontological multiplicity, there is only being within the horizon of the same, of the One".[3] Second, ontological Oneness is reductive as it seeks to locate existence within a single explanation. In this case, "Otherness, especially otherness that cannot be somehow resolved into a recognizable frame of the One, indicates an error in knowledge or in judgment precisely because fundamental otherness is not real".[4] Schneider connects these assertions with feminist theology because this oneness, has by default, been conceived of as "male"; thus the feminist theological problem is *not* the maleness of God, but the insistence on oneness. This "logic of the One" concerns me personally, as I am interested in, and oftentimes representative of, the Other. Where are women, people of color, those with faith in multiple divinity –

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[1] I think McFague outlines this in greater depth in *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

[2] Laurel Schneider, "When Hell Freezes Over: Feminism, Ontology and Multiplicity," Antoinette Brown Lecture. March 16, 2006, Vanderbilt University Divinity School; published in *The Spire* 26.2 (Summer 2006).

[3] Ibid., 12.

[4] Ibid.

let alone colored women who believe in multiple divinity – in a logic of the One? Where are they in a Western Christian model of God?

Schneider implies that process theism and non-Western religions may hold a theological key to this lock. Schneider is clear that non-Western religions seem to avoid the empirical-intuitive split of the logic of the One: "So many non-Western cultures ... that are open to many other possibilities for existence, make the finality of true/false a non-sequitur, a bit of nonsense".[5] Indeed, "criticism of ontologies of the One has flourished among indigenous storytellers for centuries".[6] But we also need a different logic, Schneider argues; "a resistant logic of becoming" that can be a "fluid logic of multiplicity" where the Other is "neither projected nor contradicted by the One". In this ontology of multiplicity, "there ... simply ... *are*".[7] This ontology of multiplicity must imagine divine multiplicity[8] and incarnational and embodied experience. For, to return to Schneider's feminist beginning, divinity must be concretely, not just metaphorically, embodied in the diversity of women's experiences.

Process theism can do this. Yes, process theology is a theology of becoming. If there is no other constant in this open system, change is constant. "The many become one and are increased by one" over and over again. Process theology is an incarnational theology. It is radically incarnational. The panentheism of process theology, that God is in and yet distinct from the world and that the world is in and yet distinct from God, makes incarnation a universal fact in process theism. As the world conforms to (or simply just responds to) God's initial aim, God is quite literally a part of who we are and what we do. In every moment, we can become an incarnation of God's self, of God. But can process theism imagine divine multiplicity? That is the question I seek to answer.

I believe that it can, and that certain religions demand that it must. African traditional religions have always posed a problem to Western theological categories of "monotheism" and "polytheism". They simply don't fit. I want to use Yoruba traditional religion and its derivatives throughout the world as an example, as a case study.

Traditional Yoruba religion can be described as the worship of a supreme deity, *Olódùmarè*/ *Olórun*,[9] under various forces or deities, the *òrìṣà*. There is no adequate description for the *òrìṣà* outside of the Yoruba universe. They have been variously described as ministers of *Olódùmarè*, forces of nature, angelic forces, lower gods and sub-deities. According to Yoruba stories, many *òrìṣà* are ancestors who did not

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., 11.

[7] Ibid., 13.

[8] Schneider suggests this in the conclusion of her book, *Re-Imagining the Divine: Confronting the Backlash Against Feminist Theology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1998).

[9] Many *òrìṣà* in Yoruba religion have multiple names although they signify the same force. This is partly attributable to the distribution of the religion throughout Yorubaland, and the Yoruba-based religions in the New World. This paper may refer to *Olódùmarè/Olorun, Obatala/ Oriṣa-nla, Orunmila/Ifà, Èṣù/Elegba/ Elegbara*. This paper will also use the "ṣ" to indicate the sound of "sh". There is no consistency in scholarship (usually because of the capability of word processors and attempts to translate into English) so "*àṣẹ*" is also "ashe" and "*òrìṣà*" is also "orisha." Note *òrìṣà* is the same in the plural or singular usage.

return to earth because their *ìwà* (human character or human consciousness) was so closely aligned with the character of *Olódùmarè*. While *Olódùmarè* is neither male nor female, nor embodied, the *òrìṣà* have genders, stories, geographical and natural associations. The *òrìṣà* have their own characteristics, herbs, personalities and devotees. Veneration of the *òrìṣà* is such an important part of Yoruba religion, that the entire religion is often referred to as "*òrìṣà* worship". The telos of Yoruba religion is *ìwà pele*. Yoruba religion identifies 401 *òrìṣà*, with 5 to 10 *òrìṣà* having more importance and appearances than the others.

The wisdom and content of Yoruba is traditionally transmitted orally in the wisdom contained in myths, songs, and the *odù*, verses of wisdom and divination. Through both the Triangular slave trade and contemporary reversionist attempts, the religion of the Yoruba people (of current-day Nigeria) constitutes a base for African-derived religious practices throughout the Caribbean, South America, the United States and Canada. Although all these different manifestations of Yoruba-based religions share a similar cosmology about the structure of the world and key religious concepts, due to the different historical and religious contexts of the encounter between Yoruba religion and the various New World situations, they differ in ritual detail and linguistic referrals. As Yoruba traditional religion travels through space, time and circumstance, it syncretizes, or blends, with other religious and cultural traditions – most particularly Western Christianity and other African traditional religions.

African theologians have wrestled with ways of characterizing the theism of African traditional religions (ATRs) such as Yoruba-based religions. Most of these theologians are responding to the missionary and early anthropological character-ization of ATRs as polytheistic, and therefore animistic, primitive and somehow "lower on the evolutionary scale" of civilization and religions. "[Polytheism] is regarded as the bastion of superstitions, even by Africans".[10] (Alfred North Whitehead himself is guilty of this in *Religion in the Making.*) It is also noteworthy that no African scholar refers to ATRs as "polytheistic" – this is a purely etic description – in part because of its connotations, but also because polytheism is virtually absent from African theologies of the Divine. Polytheism usually means separatism among the gods or a polytheism that "separates the Divine nature into many disparate parts".[11] While African scholars may discuss distinctive and hierarchical relations within divinity, there is never an assertion that there is a separation of natures within the general understanding of the divine.

The logic of the One, however, pushes African scholars into a dualism such that a rejection of polytheism has necessitated an affirmation of monotheism. E. Bolaji Idowu's popular *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* compares creation accounts and stories of the *òrìṣà* to the political structure of the Yoruba to describe the relationship between *Olódùmarè* and the various *òrìṣà*.[12] He describes the *òrìṣà* as the ministers of *Olódùmarè* who do the work of the high God in everyday life just as ancient

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[10] Okechukwu Obannaya, A. (1994). *On Communitarian Divinity: an African Interpretation of the Trinity* (p. 21). New York: Paragon House.

[11] Ibid., 21.

[12] Bolaji Idowu, E. (1994). *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. New York: Wazobia.

kings of the Yoruba had ministers do their work. He argues that traditional Yoruba religion is, therefore, a "diffused monotheism". Idowu concludes that the Yoruba not only knew God before Christian and Muslim contact, but were receptive to it because their beliefs were already monotheistic. Philip Neimark follows suit in *The Way of the Orisa* as he describes *Olódùmarè* as a monotheistic single god of the Yoruba religion and the many *òrìṣà* as energy forces of nature that people must assimilate through the guidance of divination.[13] This places *Olódùmarè* at the remote apex of the religious hierarchy and the *òrìṣà* at the center as energy forces. E. E. Evans-Pritchard argues that ATRs have levels of divinities. In this scheme, the high God is a principle of ultimacy that gives an underlying unity to the multiplicity of deities and spirits. The many powers are understood to be aspects of, or intermediaries for, the One God. These characterizations are problematic because they all reify the ontological Oneness that creates an "Other" out of the practitioners of ATRs. They are, with little success in my opinion, trying to impose a "logic of the One" on a divine multiplicity that will not go away – after all, the multiplicity is strikingly real – there are 10–401 *òrìṣà*. It's difficult to avoid and deny *them*.

In *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual and Community*, Benjamin Ray notes the real problem – the language of monotheism and polytheism (and pantheism[14]). Choosing one of these terms, Ray believes, "distorts the rich diversity of African religious experience by oversimplification".[15] I agree. The problem with having to choose between terms like monotheism and polytheism (and pantheism) is that traditional Yoruba religion has multiple figures that are eternal and active within the finite human world. It is, Ray admits, a problem of how to consider "unity and multiplicity within the same religious system".[16] To make things more complicated, Yoruba traditional religion also maintains that the end of life within the finite world does not necessitate the end of life within a divine or ancestral world, and that there is constant, continuous, embodied (sometimes malevolent, sometimes benevolent) contact between that which is divine, eternal and ancestral, and that which is human, animal and planetary.

The most creative portrayal of African traditional religions is in A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya's *On Communitarian Divinity* where Ogbonnaya critiques his African theologian counterparts for rejecting the Western conception of African religions as polytheistic without offering an alternative proposal that is truly liberating.[17] Too often, he writes, African scholars speak of the Divine in the same way as their Eurocentric counterparts.[18] He believes that they need to use their own experience in conjunction with philosophical categories. What Ogbonnaya refers to as "Eurocentric"

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[13] Neimark, P. J. (1993). *The Way of the Orisa: Empowering Your Life through the ancient African Religion of Ifa*. San Francisco: Harper.

[14] Ray, B. (2000). *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual and Community* (2nd ed.; p.25). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. Ray defines pantheism as "an underlying notion of sacred 'force' or 'power' that permeates the gods, humans and the natural world".

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., 27.

[17] Ogbonnaya, 13–22. He also recapitulates the monotheism/polytheism debate within African traditional religions.

[18] Ibid., x.

is, in my estimation, really the problem of ontological oneness. Also critical of monotheistic and polytheistic characterizations, Ogbonnaya posits a conversation about "a community of gods" under a term he coins as "communotheism".

Communotheism is a divine communalism. "Divine communalism is the position that the Divine is a community of gods who are fundamentally related to one another and ontologically equal while at the same time distinct from one another by their personhood and functions".[19] In communotheism, there is immanence in that there is radical relationality among the members of the divine community and between the divine community and the world, and there is transcendence because geographic distance and "physiological decarnation" (death) cannot destroy the radical relationality. While there is distinction (eroding any real classification of pantheism), there is no idea of a separation between the human and the divine.

Jacob K. Olupona affirms this concept of divine communalism in his description of ancestors. Olupona describes four distinct types of deities within African religious systems.[20] There is a Supreme Being; "lesser deities", where he would locate most of the òrìṣà of whom we have been speaking; "culture heroes", who are "mythic founders of communities and villages who go through an apotheosis after their heroic sojourn on earth";[21] and "ancestors", the deceased members of the lineage of the living. Culture heroes are hard to classify because they seem to have some of the same characteristics of both the lesser deities in that "they are regarded as greater in importance and authority than the ancestors, whose sphere of influence is more or less limited to their lineage and their descendants".[22] Within African traditional religions, "ancestors" have a different role than the lesser deities and culture heroes. At death, a human being can become an "ancestor"; however not all deceased persons are regarded as "ancestors". In order to be an "ancestor", one must have lived a morally exemplary life, lived to a very old age, died a "good death" (not by a disease such as smallpox or leprosy), and received a proper burial by one's family. Ancestors are not simply human beings who maintain activity after death. "Through the process of death, ancestors undergo a change in their ontological status that makes them into supernatural entities".[23] Ancestors are transformed in the afterlife; they have a divine quality to them. In summary, African traditional religions affirm that human beings can live on after death. The ancestors, along with lesser deities and culture heroes and *Olodumare*, constitute a divine community. Their difference in divinity is one of degree, not kind. There is divine multiplicity.

Any conception of Oneness cannot apply to ATR, says Ogbonnaya, because ATRs do not properly believe that the worship of òrìṣà encroaches on the worship of any "high God", and they do not believe that there is one single personal God who alone deserves worship. If there is oneness, "it is the power or vital principle that is

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[19] Ibid., 23.

[20] Olupona, J. K. (2001). To Praise and to Reprimand: Ancestors and Spirituality in African Society and Culture. In S. J. Friesen (Ed.), *Ancestors in Post-Contact Religion: Roots, Ruptures, and Modernity's Memory* (p. 51). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., 58.

one".[24] In the Yoruba universe, this power is the power of life, àṣẹ, or the power to make things happen.

Ogbonnaya connects communotheism with Tertullian and an African concept of the Trinity. He engages in conversation with Joseph Bracken's Trinitarian theology, and recognizes that there are process roots in his theological construction. I prefer to stay in the realm of ATRs and assert that a Whiteheadian process metaphysic can offer a theology of divine multiplicity, a model of Gods, when we locate the community of gods precisely where Christian Whiteheadian theologians have located the "community of God" (or "kingdom of God" to use the patriarchal monarchistic language that McFague rejects) – in the consequent nature of God.

In Alfred North Whitehead's model of God, God is an actual entity that is the chief exemplification of the metaphysical principles of the working of the world. The process God is dipolar, with a primordial nature and a consequent nature. The primordial nature of God contains all the infinite possibilities that will be directed towards the actual entities of the world. The consequent nature of God receives the actual entities of the world, feeling them as the world has experienced them. Whereas the two natures of God can be separated in abstraction, they form a unity that receives, evaluates and lures the world to a vision of the common good.

In the fifth chapter of *Process and Reality*, Whitehead describes the "kingdom of heaven" within the consequent nature of God. I start here because the "kingdom of heaven", is also coined in variations of the biblical term *basileia*: the reign of God, the kingdom of God, the city of God, and in feminist theological parlance of inclusive language, "the community of God". In classical Christian theism, the kingdom of heaven is the realm wherein evil is eradicated, God's will prevails, and the righteous dwell. The kingdom of heaven is the believer's telos and current ideal. It is the place where we want to be sent when "the last things" come about, and it is also the standard by which we are to work to eradicate evil on earth.[25]

For Whitehead, the ultimate evil is the perpetual perishing of the temporal world. That is, as each actual entity becomes something new, it is no longer what it once was. So as each actual entity is constantly in the process of becoming, it is also perpetually perishing. It remains only as it has influenced other actual entities. In this sense, it is immortal because its influence is felt beyond its own perishing. But it is only objectively immortal since it no longer exists for itself. It exists only as it has been felt by other actual entities. Objective immortality within the world does not provide the everlastingness that the world craves, the everlastingness that generally frames our ideas of "heaven".

As the completed actual entity increases the manyness of the world by one, it is also felt by God – received into the consequent nature. In this sense, every actual entity is a part of God and thus lives on everlastingly in God. That is, God is constantly receiving from the world, but retaining in God's own everlasting present all that is past in the temporal world. Thus, one can say that no matter how much our

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[24] Ogbonnaya 26.

[25] For a concise explanation of eschatology in classical theism, see Basinger, D. (1988). Eschatology: Will Good Ultimately Triumph in the Process System? In *Divine Power in Process Theism: A Philosophical Critique* (69–84). Albany: SUNY Press. For a more thorough explanation, see Suchocki, M. H. (1988). *End of Evil: Process Eschatology in Historical Context*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

actions and decisions may fade in the course of time, they matter in the divine life.[26] The consequent nature of God receives every aspect of the world and highlights the best of it.

The consequent nature of God also receives the multiplicity of the world and holds it in a unity. Whitehead writes that "[the consequent nature of God] is just as much one immediate fact as it is an unresting advance beyond itself. [Like all other actual entities,] the actuality of God must also be understood as a multiplicity of actual components in the process of creation. This is God in [God's] function as the kingdom of heaven".[27] Simply put, in the consequent nature of God, the loss of perpetual perishing does not occur. Heaven is this place where immortality is perfectly or completely achieved. To use Whitehead's language: "The problems of the fluency of God and of the everlastingness of passing experience are solved by the same factor in the universe. This factor [the kingdom of heaven] is the temporal world perfected by its reception and its reformation, as a fulfillment of the primordial appetition which is the basis of all order".[28] Heaven is received and reformed. God receives the world in the consequent nature, but also evaluates the world according to intensity and harmony. God orders the experiences of the world and forms a vision that will be used to constitute the initial aim that will be given to actual entities within the world.

For me, the emphasis is not upon locating a place where evil does not exist (although I do not argue this point within Whiteheadian metaphysics), but I'm interested in finding a place where there is everlastingness or immortality, and multiplicity is held together and affirmed. This "place" is in the consequent nature of Whitehead's God.

In the consequent nature, all actual entities live on and participate in God eternally, to the ordering of what has been received (God's concrescing), to the primordial nature where the vision is returned to the world. This "heaven" or the "community of God" is both something that is apart from the world – in God – and yet in the world. Whitehead concludes: "The kingdom of heaven is with us today.... What is done in the world is transformed into a reality in heaven [or the community of God], and the reality in [the community of God] passes back into the world".[29]

While the term "community of God", substitutes for "heaven", in terms of inclusive language, "community of God" also describes a kind of multiplicity – the manyness of the world that finds immortality within God. It is more properly "God's community", or when valuated, God's ideal community. But why must it be just the manyness of the world? Why not the manyness of the divine? And, as a fair question, why not locate this manyness in the primordial nature of God?

For practitioners of ATR, divine multiplicity is not a possibility, but it is a reality. This alone removes divine multiplicity from the primordial nature where Whiteheadians

[26] Suchocki, M. H. (1988). *End of Evil: Process Eschatology in Historical Context* (p. 122). Albany: State University of New York Press.

[27] Whitehead, A. N. (1978). *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (p. 350). In D. R. Griffin & D. W. Sherburne (Eds.). New York: The Free Press.

[28] Ibid., 347.

[29] Ibid., 351.

locate the eternal objects, or the possibilities available for actualization within the world. Following Olupona's discussion of deities, we must also acknowledge that divine multiplicity is composed as much of a "primordial God", *Olódùmarè*, and *òrìṣà* who were present at creation and are just as "primordial", as it is of "culture heroes" like *Şango*, who is treated as an *òrìṣà*, but whose stories describe him as an earthly king in Yorubaland who disappeared into the earth and became an *òrìṣà*. Likewise, those who Olupona identifies as "ancestors" are clearly individuals who once led a human life. These are all concrete divinities. Some are received into the divine realm and transformed into a divine life. Others appear to be primordially divine. Thus they exist (but do not remain) in the consequent nature. As they are related to the primordial nature, the community of Gods is available to reception by the world, available for incarnation in the world.

Admittedly, this description relies upon Marjorie Suchocki's construction of subjective immortality – that God can know us fully (and others in the world can know in part) as we know ourselves. Suchocki admits that the distinction between subjective and objective immortality, what Whitehead describes as occurring within the consequent nature, while important, is not totalizing. The concept of subjective immortality enlarges the scope of how the present prehends the past and the way God prehends the world. Like Olupona's understanding of the four kinds of deities, objective and subjective immortality reflect "a difference of degree rather than kind ... for each mode indicates and to a degree includes the other".[30]

Suchocki uses the concept of subjective immortality to assert the way in which a satisfied actual occasion experiences itself. In the consequent nature of God, the actual occasion continues to experience itself as itself, itself in God, and God's valuation of itself. This allows Suchocki to describe a post-historical existence for the actual occasion or a kind of life after death in the consequent nature of God.[31] This occasion is now broader than it was in its satisfaction because it can feel itself in relation to other occasions in the temporal world. This is possible because of God's concrescence. God compares and contrasts the occasions according to the primordial vision. In this process, an occasion can feel its relationships to other occasions. To use my language, because of subjective immortality in God, a community of Gods can continue to experience themselves as themselves, themselves in this singular actual entity that Whitehead calls God, and the experiences of the world. The community of Gods exists in the consequent nature, therefore, not just with the fact of their existence, but with the subjectivity of their existence – with experience, knowledge and agency.

The community of Gods maintains constant relationship, interaction and embodiment with and in the world. In the initial aim, the content of the consequent nature is objectively immortal and partially subjectively immortal, and available for prehension by the present world. Here I also assume Suchocki's description of God's initial aim as more than a propositional sentence that God offers to us: "God will indeed offer guidance, but the guidance will not be in the form of a clear voice in the

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[30] Suchocki., 96.

[31] This (inside the consequent nature of God) is where one might locate an "ancestral realm" wherein ancestors commune with one another and God while "looking in" on the activity of the temporal world.

night, but in the form of options to weigh, factors to consider, friends to consult".[32] In other words, there is multiplicity within the initial aim. For Suchocki, this is a multiplicity of available and relevant possibilities. For me, this is also a multiplicity of gods. Process theism offers a theology of divine multiplicity, a model of Gods.

There is still a problem with what I have laid out. How can I claim divine multiplicity and locate the community of Gods within the consequent nature of the singular actual entity that Whitehead calls "God". Is there one God, in alignment with Whitehead's metaphysic of God as a singular dipolar actual entity with a consequent and primordial nature with a community of Gods that is somehow located within the one God? If I affirm this, I have only reiterated Idowu's idea of "diffused monotheism". Rather I take Whitehead's proposition of an everlasting actual entity with consequent and primordial aspects, and affirm that it really *is* an actual entity in the most basic understanding. This everlasting actual entity is a "drop of experience", an event, a verb, if you will. Recalling Obannaya's assertion that the unifying one to the divine community is this power, then that actual entity, that gerund verb, that experience that is everlastingly primordial and consequent is what the Yoruba call *àṣẹ,* "the power to make things happen"[33] *Àṣẹ* is the name given to a fundamental element in the Yoruba cosmos. It is spiritual command, a morally neutral force that is found in all things everywhere in varying degrees. It imbues all creation empowering people, objects and natural elements with the influence of *Olódùmarè* and the *òrìṣà,* and yet the people who possess it also determine it. It is the life-force of creation and the *òrìṣà.* It is quantifiable, movable, transferable, giveable and receivable as if it is a substance, and yet it is power, action, ability and efficacy. It is "dynamic stuff" without which the world cannot operate.

I believe that this theology of divine multiplicity is consonant with McFague's requirements for a theology of today. To be more true to McFague's theology, I should discuss more than a conceptual model. I should also talk in images, pictures, metaphors, stories and narrative.[34] This is integral to McFague's metaphorical theology. While this essay does not address the issue of narrative and story as I would like, it is important to say that African traditional religions are narrative religions. The *odu,* or wisdom literature, are stories. We know the personalities of the *òrìṣà,* not through writings or doctrinal statements, but through stories about how they interact with each other and the world. In other words, all I have said and most of what is known about African traditional religions is through orally transmitted stories and divine embodiment in ritual, nature and in the phenomenon that anthropologists call spirit possession.

To return to the beginning: I've subtitled this paper, "How Whiteheadian Metaphysics Facilitates Western Language Discussion of Divine Multiplicity". As I posit a model of Gods in process theism, I'm expressing Yoruba traditional religion in Western philosophical language. I think that this begs an important question: Must Western intellectual thought have language and concepts for non-Western religions?

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[32] Suchocki, M. H. (1994). *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (p. 60). New York: Continuum.

[33] Thompson, R. F. (1983). *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (p. 5). New York: Vintage.

[34] McFague, S. (1975). *Speaking in Parables: a Study of Metaphor and Theology.* Philadelphia: Fortress.

Why not, one can argue, live in a Yoruba universe? Perhaps we should stop trying to translate non-Western religions into a Western language that was never intended to account for non-Western religious experience. Perhaps we should learn Yoruba language, understand *Olódùmarè*, *òrìṣà,* and *egungun* from the inside out, from within the religion itself. Perhaps we should insist on this language world as primary for the discussion of Yoruba traditional religion. My honest answer is that we should. We should live in a Yoruba language world when discussing Yoruba religion. No, we don't need Western intellectual thought to have language for non-Western religions; the religions have their own language.

So my answer is "no, but it helps". In the academy, it helps. Western intellectual language, a model of Gods based on a Western philosophical system, allows those of us who identify as religious scholars to engage ATRs and other faiths with divine multiplicity in our work in religious pluralism. This is not unlike John Cobb's work with the non-theistic Buddhist faith and Whitehead's concept of creativity.[35]

It's also important to have Western language for ATRs because many of the practitioners of ATRs live in a Western world. Yoruba-based religions constitute a world religion. Blended forms of traditional Yoruba religion exist throughout the Americas. The religion has been even further syncretized in the Diaspora of those practitioners. In the Americas, Haiti's *Vodun*, Cuba's *Santería*, Brazil's *Candomblé*, and Trinidad's Shango and Orisha Worship are Yoruba-based religions. These Yoruba-based religions are the result of a unique religious and cultural blending between the Yoruba religion of African slaves and Catholicism, or in the case of Trinidad's Shango, Baptist faith. When I teach traditional Yoruba religion, my students always ask me how many people in the United States and Caribbean practice *Vodun*. I tell them that it's impossible to get accurate data on that question because most of these people go to mass. Many people who adhere to ATRs have dual religious affiliation. Tracey E. Hucks investigates the spirituality of an African American woman who maintains dual affiliation as a religious leader in a black Christian denomination and a Yoruba-based religious tradition.[36] Traditional understandings of an individual who adheres to a single religious tradition do not often apply. We need, Hucks insists, another term all together to discuss this practice. To further complicate this point, most practitioners of ATRs outside of Africa speak English, Spanish, Portuguese or French as their first language. What I am saying is that people who practice Yoruba traditional religion, this non-Western religion, live in a Western context, often within or alongside a Western Christian religion and while speaking a Western language. The use of Western intellectual thought in discussing this non-Western religion is not just a convenience for Western-trained scholars, but a reflection of the lived reality of the faithful.

In conclusion, I find that process theism offers a rich model of Gods through a construction of a community of Gods located in Whitehead's consequent nature of God. It boldly and unapologetically uses Western philosophical language to talk about the divine multiplicity found within the traditional African Yoruba-based

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[35] Cobb, J. B. Jr. (1982). *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism*. Philadelphia: Fortress.

[36] Hucks, T. E. (2001). 'Burning with a Flame in America': African American Women in African-Derived Traditions. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion,17*(2), 89–90.

religions. But this is not just a model for philosophers – as wonderful as that can be. Affirming divine multiplicity, a model of Gods, is a radical theological act. Like McFague's description of her models of God, "its radical character lies not primarily in programs for revolutionary action but in changes of consciousness, the assumption being that a new imaginative picture of the relationship between God and the world must precede action".[37] A model of Gods is an act of decentering, a rejection of ontological Oneness, and a refusal to accept the position of "Other" as other. It is a postmodern, feminist, African-centered theological act.

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[37] McFague, *Models of God*, xiv.