

# Book Summary – African Religions and Philosophy

Africa is unique among the continents. It has the longest river (Nile), the biggest desert (Sahara), and a vast wealth of natural resources. Many archeologists and other scientists argue that Africa was the birthplace of mankind. Yet Africa is also the poorest (measured by per capita GDP), most colonized, and least developed continent. As a result, Africa and its people have long been disparaged by commentators from the Americas, Asia, and Europe. Native peoples have been called “savages” and native beliefs have been called “primitive”. John S Mbiti, a Kenyan priest of the Anglican Church and Christian philosopher, portrays a different picture of these people and their beliefs in *African Religions and Philosophy*.

Mbiti begins by discussing the pervasive influence of religion in Africa. To the African, everything is religious. There is no demarcation between sacred and secular or material and spiritual. African tribal religions exist for the community, although they support and protect the individual, and promulgate a corporate identity, “I am because we are.” He continues by correcting misconceptions and mislabeling of African beliefs. He objects to the evolutionary paradigm of religion, in which animistic religions (such tribal beliefs in Africa) evolve into polytheism and eventually into monotheism. Characterizing African religions as nothing more than “magic” is also superficial and unfair.

The African concept of time is fundamental to tribal religions. Time is not an independent entity, moving forward independently of man’s activities, but a compilation of events. For example, as I write, the clock in front of me ticks. It will tick no matter if I am sleeping and unaware of its movement, or staring at it and concentrating on every move of the pendulum. To me as a Westerner, time has an independent existence – it will go forward no matter what I do. Thus I “manage time”, “save time”, or “waste time”, but never want to “kill time.” The traditional African, by contrast, focuses on events; time has no independent existence. An African looking at my clock would see each tick as an event, but would not see each tick as marking the passage of an independent flow of time. He would not be bound by the ticking as I am, neither “getting as much done” nor feeling guilty for “not getting as much done as I should.”

Unlike Western notions of past, present, and future, traditional Africans understand Sasa (including the present and the recent past) and Zamani (remote past and unspecified time in general). Since they focus on events, their concept of the future is limited to about two years, the time in which reasonably foreseeable events such as the birth of a baby (9 months) or next year’s harvest (18 months) will occur. Existence is cyclical rather than linear, and there is no thought of evolution or development. Traditional African religions cannot be understood without understanding this concept of time.

Mbiti portrays traditional African religions as essentially monotheistic, despite a plethora of divinities and spirits. He discusses God’s transcendence and immanence, and God’s works such as creating, sustaining, judging, protecting, and helping. On the whole, Mbiti’s African God seems similar to the Christian God. While other sources such as Witzel’s *Origins of the World’s Mythologies* describe a Most High God, He is far from man and little involved in human activities. These descriptions are probably accurate for various subsets of the population.

While modernists see a disenchanted nature composed only of biological, chemical, and physical forces, Africans see an enchanted nature filled with divinities (often forces of nature), spirits (deceased men, “angels”, “demons”), and underlying spiritual forces. All power comes ultimately from God, but His power works through spiritual beings, man, and even plants and animals. Some domestic animals such as the cow are considered sacred, powerful animals

such as lions represent god, creeping animals such as snakes represent magic in ceremonies and may actually be magical, and chickens are a favored animal for sacrifices. Trees may be mythical, and significant mountains and hills may be considered sacred. Worship occurs in sacrifice, in singing, in prayer, and in a host of other activities, but traditional Africans do not approach God on their own. They need intermediaries such as priests, medicine men, mediums, diviners, rulers, or even spirits.

After a person dies, he is considered living-dead for four to five generations, and is still in the Sasi portion of time. His living family does not worship him but does remember his name and ceremonially offer him food and other gifts. Once the last living person who knew him dies, he joins the ranks of the dead, sinks into the Zamani period of existence and the corporate “spirit of ancestors”, and is forgotten. There is no final judgment, no reincarnation, no heaven, no paradise, and no resurrection of the dead.

Kinship, including tribe, clan, family, and household, is the fundamental organizing principal of traditional African life. Pregnancy is celebrated because each new baby helps ensure the survival of the group and the memory of his parents. However, twins are unusual and therefore considered a bad omen; they are often killed at birth, and sometimes the mother is as well. Childhood is marked by a series of initiation rites that signify the passage into the community and into adulthood. Body marking to identify the child as a member of the group, circumcision, and clitoridectomy are routine. In the early to mid-teens, usually at first menstruation and sometimes at first seminal emission, girls and boys enter adulthood. Marriage is the greatest ceremony in life because it joins a man and a woman, or a man and several women, into a bond capable of reproducing. Staying unmarried is not an accepted option and divorce is rare in traditional African societies. Stages of existence are child, adult, living-dead, and finally dead.

Traditional African economies are agrarian, pastoral, and hunter-gatherer. Some people become specialists to serve special roles in the community. The ruler is God’s representative and serves by divine commission. Priests handle the formal religious activities such as sacrifice. Medicine men use “good magic” to heal diseases, improve well-being, and protect from “evil magic”, such as that conjured by witches and sorcerers. Mediums commune with the living dead and spirits, and diviners unveil mysteries. Much of Africa is hot and dry, and rainmakers are some of the most important specialists, bringing down that most precious gift of God.

The author knows that his Western readers will be skeptical about spiritual power, and so he dedicates a chapter to proving that it is real. He tells several interesting stories about magic and spiritual power affecting people that he knows, which should not be necessary because the Bible itself teaches that spiritual power is real. Mbiti mentions the power or “force” of the universe, and briefly touches on the power of blessings and curses. African society is hierarchical, and actions undermining the chain of authority are taboo.

*African Religions and Philosophy* ends by enumerating the challenges faced by Africans in the modern era, and details the impacts of world religions, secularism, and globalization on the African people. Mbiti is not blindly antagonistic to colonialism, believing that as in every other area of life, colonialism had good and bad aspects, and some colonial powers were better than others. Writing in 1969, Mbiti discusses the conflicts between Christianity, Islam, and tribal religions, and traces Africa’s religious nominalism and the independent church movement to the superficial nature of Christianity there. He ends his work by affirming Jesus Christ as the ultimate answer, in the short term and in eternity, to the troubles bedeviling Africa today.

Evaluation

*African Religions and Philosophy* is a good book and Mbiti is a good man to write it. The similarities of folk beliefs and practices worldwide provide amazing insight into the Bible, especially the Old Testament. Africa's geographic and cultural proximity to the Holy Land makes African folk religion even more interesting to a student of Scripture.

Mbiti seems well versed on African religions, and provides a broad sweep. My primary concern is that since he comes from a Christian perspective, he may be putting too great a Christian gloss on traditional African beliefs and practices. His African God sounds a lot like Jehovah of the Jews. Although even in this book, African faiths do not share the Hebrew concept of sin.

The author concludes that African faiths cannot ultimately compete in the religious marketplace because they lack a final solution to human eternity. The best an African can hope for is to merge into the corporate company of spirits in the Zamani period, while the best a Christian can hope for is eternal life with the source of all love, beauty, and virtue in the universe, and outside. Big difference.

### Conclusion

Though dated, this book is good for students of world religions, although there are few of us, anthropologists, and academics. It may also be useful for students of the Old Testament.