



How to cite this book: Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African religions and philosophy*. Johannesburg: Heinemann.

Note to the reader: The text below is from the introduction of Mbiti's book and has been provided word for word (verbatim) except for the headings that were an addition. We have replaced the word 'traditional' with suitable terms, to ensure that African knowledges are not disempowered. We have selected some text and put it in italics or bold for emphasis.

Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it. A study of these religious systems is, therefore, ultimately a study of the peoples themselves in all the complexities of both traditional and modern life. Our written knowledge of religions is comparatively little (in the 60s), though increasing, and comes chiefly from anthropologists and sociologists. Practically nothing has been produced by theologians, describing or interpreting these religions theologically.

There are about three thousand African peoples (tribes), and each has its own religious system (just like in Christianity that has millions of people who believe, pray and worship differently and have different symbols, African religion also has different people who believe, pray and worship differently, and have different symbols). These religions are a reality which calls for academic scrutiny and which must be reckoned with in modern fields of life like economics, politics, education, and Christian or Muslim work. *To ignore these beliefs, attitudes and practices can only lead to a lack of understanding of African behaviour and problems. Religion is the strongest element in the background and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned.*

Meaning of religion

While religion can be discerned in terms of beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and religious officiants, philosophy is not so easily distinguishable. We shall consider different religions in terms of their similarities and differences, to give us a picture of the overall situation in Africa. But, since there are no parallel philosophical systems which can be observed in similarly concrete terms, we shall use the singular, 'philosophy', to refer to the philosophical understanding of African peoples concerning different issues of life. Philosophy of one kind or another is behind the thinking and acting of every people, and a study of religions brings us into those areas of African life where, through word and action, we may be able to discern the philosophy behind. This involves interpretation of the information before us, and interpretation cannot be completely free of subjective judgment.

Definition of religion: Religion can be discerned in terms of beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and religious officiants (Mbiti 1969, p. 1).

Meaning of philosophy

What, therefore, is 'African Philosophy', may not amount to more than simply my own process of philosophizing the items under consideration: but this cannot be helped, and in any case I am by birth an African. Philosophical systems of different African peoples have not yet been (written)(in the 60s), but some of the areas where they may be found are in the religion, proverbs, oral traditions, ethics and morals of the society concerned. I have incorporated some of these areas into this study, but proverbs in particular deserve a separate treatment since their philosophical content is mainly situational. We do not however have many comprehensive collections of African proverbs out of which an overall analysis of this type of philosophy could be undertaken. I have a collection of about twelve thousand African proverbs but I have not analysed or categorized them. Other collections are gradually being made by researchers. 'African philosophy' here refers to the

understanding, attitude of mind, logic and perception behind the manner in which African peoples think, act or speak in different situations of life.

Definition of philosophy: Philosophy refers to the understanding, attitude of mind, logic and perception behind the manner in which people think, act or speak in different situations of life (Mbiti 1969).

Africa did not learn religion from outside, it was always religious, with their religion

Because (African) religion permeate all departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop,; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician, he takes it to the house of parliament Although many African languages do not have a word for religion as such, it nevertheless accompanies the individual from long before his death to long after his physical death. Through modern change these religions cannot remain intact, but they are by no means extinct. In times of crisis, they often come to the surface, or people revert to them in secret.

Community is at the centre of African life

African religion is not primarily for the individual, but for the community of which he is part. Chapters of African religions are written everywhere in the life of the community, and in African society there are no irreligious people. To be human is to belong to the whole community, and participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, and festivals of that community. A person cannot detach himself from the religion of his people, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, his kinships and the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence. To be without one of these corporate elements of life is to be out of the whole picture. Therefore, to be without religion amounts to a self-excommunication from the entire life of society, and Africa peoples do not know how to exist without religion.

African religions can not be replaced, they are irreplaceable

One of the sources of severe strain for Africans exposed to modern change is the increasing process (through education, urbanization and industrialisation) by which individuals become detached from their environment. This leaves them in a vacuum devoid of a solid religious foundation. They are torn between the life of their forefathers which, whatever else might be said about it, has historical roots and firm traditions, and the life of our technological age which, as yet, for many Africans has no concrete form or depth.

Shortcomings of borrowed religions

In these circumstances, Christianity and Islam do not seem to remove the sense of frustration and uprootedness. It is not enough to learn and embrace a faith which is active

once a week, either on Sunday or Friday, while the rest of the week is virtually empty. It is not enough to embrace a faith which is confined to a church building or mosque, which is locked up six days and opened only once or twice a week. Unless Christianity and Islam fully occupy the whole person as much as, if not more than, African religions do, most converts to these faiths will continue to revert to their old beliefs and practices for perhaps six days a week, and certainly in times of emergency and crisis. The whole environment and the whole time must be occupied by religious meaning, so that at any moment and in any place, a person feels secure enough to act in a meaningful and religious consciousness. Since African religion occupy the whole person and the whole of his life, conversion to new religions like Christianity and Islam must embrace his language, thought patterns, fears, social relationships, attitudes and philosophical disposition, if that conversion is to make a lasting impact upon the individual and his community.

Religion is inherited

A great number of beliefs and practices are to be found in any African society. These are not (in the 60s), however, formulated into a systematic set of dogmas which a person is expected to accept. People simply assimilate whatever religious ideas and practices are held or observed by their families and communities. These traditions have been handed down from forebearers, and each generation takes them up with modifications suitable to its own historical situation and needs.

Individuals hold differences of opinion on various subjects; and the myths, rituals and ceremonies may differ in detail from area to area. But such ideas or views are not considered as either contrary or conforming to any orthodox opinion.

Importance of orature in religion

In African religion there are no creeds to be recited; instead, the creeds are written in the heart of the individual, and each one is himself a living creed of his own religion. Where the individual is, there is his religion, for he is a religious being. It is this that makes Africans so religious: religion is in their whole system of being.

One of the difficulties in studying African religions and philosophy is that there are no sacred scriptures. Religion in African societies is written not on paper but in people's hearts, minds, oral history, rituals and religious personages the priests, rainmakers, officiating elders and even kings. Everybody is a religious carrier. Therefore, we have to study not only religious beliefs concerning God and the spirits, but also the religious journey of the individual from before birth to after physical death; and to study also the persons responsible for formal rituals and ceremonies.

Belief and action are inseparable

What people do is motivated by what they believe, and what they believe springs from what they do and experience. So then, belief and action in African society cannot be separated: they belong to a single whole.

Religious (beliefs) are not universal: they are tribal or national. Each religion is bound and limited to the people among whom it has evolved. One religion cannot be propagated in another tribal group. This does not rule out the fact that religious ideas may spread from one people to another. But such ideas spread spontaneously, especially through migrations, intermarriage, conquest, or expert knowledge being sought by individuals of one tribal group from another.

African religions have no missionaries to propagate them; and one individual does not preach his religion to another.

Conversion is foreign

Similarly, there is no conversion from one religion to another. Each society has its own religious system, and the propagation of such a complete system would involve propagating the entire life of the people concerned. Therefore, a person must be born in a particular society to assimilate the religious system of the society to which he belongs. An outsider cannot enter or appreciate fully the religion of another society. Those few Europeans who claim to have been 'converted' to African religions - and I know some who make such fantastic claims! - do not know what they are saying. To pour out libation or observe a few rituals like Africans, does not constitute conversion to African religion.

There are no founders in African religion

African religions have neither founders nor reformers. They may, however, incorporate national heroes, leaders, rulers and other famous men and women into their body of beliefs and mythology. Some of these figures are elevated to high national positions and may even be regarded as divinities responsible for natural objects or phenomena. These heroes and heroines form an integral part of the religious milieu of their society, whether they played a specifically religious role in their time.

Relationship with God

Belief in the continuation of life after death is found in all African societies, as far as I have been able to discover. But this belief does not constitute a hope for a future and better life. To live here and now is the most important concern of African religious activities and beliefs. There is little, if any, concern with the distinctly spiritual welfare of man apart from his physical life. No line is drawn between the spiritual and the physical. Even life in the hereafter is conceived in materialistic and physical terms. There is neither paradise to be hoped for nor hell to be feared in the hereafter. The soul of man does not long for spiritual redemption, or for closer contact with God in the next world. This is an important element in African religion, and one which will help us to understand the concentration of African religiosity in earthly matters, with man at the centre of this religiosity. It is here also that the question of African concept of time is so important. African religion and philosophy are concerned with man in past and present time. God comes into the picture as an explanation of man's contact with time. There is no messianic hope or apocalyptic vision with God stepping in at some future moment to bring about a radical reversal of man's normal life.

God is not pictured in an ethical-spiritual relationship with man. Man's acts of worship and turning to God are pragmatic and utilitarian rather than spiritual or mystical.

Each people's history constitutes the history of their religion

With our incomplete knowledge of African religions, it is difficult to describe their history. Overall, however, they seem to have remained stable, quietly assimilating new ideas and practices from one another. National crises like warfare, famines, epidemics, locust invasions and major changes in the weather cause a revival of religious activities or innovation of new ones. Since people are so intimately bound up with their religious life and outlook, their history constitutes the history of their religion. This is an area of study which calls for interdisciplinary co-operation between historians, anthropologists, and theologians. I have made no attempt in this book to deal with the historical aspects of African religions, and I am aware of only a few studies having been done along those lines and being based mainly on oral tradition and language analysis. My approach here is chiefly descriptive and interpretive, bringing together in a comparative way those elements which are representative of religions from all over Africa. In such a general survey, there is no room to treat in depth the unique and complex religious system of each people; but it is hoped that the detailed illustrations used here and drawn from many parts of Africa will not only indicate this complexity of African religions, but also remedy in part what otherwise could not be covered in depth.