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The African Context for Theology

There is a dichotomy between African traditional culture and Western civilization and Christianity. Westerners generally regard African traditional beliefs as superstition, symptomatic of a people's backwardness. African people, on the whole, are influenced by their religio-traditional beliefs which include belief in and fear of witches and witchcraft practices.¹ In an attempt to eradicate this so-called superstition, missionaries in the past laid heavy stress on education and Christian evangelism as the answer to the problem of the so-called African superstition and backwardness. Millions of dollars were raised in the United States and European churches to solve what was assumed to be a short-term process of educating and evangelizing Africa. After a century, the enigmatic puzzle still facing the Christian church in its wrapping of Western civilization remains the same: the African elite, in spite of high achievement in the arts, theological education and technology, remains staunchly embedded in his/her religio-cultural tradition which is based on African cosmology.²

The fundamental difference between Western people and traditional Africans lies in their world view. For the Westerners, the phenomenal world is primarily viewed as an inanimate object which can be scientifically analyzed. For the Africans, nature is a being and can only be comprehended as a living presence confronting them with its joy, anger, or even indifference.

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Another important difference between Westerners and Africans lies in their approach to inquiry. To Westerners, an object can always be specifically related to other objects and appear as part of a series or a group. In this manner, science is able to comprehend objects and events as ruled by universal laws which make their behavior under given circumstances predictable. To the Africans, on the other hand, objects are unique because they have the unprecedented, unparalleled and unpredictable character of an individual. They are a presence known only insofar as they reveal themselves. It is correct to sum up this by saying that traditional Africans are mythical in their view of the universe. A myth, in this sense, does not claim to have the lucidity of theoretical hypotheses. Like religion, a myth claims recognition only by faith.³ It does not try to justify itself before the critical mind because myths are not recounted in traditional Africa as historical narrations that give factual information. Rather, they are dramatized and activated by recital during solemn ceremonies.

Traditional Africans do not distinguish between visions, nightmares, hallucinations and ordinary dreams.⁴ Moreover, the traditional African concept of symbolism differs a great deal from that of Westerners. Africans cannot conceive of symbols as signifying, yet separate from the things which, as Westerners would view it, they symbolize. According to the Africans, there is a coalescence of the symbol and what it symbolizes. In other words a person's name, a photograph, or his footprint can stand for his very essence and can be used by witches or diviners to kill, to harm, or to bless.

African Conception of Time

A traditional African's conception of time is qualitative and concrete—not qualitative and abstract.⁵ Time is not uniform duration, nor is it a succession of qualitatively different moments. The traditional Africans do not abstract a concept of time from the experience of time. Time is experienced in the periodicity and rhythm of human life: from childhood to adolescence; from adolescence to maturity; from maturity to old age

and so on. Each stage is a time period with peculiar qualities. The transition from one phase to the next creates a crisis for the one concerned and demands the assistance of other members of the community to join in appropriate rituals, particularly for such critical moments as birth, puberty, marriage, and death.

The African's view of weather is also unique. Weather change is viewed as resulting from a will of the elements concerned. This concept is also reflected in the Bible where we read: "while the earth remaineth, seed-time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease."⁶ The traditional Africans, like the people of the ancient Near East, believe that God has freely granted the individual sequence of the time as distinct substances. But they also realize the changes which take place in nature, in particular the drought and its threat to the rainy season. They do not dare remain mere spectators in this life and death struggle, but become directly involved in it because their welfare, indeed, their very being, depends on the outcome of the struggle of the seasons. Africans, therefore, arrange their lives or that of their society in such a way that it is in harmony with nature. To understand the peculiar world of the Africans, a study of several of its key social elements which, as a matter of fact, compare with those of the Old Testament, must be made. In this paper, I will only briefly touch on those which are very crucial, not only for evangelization, but also for the teaching of theology in an African context. These are community structure, ancestral spirits, role of the grandparents, the African community and social concerns, attitude to strangers, and belief in witchcraft.

African Community Structure and the Place of Ancestors

The traditional African philosophy of life is based on the community. This community comprises the living and those who are long dead. The dead are regarded as present in their spiritual form among the living. They are believed to be much more powerful than when they existed in the

flesh. These ancestral spirits play a very important role in all aspects of the lives of African people because they continue to occupy their places in the hierarchical social structure of the community. This structure begins with the family and stretches out to include the clan and tribe. Traditional Africans realize that the existence of human life results from a union between the father and mother. This, therefore, is construed to mean that the parents exist because of the marriage of the grandparents. That being the case, by means of a genealogical chain, it could be possible to trace one's connection with the first ancestral grandparents created by and sitting next to God.⁷ This is why in services of traditional worship, Africans will be represented by the oldest member of the family. This representative realizes, however, that though he is the oldest among the living of the family, he is nonetheless, the youngest in the long line of those who went before him.⁸ In other words, he is too small before God to address Him directly. As a result he will pass on the sacrifice to his physically deceased, but spiritually living, parents whom he will ask to pass it on to their parents, until it reaches *Varikumatenga*, the One-in-the-highest Heavens, that is, God who is called by various names, all reflecting his benevolent attributes.⁹

The same hierarchical structure is followed when the family is gathered to deal with family business affairs such as marriage. The participants in a marriage transaction sit in a circle originating from the oldest person who, consequently, assumes the presiding role of the gathering. The rest of the members take their seats in a descending order, beginning with the most senior according to age. The elder person will not listen to or receive a message coming directly from any of the junior members of the family circle, unless it comes through the person sitting next to him by age, a first born, or an uncle.

This same procedure is followed when a chief gathers his advisors to decide a case. In a civil court, status or position would determine who sits next to the chief and who sits at the end of the circle. Though the

last person in the circle may be sitting closest to the chief, he cannot speak directly to him but can only do so through his immediate superior, who in turn passes it on to his immediate superior until it reaches the chief from the other end. The chief replies in reverse order. Obviously this way of doing business takes a long time to accomplish. To Africans, however, to execute business properly, time is always made available. Moreover, Africans believe in doing one thing at a time. This attitude toward time is prompted by the fact that Africans used to organize their lives according to seasons and not according to the clock. This also explains why traditional Africans always have relaxed attitudes and do not suffer from the pressure and stress of schedules.

The Role of the Grandparents

The African hierarchical structure elucidates the reason why the disintegration of the immediate family and the extended family is creating social, moral and economic problems for the Africans. In the days of old, the role of the grandparents was to play with the grandchildren. They had responsibility to advise the youths on all matters of ethics, courtship, love and marriage. At other times, they spent time with the youths telling them stories of ancient times, teaching them heroic songs and tales. The grandchildren were also eager to hear what life was like when the grandparents were of their same age. This arrangement solved many problems which are now being encountered in a modern African family. The grandparents played a role of a day care center, and did the job very well because they loved their grandchildren. Though they had deteriorated in age, they had not lost their usefulness to society. Because they play an advisory role to the children, Africans, even nowadays, do not dream of sending their parents to old people's homes where they will feel lonely and neglected by family and society. Africans did not require a psychiatrist's services because the traditional family structure had a way of dealing with stress, loneliness, sickness and death. Thus, the traditional African family organiza-

tion provided several things: a structure for worshipping God, personnel for dealing with youth, old age, and related social problems.

African Approach to God

Africans regard God as the patron of the family. As such he must be respected as the most senior member or guardian of the community. Therefore to approach Him by any form of worship, one must follow the family procedure. In other words, the ancestral spirits cannot be by-passed because they are intermediaries between God and human beings. Failure by the missionary church to understand and appreciate the role of the ancestral spirits led to the condemnation of what has been labelled African ancestral worship. African Christian scholars have begun scrutinizing African worship and are finding evidence that traditional Africans did not, in actual fact, worship ancestors, but they worshipped God *through* ancestral spirits, in accordance with their highest degree of reverence to Him who is the supreme head of the family circle.

The African Community and Social Concerns

There are certain social concerns in traditional Africa which people were required to observe in order to please God. These concerns included the care of aging parents. In traditional Africa there was no pension plan and life insurance. The parents were ensured of health care, subsistence and a decent burial by the children they reared. The Shonas have a saying, "*Yakakura ika amwa mwana,*" ("It grew old and lived on the milk of its child"). The reason why traditional Africans would not keep a barren wife becomes self-evident when one realizes the role children played in the family. The male children were responsible for taking care of their aging parents. Moreover, the sons would be able to give their deceased parents proper and decent burial. The daughters, on the other hand, once married, ceased to belong to their parental family. Therefore, they no longer had the capacity to help their aging parents. This explains why traditional

Africans preferred sons to daughters, an attitude also evident in the Old Testament (Abraham) and in texts of the ancient Near East (Kirita). (Cf. Matt. 15:4-6).

Attitudes Toward Strangers

The next community concern which echoes biblical teaching is the extension of courtesy and hospitality to the poor of all types (widows, orphans, and those who were disabled) and to strangers. There were no inns or hotels in traditional Africa, but there were dangerous wild animals such as lions, hyenas and leopards. In search of food, or in search of work, strangers needed to find shelter at night. African traditional ethics required that one offered strangers some shelter and food.¹⁰

When harvesting crops, it was a traditional custom that one must deliberately leave some ears of corn, some grain, beans, and so on, for the poor. In the same way, when planning a party, one was to cook more food than the family and invited guests needed in order to feed several of the poor who came uninvited. This customary norm also applied to weddings and Christmas festivities. Whenever there was a famine in the land, the poor would outnumber the invited guests. To help or take care of the poor was a good thing, hence the Shona saying: "*Mupfumi ndimambo*," ("The rich person is a king").¹¹ In traditional Africa, it was the responsibility of the king to see to it that the poor of his land were fed and also were protected from exploitation. If society failed in its social responsibility to the poor, God was expected to intervene for them and punish the evil doers.¹² The Shonas have a saying: "*Vadzimu vanoona*," ("the ancestral spirits see"). The African belief is that once the ancestral spirits see injustice, they report it to God who immediately executes justice by punishing the guilty person in his life time, and not in the world to come. God's punishment took several forms. He could mysteriously transfer the wealth from the unjust rich to the poor victims of injustice. Alternatively, the ancestors would be so hurt by this injustice that they would withdraw their

protection from the wicked. Thus the transgressor would be thrown out of the family circle, immediately becoming exposed to the dangers of evil spirits and witches.¹³

Belief in Witchcraft

The African belief in witchcraft is a very important subject which must be researched and addressed if the context for theology in modern Africa is to be understood. To this subject we now turn briefly.

My long experience working as a pastor of the United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe has convinced me that the greater number of Africans who passionately confess Christ as their Lord and Savior are still limping between two religious opinions. They live two contradicting lives: one as Christians only on Sunday mornings, and the other as ardent followers of their traditional religion for six and a half days of the week; one as Christians when life is going well, and the other as observers of traditional superstitious practices whenever they are faced with life's predicaments. Since life on earth ends with the bewildering ordeal of illness and death, most African Christians if affected by long illnesses such as cancer, arthritis, and other chronic diseases, become completely traditional in their inner beliefs. The questions which arise are: "How can the Scriptures and theology be taught to Africans so as to become the good news which can drive away fear and superstition?" "Is now not the time when African theologians should seriously, objectively, and empirically scrutinize their long and rich cultural and traditional heritage to see how some of its aspects could be used to enhance the dissemination of the good news about Jesus Christ?" It should be unequivocally stated that to the Africans both God, the Creator of the world, and forces of evil which defy God's authority, co-exist. Therefore, many Africans superficially affirm belief in the Christian God in order to look civilized according to Western custom, while at the same time secretly observing all the traditional customs which they publicly and hypocritically claim to have discarded. They do this in order

to ensure that family ancestors are happy and may keep witches, wizards, sorcerers, magicians and spooks at bay, a role which Christianity fails to perform.

It should be stressed that Africans do not make a sharp distinction between the sacred and the profane. The teaching of Christian theology in Africa should take this into consideration. To the Africans the sacred includes all the supernatural forces, real and imaginary, which an African regards with wonder and awe. The profane is the domain of magic, traditional religion, witchcraft and all types of superstition. These two divergent conceptualizations of the universe and natural phenomena are merged in the African traditional life-style. It is hard for most Americans, in spite of education in science or in the arts, to shake off their traditional beliefs. For example, an educated African with a Mercedes-Benz car and an executive house in a middle class suburban area will often go "home"¹⁴ to visit his relatives. There, in the country, he is brought down from the ivory tower of the elite to the "real" world conceived in terms of African traditional cosmology. By threats and counsel, the urban dweller is warned that if he does not take immediate traditional and superstitious precautions to safeguard his job, or his business, or his health, he might soon lose everything he has worked for so hard. Many African Christians are consequently made to realize that there are certain traditions and customs which are immutable. These are practices which may relate to the cult, witchcraft, divination, sorcery and magic, which must be observed rigorously and unquestioningly because they are the way things have been done by all members of the clan or family throughout all generations.¹⁵

The life of an African is therefore governed by many considerations, for example, protected against witches and their mysterious witchcraft. Belief in witches and witchcraft answers a very vexing problem about evil in the world.

To explain the source of evil in the universe, to explain why the loving God should snuff out an innocent child, or why an adult who is the family's only support should die, witchcraft offers a plausible explanation.¹⁶

The question often asked after death or an accident is not *how* it happened, because the process is clear to everyone, but *why* the accident occurred at that point in time. Why should two cars collide at that particular spot and why should mine get the worst of the head-on impact, causing a fatal injury to a relative? This is the question which defies a traditional person's rationale. In this case, only a charge of witchcraft against a jealous neighbor or relative satisfies the inquiry.¹⁷

Thus, Christian theology in Africa will never make a lasting impact until teachers and evangelists confront the real African in his/her religio-cultural milieu. In other words, the gospel as preached and taught to the Africans must also relate to the African's fear of witchcraft, sorcery and magic. To teach that witches do not exist, when illness and death, believed to be caused by them exist, will never convince a religio-traditional African to wholly abandon belief in this strong superstition and fully accept Christianity. What evangelists confronting religio-traditional Africans must do is to acknowledge that in the African world, be it real or unreal, witches, demons, and sorcerers do exist.¹⁸ Belief in witches generates great fear and uncertainties for the future of an African. The evangelist must then declare that he is bringing good news, a protection against witches. He/She must categorically assure the believers that the Holy Spirit, whom the believers would receive, forms a protective wall against witches, sorcerers, demons (cf. Mark 16:18). This good news should be accentuated with the words: "fear not" or "be not dismayed." These words were repeatedly said by Jesus to the Jews who, during his time, harbored similar cosmological views as traditional Africans still do today.¹⁹ Africans, therefore, require tangible proof or signs that Christianity really works and the Christian God truly lives.²⁰ In their religio-traditional milieu, diviners are able to

demonstrate the working of their craft. They even give their clients talismans or amulets to protect them from harm or to ensure them good luck. This is the reason why sectarian movements are mushrooming in their hundreds in Africa, and throughout the world today. In Africa some join the Zionist Churches because the prophets can speak in tongues and can heal the sick by "holy water" believed to be blessed by God. The Zionist prophets, or those of other sects, claim that they can walk on fire and are believed to be able to detect and exorcise witches and demons. Moreover, like diviners, they assure their followers that they will establish a "spiritual" wall around a believer's residence to keep witches out.

It should be clear by now that Africans do not regard traditional religion as a separable element of culture. In other words, social life and spiritual formation are integral components of their culture. These social values cannot be adequately taught to African children and ministerial candidates by means of theoretical formulas which are divorced from example and practice. This is to say, the teachers do not necessarily have to live according to their theoretical moral teachings. The Africans will, on the other hand, find it very hard, if not impossible, to accept a theology that is not practiced by its disseminators.²¹ It is true, and more so to the Africans, that "actions speak louder than words." For this reason, Africans are unable to grasp a theological lesson unillustrated by the life and enthusiasm of the tutors.

It is significant that this African attitude to learning is supported by biblical teaching. In Deuteronomy 6:20-25 Moses admonished the Israelites to seriously live their faith before their children in order to increase their children's interest and curiosity. Their actions were to provoke their children to ask the question:

What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the ordinances which the Lord our God has commanded you? Then you shall say to your son, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand;

and the Lord showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharoah and all his household, before our eyes; and he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land which he swore to give to our fathers. And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as at this day. And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the Lord our God, as He has commanded us.

It should be noticed that the liberation theology of Israel was not theoretically affirmed or taught. It was re-enacted. That is to say, it was recited and dramatized by those who were teaching it to their progeny. Interesting enough, Africans have sayings which succinctly convey the point I am making. One of the axioms reads: *Chitiyo keunda mudzani kuona ndimai*. ("To hide from the rapacious eagle the chick learns from its mother"). The English reflect the same idea in the proverb: "Like father, like son." In other words, people characteristically learn by example of their family's older members.

Notes

1. I have discussed this subject at length in a paper: "Belief in Witchcraft," *Zambezia* (1986), XIII(ii): 119-37.

2. H. Bucher, *Spirits and Power: An Analysis of Shona Cosmology*, Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1980, is a useful general book to read on African cosmology even though Bucher poorly researched this important subject.

3. H. Frankfort, et al., *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1977. This is an excellent book on the ancient Near Eastern view of the universe which compares very closely to the traditional African cosmological view.

4. Traditional Africans could distinguish between ordinary dreams (to pass the night) from vivid dreams in which the ancestors or God was trying to communicate something. Cf. the call of Samuel, I Sam. 3:1-17; Samuel's address to Saul at the wizard of Endor, I Sam. 28:15.

5. On this aspect, traditional Africans compare to the people of the ancient Near East. Henri Frankfort, *et al.* *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, p. 23 discusses the different conceptions of time that exist between modern people and those of the ancient Near East.

6. Gen. 8:23. See also H. Frankfort, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.

7. The African genealogical chain which links human beings with God compares to Luke's genealogy which traces Jesus in reverse order from Joseph to Adam, "who was the son of God," Lk. 3:23-38.

8. Because God is regarded as the most senior member of the family, junior members cannot approach him without going through their seniors. Since the ancestors in their spiritual form are regarded as active members of the community, they are requested to convey the petition which the living would like to place before God. Ancestors are normally good people who died in old age. Besides, not every old person qualified to be designated the status of ancestor. Their conduct before they deceased determines whether they would be accorded the reverent status of ancestor or should be feared as evil spirits of the cursed people.

9. In African tradition, as was the case in the tradition of the patriarchs of Israel, God was regarded as a clan deity and the most senior member of the family. In the Ndau tribe of Zimbabwe, God is called by names which reflect the people's trust of their God. Some of these names are *Mabota*, the Giver of Food and *Musiki*, the Creator. The Zulus, on the other hand, call God *Nkulunkulu*, the Great One. Because God is good and caring for humanity like a loving father, Africans worship him not out of fear of burning in hell or to avoid other forms of punishment, but out of love and gratitude for his benevolences to them.

10. This African social regulation compares very closely with the Israelite covenant stipulation in the book of Leviticus. The Israelites were required by their religious affirmation in Yahweh to take care of strangers (Lev. 19:33). See the author's article "Ethics of the Old Testament," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (forthcoming). Many biblical references in this article show clearly that God required those in privileged positions to protect and help the poor and strangers.

11. The African king was expected to be rich in food and property in order to feed the strangers who might be passing through his land. This explains why African kings married many wives by whom they would have many children. As a large family community they would work hard to produce much food to share with the needy. This is elucidated better by the proverb: *Mupfumi ndiMambo*, "The rich person is a king." Furthermore it is interesting to note that whenever there was no rain, the people would cry to the king to implore God for rain. The African King's responsibility to the poor compares very closely with that of the kings of ancient Israel.

12. Cf. Ps. 82:1-8; Amos 5:21-26; Prov. 31:9; Lev. 19:14; Job 31:15. The poor also included the widow and the orphan.

13. See a fuller discussion of this subject in my article, "Beliefs in Witchcraft," *Zambezia* XII (1986): 119-37.

14. Most traditional Africans consider home to be in the countryside where they were born and where their relatives and aged parents still live or are buried. The beautiful houses they may own in the city are regarded as temporary dwellings while they are working in the city. Though the country home may not have electricity and the hygienic standards may be poor, the ambiance created by being part of the traditional family circle fills one with relaxation, love and ecstasy.

15. Africans, like people of the Old Testament, are very traditional in their approach to life. Traditions may only change insofar as they must adapt to the new environment. Basically, however, modified traditions

must always serve the same functions as did the old traditions. Traditions cannot be traded off or exchanged for new ones no matter how sound or logical the new ones may appear.

16. "Belief in Witchcraft," 128.

17. *Ibid.*

18. It is clear that Jesus did not dispute the existence of demons and evil spirits. He even drove them out of possessed people (Mk. 11:23-26; Matt. 12:43; Lk. 9:42). Jesus therefore evangelized the Jews on the basis of their cosmological viewpoint.

19. On this point the Africans are like the biblical Jews who always required signs and wonders in order to become fully convinced that God was with them, e.g. Deut. 6:23-33; Jgs. 6 and Exodus 3-4.

20. Being a way of life, religion was not a set of rules, regulations and laws which were to be observed in order to please God. This explains why Jesus condemned those who believed in God but did not practice their faith as hypocrites, e.g. Matt. 15:7; 23:13-36.

21. The Mission Statement of the Africa University to be established in Zimbabwe by the United Methodists states unequivocally that its teachers will be required to teach by both example and practice.