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Adventists and African Traditional Religion

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African Traditional Religion (hereafter cited as ATR) is the indigenous religion of the African people. ATR reflects the thinking and perception of reality in relation to the African understanding of the supernatural. It expresses the beliefs and practices that regulate the mentality and views of the African cosmology whose worldview locates an individual's place in the wider universe. Further, ATR is the totality of the way people live life within the interaction of persons, events, objects, and natural phenomena.¹

"Africans are notoriously religious."² ATR permeates all the aspects of a traditional African man and woman to the extent that it is not possible to separate life from religion, or religion from life. Mbiti comments that because ATR permeates all aspects of life, little distinction exists between the sacred and the secular. In fact, that is possibly the reason why African languages have no word for "religion."³

Religious studies classify ATR among primal, basic, and pre-scientific religions. They are religions whose character blurs religion and culture, making them indistinguishable.⁴ ATR does not have a formal creed. Instead, ATR comes from a non-literate background that passes beliefs orally from father to son and mother to daughter. As a result, ATR has no written scriptures.

The Character of ATR

ATR is an ancient world religion whose origin largely remains in doubt. It has no known founder or date as to when it came into being. It is believed that ATR evolved throughout the existence of the African people.⁵ The religion may have originated from the awe and veneration that they felt in response to events and happenings in nature. The fruition of ATR may have been one of the many things that amazed the Romans who during their time in North Africa commented, *Ex Africa semper aliquid novi* (Latin for "out of Africa always something new").⁶ One opinion concludes that it was the inner feeling about natural events that created in the African the belief in the existence of a supernatural element that controls those phenomena that humans cannot control.⁷ Christian opinion attributes that awareness to natural revelation (Rom. 1:19-21).

ATR is a communal religion, meaning that it does not demand individual participation in worship as long as a senior member has met the religious requirement. If a father offers the needed sacrifice or offering, then it is regarded as if his entire family has performed the act. This operates from the principle that what concerns the individual also concerns the community as a whole, and what involves the community includes the individual as well. Mbiti expresses the relationship as: "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."⁸ The expression demonstrates a strong sense of communality in which, for instance a father performs required rituals on behalf of his children, or a chief for his subjects. This aspect contrasts with the Christian religion which demands individual commitment to God.

Adventism Meets African Traditional Religion

The first Adventist mission station among native Africans opened in 1894 at Solusi, Zimbabwe.⁹ Thereafter many mission centers sprang up in various parts of the continent. Christian missionaries came as part of the nineteenth-century colonial policy of the 3Cs; Christianity, Commerce, and Colonization.¹⁰ Seventh-day Adventist missionaries arrived and settled in the same way that other Christian missionaries did, especially during the so-called "Era of Missions," a period approximately between 1800 to about 1900.¹¹

Missionaries knew very little about Africa and Africans, and similarly, Africans knew even less about the foreigners, including the reason for their coming. Africans regarded Adventist missionaries in the same manner as all other missionaries and, generally, all white people. Immediately upon entry, Christian missionaries, using inaccurate information from European travellers--including cultural prejudice--regarded ATR as a belief system that they had to conquer.¹² Scholars believe that view had its origin in views popularized by, among others, European anthropologists, ethnologists, and sociologists. In 1867 well-known British explorer Sir Samuel Baker read a paper to the Ethnological Society of London on the religion of the Dinka and the Nuer. According to Baker, those peoples had no belief in a supreme being nor any form of worship or idolatry. He described their minds as dark and devoid of even a ray of superstition.¹³ But Baker was simply echoing popular opinion at the time, what prompts Mbiti to decry the way African religion has been subject to "misinterpretation, misrepresentation and misunderstanding" throughout history.¹⁴

Adventist missionaries--indeed all missionaries--approached ATR from a common European attitude that viewed native religions as savage, heathen, satanic, and animistic, among other negative terms.¹⁵ Missionary misunderstanding of ATR viewed the religion as actually non-religion. Coming from Europe, a land of majestic cathedrals and where church bells sounded Sunday morning, where the clergyman's collar was conspicuous, and where the King James Version of the Bible lay on the pulpit, the missionaries promptly concluded that ATR was not a religion worthy of mention, because it lacked such symbols and objects. However, as we know today, the nineteenth-century missionary view of ATR was greatly misleading.¹⁶

Seventh-day Adventist teaching came across to Africans as a foreign religion whose premise they did not quite understand. The two religions contrasted sharply and still do. Furthermore, it is not far-fetched to suggest that ATR is in fact still alive and strong despite more than 200 hundred years of missionary onslaught against it.¹⁷ We have no evidence to indicate that the relationship has significantly changed since then.

Adventist Teaching in Light of African Traditional Religious Beliefs

The pioneer Adventist missionaries accepted a biased view of ATR and sought to socialize their converts into a mentality thoroughly hostile to ATR. Unfortunately, not fully understanding the teachings of the new religion, Adventist converts soon realized that traditional beliefs were more relevant to their daily experience than what they grasped of the new religion. More often than not, converts would revert back to the traditional ways of dealing with existential concerns.

They struggled to relate the new beliefs to their lives in an African village in which traditional religion permeated their entire life. Because of the communality of ATR, the ceremonies and rituals celebrated in the village included the convert by virtue of birth-right. Villagers who had not converted did not exclude their kinspeople who had discarded the rituals. Many times, the converts easily turned back to participate in the rituals, because of the taboos that such practices entailed. The missionaries eventually recognized that traditional society had more appeal to their converts, because even after conversion and baptism, they sooner or later reverted to the traditional beliefs.

Acknowledging the problem, the missionaries sought to solve it. One solution involved establishing mission villages where only converts were allowed to settle. The “converts only” settlements allowed them to live without interference from the traditional village lifestyle. When converts entered the mission village they received a new Christian name meant to instill a new self-identity. The innovation helped, because in the settlement the stronger believer strengthened the weaker one, as well as the fact that converts were within easy reach of the missionary. The mission village created a tribe within a tribe as the new teachings shaped a new culture.¹⁸ Once in the settlement, the convert progressed through the rigors of the then famous 3Rs: reading, writing, and arithmetic.¹⁹ Such an approach emphasizing literacy was a radical paradigm shift of transformation and change for the convert. Missionary Spencer G. Maxwell writes about the experience in his book, *I Loved Africa*.²⁰

The interaction between missionaries and nationals took a while before the one started to understand the other. Tension that came to ease with time characterized the first stage. The missionaries found to their amazement that Africans actually worshiped the same supernatural as they did. The difference was that whereas missionaries believed in one God, the African believed in one supernatural who is the creator, but also one who needs assistants called divinities, such as a god of rain, a god of harvest, a god of fertility, etc.²¹

A fitting illustration of the African conception may be found in the interaction between Akunna and a Christian missionary in Chinua Achebe's novel. In the conversation, Akunna tells Brown; ‘You say that there is one Supreme God who made heaven and earth. We also believe in him and call him *Chukwu*. He made all the world and other gods.’²²In the story the missionary objects to existence of “other gods,” but he promptly agrees that *Chukwu* [an Igbo name of the supernatural] is the only God who created heaven and earth.

Many traditional religious concepts, however, brought converts into a collision course with Adventist teaching: the belief in spirits of ancestors, efficacy of magic, role of religious personalities, attachment to rites of passage, traditional worship rituals, etc. For instance, the use of traditional medicine was prevalent at the time. During its application, the treatment included such rituals as eating food sacrificed to spirits or to the dead. In order to benefit from the efficacy of the medicine, the sick had to undergo diagnosis done by a soothsayer who used divination powers from spirits of the dead. Further, observing rites of passage (birth, initiation, marriage, and death) involved practices associated with the dedication of a new-born, initiation rituals containing age-set taboos, polygamy in marriage, and rituals of purification at death. Adventist teaching introduced a radical change, hence the collision.

At the time of arrival of Adventism in Africa, Africans had a full life in their own way. Rituals and ceremonies accompanied every aspect of daily existence. A traditional lifestyle was both cultural and religious at the same time. When Adventism [read Christianity] arrived, the new teaching imposed itself on the traditional structure which was functional and complete. Let it be recognized that an African living at the turn of the century when Adventism came did not need Adventism or its new culture in order to live life to the full. An African traditional experience of life then and today is self-contained. Every stage of the living experience has beliefs and practices that are binding on the individual. Africans consider life empty in the absence of such accompanying beliefs and practices.

Perhaps it is because ATR pervades the totality of the individual's life that even after conversion African Adventists still find it “more practical” to turn to ATR in order to manage their lives. Strangely, it is a state of affairs that has persisted to this day. The number of believers whose membership is terminated because they got involved in traditional beliefs attests to the magnitude of the problem. The co-existence of Adventism and ATR became the reason why prominent scholars in Africa undertook a study to examine how culture affects the Adventist experience in the continent.²³

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2. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, 1969), 2.?
3. Ibid.?
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8. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 106.?
9. Emma E. Howell, *The Great Advent Movement* (Washington DC Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1933).?
10. Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa 1450-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).?
11. Bengt Sundkler and Christopher Steed, *A History of the Church in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).?
12. See Benjamin C. Ray, *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual and Community* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 3.?
13. Sir Samuel Baker quoted in Benjamin C. Ray., 3.?
14. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 10.?
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22. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1978), chapter 21.?
23. See, Kwabena Donkor ed., *The Church, Culture and Spirits: Adventism in Africa* (Silver Springs MD: Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2011).?

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