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The Relevance and Influence of African Religion in Post Apartheid South Africa and Beyond—Part 2

Julius Mutugi Gathogo

An acknowledgement that every culture has its dark and dangerous side, helps the Ubuntu philosophy today to absorb the strength of the European cultural emphasis on freedom in the individual idea of choice while at the same time builds on the strength of the African cultural emphasis on the idea of community—that is, persons depend on other persons to be persons. This acknowledgement helps in producing a synthesis that is true to the African tradition while at the same time; it ‘can also be applied to the new world that European science and technology is in the process of creating’.⁵⁰ It also encourages us to prioritise the needs of our fellow members of humanity.

Thus it would be honest for each and every one of us to take cognisance of the fact that the study of African Religion in Africa today, can best be done by acknowledging the need to redefine Africa in the light of the realisation that African Religion is very influential in the lives of the African people.

The Influence of African Religion

Apart from the South African religious notion of Ubuntu whose philosophical emphasis is found in the rest of Africa, the influence of African Religion among the people of Africa is seen in Tanzanian theologian, Laurenti Magesa’s contention that most of the time, African Christians ‘seek comfort in their own religious symbol systems, even though these may not correspond exactly to those inculcated and expected by their Christian leaders. Indeed, these are often symbols and rituals that church leaders have explicitly condemned’.⁵¹

Aylward Shorter has described this situation further when he says that the African Christian repudiates ‘remarkably little of his former non-Christian outlook’.⁵² In other words, s/he does not recant a religious philosophy in him or her. Consequently, the African Christian operates with ‘two thought-systems

at once, and both of them are closed to each other. Each is only superficially modified by the other'.⁵³

Writing in 1960 the Nigerian, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, made substantially the same point with reference to his own country. He pointed out that 'Christian and Moslem beliefs and practices are, with many a Nigerian, nothing but veneers and social facades: at heart and in the privacy of their lives, most Nigerian Christians and Moslems are African religious traditionalists.'⁵⁴

According to John M. Waliggo, Christian evangelisers convinced themselves that the Baganda had been 'civilized', that is, completely won over to Christianity. But when Kabaka Mutesa II, their king, was exiled in 1953, many Baganda Christians identified with traditionalists, rejecting Christian prayers as ineffective in bringing him back.⁵⁵ Again in 1961, many Buganda Catholics 'turned a deaf ear' to Archbishop Kiwanuka's letter against the traditionalist-tinted political party Kabaka Yekka (which literally means Kabaka alone!) and continued to support it. Despite the phenomenal spread of Christianity in Buganda, many expressions of African Religion such as divination and the use of healing practices continue—even though Christianity expressly forbids them.⁵⁶ Similarly, Samuel G. Kibicho shows the role that the Kikuyu conception of God (*Ngai*) played in their struggle against colonialism in the 1950s and how it has been an important factor in their response to Christian evangelisation from the beginning.⁵⁷

In their book, *African Traditional Religion in South Africa: An Annotated Bibliography* (1997), David Chidester, Chirevo Kwenda, Robert Petty, Judy Tobler, and Darrel Wratten have strived to show the influence of African Religion amongst the indigenous people of Africa when they say that—

The popular version of African traditional religion is what Africans (including some elites, though mostly the masses) do with no regard for what Westerners, or anyone else, may or may not think about it. It is what Africans do when they are just Africans. Now this does not mean that such a practice is completely untouched by alien influences, be they religious (such as Christianity or Islam) or secular (such as modernity); what it means is that in full cognisance of their historical context Africans do what they do for their own reasons rather than to

impress someone else. In other words, while talking to the West is unavoidable—for the elite—and talking back to the West may be progressive, it is only through turning away from and not talking to the West that the possibility of considering African traditional religion in its own right translates into a reality.

They go on to say—

Consider the example of (Jomo) Kenyatta's Facing Mount Kenya. Note that this 'facing' is a metaphor for orientation in space and time as well as for motivation. To face Mount Kenya means to think and do African without any concern for non-African opinion. The first significance of this act of indifference lies in facing towards an African centre. Implied in the act is a facing away from other centres of meaning and power. Now this is not to suggest that these other centres are denied either existence or power within their sphere of influence; it is to stress, however, that Africans recognize a space and a moment in which every other centre can only register as subordinate to an African centre. It is in this space that the core of African identity inheres.⁵⁸

Similarly, J. S. Mbiti builds on the influence of African Religion in the African context when he says that it 'is the strongest element in traditional background, and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned'.⁵⁹

In his book, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (1997), Lurenti Magesa sets his book on the premise that the importance of African Religion in Africa cannot be down played, for even Africans who convert to Christianity (or Islam) still retain their inner motivation for their religious life in African Religion. Mbiti graphically captures this view when he says that Africans 'come out of African Religion but they don't take off their traditional religiosity. They come as they are. They come as people whose world view is shaped according to African Religion'.⁶⁰

If there are any changes during this process, Mbiti points out quite accurately, that they 'are generally on the surface, affecting the material side of life, and only beginning to reach the deeper levels of thinking pattern, language content,

mental images, emotions, beliefs and response in situations of need. Traditional concepts still form the essential background of many African peoples...'.⁶¹ In other words, their inner religious drive remains overwhelmingly African Religion. Consequently, the convert may publicly claim the new intended meaning while unconsciously ascribing to them a different one—that is African Religion.⁶² Thus, there is every need for everyone who is interested to know more about the African personality, to first and foremost study the African Religion.

The need to study African Religion is strengthened by the contention that religion is the axis around which life in Africa revolves. It gains further weight in the assertion of the doyen of African theology, J. S. Mbiti, that 'Africans are notoriously religious'.⁶³ As Ezra Chitando notes, this statement has become something of a truism in the study of religion in Africa.⁶⁴ For most African Christian theologians contend that *homo Africanus* is *homo religious*.

African Religion as an Agent of Social Reconstruction

J. S. Mbiti describes African Religion as that which provides people with a view of the world, and as that which inspires new ideas.⁶⁵ That means that African Religion is a good agent of social reconstruction—as the society keeps renewing itself to cope with the changing circumstances. Aquiline Tarimo rightly says—

Naturally, all human beings are endowed with the gift of reason and as such are capable of anticipating the future with hope and a certain degree of dynamism. Metaphysical figures of speech, symbols, rituals, and spiritualities can easily demonstrate this assertion. A static culture does not exist. Everything is subject to change. What happened in the course of African history is that external forces of political and religious domination suppressed cultural and religious dynamics. Consequently, concerns about self-defence and self-preservation became important.⁶⁶

In his works, Jesse Mugambi sees the notion of social reconstruction as belonging to the social sciences.⁶⁷ Consequently, he borrows from Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann⁶⁸ who describe social reconstruction as 'the re-organization of some aspects of a society in order to make it more responsive to changed circumstances'.⁶⁹ Like Berger and Luckmann, Mugambi is

convinced that religion has an important role in the social reconstruction of a society. As both object and agent of social reconstruction, he feels that 'religion provides the world view which synthesizes everything cherished by the individuals as corporate members of the community'.⁷⁰ He thus exudes his confidence that religion is the most vital project for the people who are undergoing a rapid change—as in post-colonial Africa.

In his theology of reconstruction, Mugambi is greatly influenced by Karl Jaspers' positive appraisal of mythical thinking; according to him 'the myth tells a story and expresses intuitive insights, rather than universal concepts'.⁷¹ This prompts him to argue that 'a society which is incapable of making its own myths or re-interpreting its old ones, becomes extinct'.⁷² In view of this, he defines the vision of the theology of reconstruction in Africa as a project of 're-mythologization, in which the theologian thus engaged, discerns new symbols and new metaphors in which to recast the central Message of the Gospel'.⁷³

Consequently, he differs strongly with the likes of Bultmann whose theory of 'demythologisation' is contrasted with his 're-mythologisation'. He says of Bultmann, 'in (his) attempt to satisfy scientific positivism by denouncing myth (he) ends up destroying the reality of religion as a pillar of culture'.⁷⁴

For Jesse Mugambi, as with Jaspers, 'myth is indispensable in cultural constructions of reality'.⁷⁵ For him therefore, the idea of social reconstruction in post apartheid South Africa or in post Cold War Africa is tantamount to beginning to make new myths, and re-interpreting the old ones, for the survival of the African people. He says that 'a vanishing people must be replaced by the myth of a resurgent, or resilient people', while the myth of a 'desperate people must be replaced by the myth of a people (who are) full of hope. The myth of a hungry people must be replaced by the myth of a people capable of feeding themselves, and so on'.⁷⁶

All in all the proponents of religion as an agent of social transformation (refer to Peter Berger, Jesse Mugambi and Thomas Luckmann), however, fail to acknowledge that religion can also be used as an agent of deconstruction. It can equally be used to 'under develop' people. It can be used as a tool of instability where blind adherence to our religious convictions leads to suspicions, pride and even violence.⁷⁷

Conclusion

The significance of religion in the African society should not be downplayed. As Paul F. Knitter notes, nothing comes before people's religious identity and convictions. 'If this identity is threatened, everything must be sacrificed or ventured in order to preserve it'.⁷⁸ This agrees with Paul Tillich's assertion that 'Religion is our Ultimate Concern. Nothing is more ultimate'.⁷⁹

Additionally, a study of African Religion is tantamount to a religious dialogue. If it is done, for instance by Christian theologians, it amounts to a dialogue between Christianity and African Religion. As Hans Küng says, 'There will be no peace among nations e among nations tions ons no peace among nations without peace among religions. And no peace among religions without greater dialogue among religions.'⁸⁰ He goes on to say—

We need a more intensive philosophical and theological dialogue of theologians and specialists in religion which takes religious plurality seriously in theological terms, accepts the challenge of the other religions, and investigates their significance for each person's own religion.⁸¹

This dialogue is crucial considering that the dialogue between, for instance, Christianity and African Religion has never been a real conversation. For as Laurenti Magesa says—

the Contact between Christianity and African Religion has historically been predominantly a monologue, bedevilled by assumptions prejudicial against the latter, with Christianity culturally more vocal and ideologically more aggressive. Therefore, what we have heard until now is largely Christianity speaking about African Religion, not African Religion speaking for itself.⁸²

Thus there is need to study African Religion as as a way of making it enter into a form of dialogue with other religions—as it is by this that Africa will experience genuine shalom that will bring wholeness in the Africa of the twenty-first century. We all have a duty to usher in a new dawn in Africa today.

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ENDNOTES

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51. Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion, The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Mary Knoll: Orbis, 1997), p. 7.
52. Aylward Shorter. "Problems and Possibilities for the Church's Dialogue With African Traditional Religion," in A. Shorter (ed.), *Dialogue with the African Traditional Religions* (Kampala: Gaba Publications, 1975), p. 7.
53. Aylward Shorter, 1975, p. 7.
54. V. E. A. Okwuosa, *In the Name of Christianity: The Missionaries in Africa* (Philadelphia and Ardmore: Dorrance & Company, 1977), p. 26.
55. J. M. Waliggo. "Ganda Traditional Religion and Catholicism in Buganda, 1948-75," in Fashole-Luke et al. (eds.), *Christianity in Independent Africa* (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1978), pp. 34-42.
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57. Samuel G. Kibicho, "The Continuity of the African Conception of God into and through Christianity: A Kikuyu Case-study," in E. Fashole-Luke et al. (eds.), *Christianity in Independent Africa* (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1978), pp. 370-88.
58. David Chidester, Chirevo Kwenda, Robert Petty, Judy Tobler, and Darrel Wratten. *African Traditional Religion in South Africa: An Annotated Bibliography* (London: Greenwood Press, 1997), p. 2.
59. J. S. Mbiti, 1969, p. 1.
60. B. W. Bursleson, 1986. John Mbiti, *The Dialogue of an African Theologian with African Religion* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International) 1986, p.12.
61. J. S. Mbiti, 1969, p. xii.
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63. J. S. Mbiti, 1969, p. 1.
64. Ezra Chitando. "High Density Spiritual Worlds and African Pentecostalism: Interpreting Religion in Africa" in Magnus Lundberg (ed.) in *Swedish Missiological Themes*, SMT, Vol. 93, No. 2, 2005:271.
65. J. S. Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 195ff.
66. Aquiline Tarimo, *Applied Ethics and Africa's Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2005), p. 20.
67. Jesse Mugambi, *From liberation to reconstruction: Africa after the Cold War* (Nairobi: E.A.E.P., 1995).

68. See Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *Social Reconstruction of Reality* (New York: Penguin Books, 1967).
69. J. Njoroge wa Ngugi, *Creation in "The Catechism of the Catholic Church": A basis for catechesis in post-colonial Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa), 2002, p. 73.
70. Mugambi, *From liberation to reconstruction*, p. 17.
71. Jaspers, K. "Myth and Religion," in Hans-Werner Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, (trans) Reginald Fuller (London: SPCK, 1972), p. 144.
72. Mugambi, *From liberation to reconstruction*, p. 37.
73. Jesse Mugambi, "The Bible and Ecumenism in African Christianity," in Hannah Kinoti and John Waliggo (eds.), *The Bible in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1997), p. 75.
74. Mugambi, *From liberation to reconstruction*, p. 37.
75. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
76. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
77. The religious clashes between the Muslims and Christians in Nigeria are a case in point. Similarly, fears of global terrorist attacks are yet another.
78. P. F. Knitter 2005, "Religion, Power, Dialogue," in Magnus Lundberg (ed.), *Swedish Missiological Themes*, SMT, Vol. 93, No. 1, 2005:30.
79. P. F. Knitter, 2005, p. 30.
80. Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In search of a New World Ethic* (New York: Crossroad), 1991: xv; cf. Magesa, 1997:4f.
81. Hans Küng, 1991:137-8.
82. Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion, The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Mary Knoll: Orbis), 1997, p. 5.