INTRODUCTION

Questions about the nature of the universe have worried thinkers from the days of Thales of Miletus (640-546 B.C.), the first philosopher, to our own – a fact acknowledged by Bernard Fonlon in his book *The Genuine Intellectual* (1978:104). Thales tried in vain to discover whether there was any law governing the universe, leaving the relay baton to his fellow Greeks as well as to ancient Egyptians and Babylonians. Forces inimical to the advancement of man and to the amelioration of his environment have largely fostered the African's speculations on the nature of the universe and the principles that govern it.

The thoughts which man has nurtured concerning the nature of the universe at various times and in various localities inevitably reflect the physical and intellectual environment in which he lived, including, above all, the interest and culture of that particular society to which he belonged. For, in attempting to bring order into the universe as a whole, he must subscribe to those lines of thought by which he has already brought order into that portion with which he is most familiar. The resulting cosmology will accordingly reflect the sociological, philosophical or scientific predilections of the individual and his group. Cosmologies, as may therefore be expected, run the gamut from simple pictures projected from the everyday objects of a traditional society, through the metaphysical constructs of the ideational faculty, to the sophisticated mathematical models presented by modern science.

In ancient times and through the Middle Ages, for instance, people regarded everything outside the solar system as an unchanging background of fixed stars. In the view of

almost everybody, the sun, the moon and the five known planets revolved around the earth and the earth was the centre of the universe. This view of the solar system, called the Ptolemaic system, was particularly propagated by the last of the famous scientists of the ancient world, the astronomer and geographer of Alexandria named Ptolemy (Claudius Ptolaeus). The Polish astronomer Copernicus published a work in 1543 in which he rejected the idea that the sun and the stars revolved around the earth as a centre, as was then taught in all the universities (Robinson, Breasted, and Smith 1951:616). He showed that the sun, on the contrary, was the centre around which the earth and the rest of the planets revolved, and that the reason the stars seem to go around the earth each day is that the globe revolves on its axis. Later scientists supported the theory of Copernicus and, by the development and use of mathematics, made great contributions to the knowledge of astronomy, an allied science to cosmology. Among these was Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) a German who formulated several important laws describing the motion of the heavenly bodies. Kepler showed that the planets follow an elliptical and not a circular orbit around the sun and that there is a fixed relationship between their distance from the sun and their revolution. Other contributions were made by people like the Italian scientist Galilei Galileo (1564-1642) who, by the use of a telescope that he had perfected, was able to behold many heavenly bodies never seen before, and the renowned English mathematician Isaac Newton (1642-1727) – famous for his description of the universal law of gravitation.

The reflections and writings of these men of science, among others, point to the fact that the universe can be described through its physical manifestations: the earth, the moon, the stars, the sun and so on – with the existence of

cosmic boundaries enabling each entity to follow its own direction without apparent interference from others. A cosmic balance, however, regulates all things from the smallest unit to the largest. The interplay among the cosmic bodies and entities aims at enriching each other.

The same universe can be seen in mystical and purely speculative terms embracing a variety of cosmic forces, some of which can be controlled, some of which can be influenced through specific agents and some of which can never be controlled or influenced. Speculations about the history, quality and organization of the universe may not be taken seriously by men of the mathematical and pure sciences but they constitute the subject matter of the cosmology of each group of people in the world. Such speculations, that find expression in myths, legends, ritual performance, and incantations, are part and parcel of an integrated philosophy linking cosmic phenomena with the ultimate meaning of life. For instance, the Hindu monistic view of the universe whose every part is seen as alive and a manifestation of the total divinity is fundamental to Hinduism, despite the hosts of gods and superhuman beings with which its mythology teems (Cotterell 1990:59). The multitudes of apparitions are only aspects of the eternal cycle of creation, duration, and dissolution. By contrast, the cosmological assumptions of the majority of African peoples point to the dual nature of the universe, described through its physical (visible) and spiritual (invisible) manifestations. This duality translates the knowable and the unknowable in the universe and the need for man to come to terms with both for his own good or welfare.

Views about the nature and functioning of the universe, including the way man relates to various entities therein, are strikingly diverse. Whereas the cosmology of most African

peoples places man at the centre of creation, for instance, Taoist cosmology ascribes to man a very low position in relation to other entities that make up the universe. He is not the centre of creation but rather a small figure in the great sweep of natural things (Cotterell 122-123). The Selish, one of the oldest of the North American Indian peoples, believe that the universe comprises an underworld, earth, and paradise, all of which levels of habitation are supported by a gigantic pillar or post. Amotken, their creator deity, dwells in paradise alone. He is an old man, wise and kind, never changing in concern for his creation (Cotterell 202). In contrast to Selish cosmology, Fon (Benin Republic) cosmology envisages the earth as floating on water. Above the earth are heavenly bodies as on the inner surface of a gourd. Serpentine power, personified as Da, assists in the ordering of this cosmos (Cotterell 249). Furthermore, whereas ancestor cults feature prominently in most traditional African communities, ancestors hardly impinge on the consciousness of the Maasai of East Africa since

> they have no distinct notion of personal survival after death. The corpse is normally left in the bush to be eaten by hyenas: at most the relatives of an elder would pile heavy stones on top. The souls of old men, they believe in particular, may return in the form of snakes. (Cotterell 236)

All these examples, based on the conclusions of men of the experimental sciences as well as on empirical knowledge, point to the fact that cosmology is a science that has preoccupied all

and sundry since creation. Since ideas about the nature of the universe are as diverse as the times, societies, cultures, and minds that propagate them, cosmology, especially from a particular African perspective, is worth the attention given it in a study of this nature.

Based on incantations emanating from the performances of specific rituals, therefore, this study examines the way the peoples of the Western Grasslands of Cameroon perceive the universe – its composition, ordering, and sustenance. It aims at not only highlighting the nature of the universe as comprising many different levels of structures, from inorganic matter up to and including man, but also at showing the ultimate signification or meaning of structures in the complex whole that is the universe. Lastly, it examines the mechanisms through which harmony and order in the universe are maintained or sustained.

A study whose focus is the description and signification of the salient features of the observed universe, in terms of such categories as space, time and matter, calls for a definition of cosmology. Similarly, to discern a people's perception of the cosmos as portrayed in incantations necessitates a definition of the term "incantation" and the whole concept of indigenous religion, given that incantations emanate from ritual performances. Central to this study, therefore, are the words "cosmology", "incantation", and "religion".

In the broadest sense of the word, cosmology is that branch of learning which treats of the universe as an ordered system. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1980:502) the word cosmology

> is derived from the Greek *kovμos* ("order", "harmony", "the world") plus

> λoros ("word", "discourse"). Cosmology is [then] that framework of concepts and relations which man erects, in satisfaction of some emotional or intellectual drive, for the purpose of bringing descriptive order into the world as a whole, including himself as one of its elements.

Edwin Rabbitte (1963:14), on his part, considers cosmology as "the metaphysical study of the material world", and posits that

> [i]ts aim is to discover, by an effort of reflection, the manner of being or "essence" of this world and its signification and place in the totality of the real. This reflection, like all metaphysical reflection, must be based on experience, or contact with the real; hence cosmology presupposes that our intellect is capable of entering into contact with the mode of being that is proper to the material world. This contact is made in our everyday life of sensation, in scientific experiment, and in our action in general on the material world.

The etymology of the word and views on its definition and aims as expressed above reveal the following salient points about cosmology – which points constitute our working definition of the concept. First, the subject relates to the

universe as an ordered system. Secondly, it is confined to a description of the salient features of the observed universe, in terms of such categories as matter, spatial extension, and temporal duration. Lastly, the cosmos is one despite its manifest diversity, and this unity is not simply the unity of a multitude of different realities or beings that are merely juxtaposed in space and time. It is a continuum with a potential multiplicity that is not in any way limited.

As for the word "incantation", the *Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of the English Language* (1965:638) informs us that it is derived from the Latin word incantare, which means to utter a spell or magical words (Latin: incantatio, incantationis). Hence, it defines incantation as "The utterance of magical words for enchantment or exorcism" or "The formula so used". *The World Book Encyclopaedia* (1966:46), on its part, sees an incantation in terms of magic whereby there is the practice of trying to control events by supernatural means. For Kashim Ibrahim Tala (1984:21), "an incantation is a curse or spell recited as part of a ritual and addressed to supernatural forces". He posits elsewhere (1999:48) that "incantations are magically oriented formulaic expression… saturated with mystical powers and loaded with word images that are highly mythopoetic". Following the same line of thought as Tala's, John S. Mbiti (1985:197) in his consideration of the language of incantations admits that "there is mystical power in words". It is this supposed potency of words that pushed (1970:182) to consider an incantation as "a verse or formula believed to be magically effective in manipulating people or things".

It can be deduced from the above that an incantation is a verse form, the words of which are believed to have a magical effect when spoken or chanted during the performance

of rituals or any other occasion that calls for the intervention of the supernatural in human affairs. This verse form manifests itself in such categories as blessings, curses, invocations, prayers and spells.

Suffice it to say, therefore, that it is often not feasible to differentiate a clear-cut category of incantations from the general body of what is termed "religious poetry". Hence, like all other forms of religious poetry, incantations are regarded as expressions of a people's belief system. In a similar vein, Alexander H. Krappe (1964:310) has argued that "the materials of folk-lore have repeatedly been regarded as pertaining in a more or less direct way to the domain of religious beliefs, and a number of folklorists have spoken of them as the 'elder faith' of a given social group". The link between the universe as an ordered system and a people's religious beliefs, therefore, is very evident. Hence, Humphrey Tata Mbuy (1992:8) has argued that:

> Since the world is an ordered whole there must be a source of this order. It could not have been by chance. Furthermore, since this order includes an element of mystery the African believes that the origin of the cosmos must be both intelligent and mysterious. This element of mystery introduces the idea of a superhuman cause of the world, God. As the Bafut man will put it: everything ultimately comes from God (*nwi*)…everything is some- how sacred.

Mbuy's contention points to an idea that is central to the origins and formulations of beliefs – the idea of mystery or the concept of the mysterious. For Africans in particular, such phenomena as the alternation of night and day, the changing seasons, the eclipse, earthquakes, tornadoes, lakes, and epidemics are considered mysterious and have often triggered a deep contemplation with regard to the forces behind them. Such contemplations have often led to the conclusion that there are forces that are behind these phenomena, forces that are stronger than puny man. John S. Mbiti (1985:54), for instance, has reported that the Shona of Zimbabwe think that earthquakes that occur fairly frequently in and around the region of the Great Rift Valley in eastern-central Africa are caused by God walking in them; and that the Ankore, Basoga and Kiga of Uganda believe that there are "earthquake divinities" responsible for causing the earth to tremble. This and other beliefs have led Africans to conclude that there is another world, or other worlds, outside the human plane of existence, hence the need arises once in a while to reach out to these worlds through ritual practice. These beliefs and practices amount to what can be termed religion.

Many authors or scholars on the subject of traditional or indigenous religion seem to be unanimous about the religious consciousness of the African, to the extent that it is no longer fashionable to raise doubts about the existence of indigenous African religions or about the religiosity of Africans. In his book *The Lower Niger and Its Tribes* (1906:429) Arthur Glyn Leonard writes about the Igbo:

> They are…a truly religious people of whom it can be said as it has been said of the Hindus, that they eat religiously,

> drink religiously, dress religiously, sin religiously…the religion of these natives is their existence and their existence is their religion.

In a similar vein, John S. Mbiti (1985:1) has observed that:

> Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it.

According to Geoffrey Parrinder (1976:27) "religion enters into the life of every individual" in Africa and it is for that reason that colonial administrators saw Africans as an "incurably religious people" (9).

Like all Africans, the peoples of the Western Grasslands of Cameroon are naturally and profoundly religious. This seems to present a more realistic picture than the sense of an all-encompassing synthesis as embedded in Leonard's assertion.

Francis A. Arinze (1970:8) defines religion from two perspectives: "subjective" and "objective". He says subjective religion is "the consciousness of one's dependence on a transcendent Being and the tendency to worship Him", while objective religion is "the body of truths, laws, and rites by which man is subordinated to the transcendent Being". Common to the two points of view are "transcendent Beings", "man" and the idea of "dependence" (subordination). In other words, religion is man's dependent relationship with the

absolute or transcendent Being – where "transcendent being" could mean different things to different people.

Very much in the same vein with that of Arinze is the definition by Melford Spiro, the emphasis of which is on dogma and man's relationship with the supernatural world. Hence, Spiro posits:

> Every religion consists of a cognitive system, a set of explicit and implicit propositions regarding the superhuman world and man's relation to it, which it claims to be true. (1966:96)

The influence of Sigmund Freud can clearly be discerned in the psychological definition of religion proposed by Weston La Barre (1970:12-13):

> In a sense religion is the group dream, or perhaps nightmare, that teaches men the proper stance vis-à-vis the parental divine, as characteristically shaped in that society, but in either case now "unreal" except psychologically.

Geoffrey E. W. Scobie (1975:8-12) has argued that whatever the definition of religion, a number of basic areas or dimensions should be considered in our discussion of religion, namely, religious beliefs, religious practice, religious experience, religious knowledge, and religious effects. Religious belief refers to the wide ranging concepts dealing with the content, ideas, dogma, and doctrine of religious faith. It involves some degree of personal commitment to such ideas

and underlines the theoretical distinction between intellectual acceptance and faith. Religious practice, on its part, is some form of worship, meaning a number of activities considered as typically religious. Considerations of religious experience take into account what an individual lives through - his following, conversion and adherence to a religious group. The interpretation which the individual gives to the experience is usually responsible for the behavioural changes which may occur. Furthermore, religious knowledge is an indication of how much a person knows about religion in general or a religion in particular. Here, Scobie argues that "it is not a question of belief; he may know that Christians believe in the resurrection or the virgin birth, but may not believe it himself" (11). Lastly, religious effects relate to the relationship of belief to behaviour and an individual's perception of the universe. That individual's sense of good and evil, for instance, is an indication of the effect of religion on him.

The five dimensions of religion discussed above notwithstanding, every religion is unique and, as Evans-Pritchard (in Street 1975:155) has advised,

> Statements about a people's religious beliefs must always be treated with the greatest caution, for we are then dealing with what neither Europeans nor natives can directly observe, with conceptions, images, words, which require for understanding a thorough knowledge of a people's language and also an awareness of the entire system of ideas of which any particular belief is part, for it may be meaningless when divorced

> from the set of beliefs and practices to which it belongs.

In the light of Evan-Pritchard's observations and taking cognizance of Scobie's postulations on the scope of religion, it is our contention that there is an inseparable link between incantations from the Western Grasslands of Cameroon and the religious beliefs of the peoples of this region, given that incantations derive their essence from the peoples' religious beliefs and practices. In this regard, these incantations reveal a perception of the universe considered not only as a whole but also as an ordered system. This whole is viewed as comprising many different levels or structures, from inorganic matter up to and including man. These structures are seen as consisting of the animate, inanimate, celestial and spirit worlds – all these reduced to the physical and metaphysical realms of existence. As an ordered system, it is perceived as an entity where there is harmony, rationale, logic, and sense in what goes on, a system sustained through the observance of religious and social mores akin to the peoples concerned. The incantations under study, therefore, reveal that the universe is conceived in hierarchically unified terms as seen in its physical and metaphysical manifestations – at the centre of which is man.

It is also our contention that although the incantations under study present the cosmos as representing a duality (the physical and the metaphysical), two basic concepts inform the worldview of the peoples of the Western Grasslands of Cameroon, namely, the unity of all things (spiritual, animate, and inanimate) and the existence of an ordered relationship among all things in the universe, in so far as they exist. The incantations reveal an extremely anthropological ontology in

the sense that everything in the universe is seen in terms of its relation to man.

In the light of the above, it is realised that covenant relationships based on a system of ethics impose on the individual the need to abide by the laws and values upon which the whole structure of the cosmological system rests. However, since man is ethically ambivalent, harmony in the universe is an ideal whose very essence is threatened by his incessant urge to do evil. This urge is checked by a number of control mechanisms and a penal system aimed at maintaining and sustaining a harmonious and orderly universe. Harmony and order in the universe, therefore, are prerequisites for a good life for man who is seen to be at the centre of creation. This 'good life' would mean man being at peace with himself and with the forces thought to be governing the universe.

Kenneth S. Goldstein (1974:1) has rightly remarked that "the basis of any scholarly discipline is the materials with which it deals", adding that "for the folklorist they consist of the materials which he calls folklore". In our case, such folklore material is made up of the incantations that constitute the basis of this study.

The task of collecting incantations for a study of this nature was a taxing one, given the vastness of the field covered, the range of performance contexts involved, and the diversity of languages and informants to be dealt with. Such a task necessitated a conceptual framework consisting of and involving such stages as the setting up of a problem to be solved (problem statement), the determination of the relevant data, and the methods most appropriate for obtaining them. Our concern here is the third stage, that is, methods used in collecting the incantations and other relevant data for this study.