

Christ triumphant: Jesus and African Traditional Religions

Why are Tanzanians so aware of a spiritual world? How does Jesus answer their deepest questions? Colin Reed takes a look at African Traditional Religions.

We were driving through a small village near Iringa when we passed a small procession singing as they wound their way along. “What are they doing?”, I asked my Tanzanian companion.

“Oh”, he said, “they’re on their way to make a sacrifice to the ancestral spirits”.

African Traditional Religions are still influential in people’s lives and should be taken as seriously as any other religious system¹. In Tanzania a lot of people have at least one foot in the camp of their tribal religion. Sometimes they are torn between their traditional beliefs and relying on one of the major ‘world religions’ – Islam or Christianity.

I can speak of only a small part of Africa, yet people in other places will find things that resonate. Also, I am speaking as an outside observer, not as an insider who has absorbed this outlook from my mother’s knee, even though I did spend my childhood and much of my adult life in rural Africa.

The Great Creator God

Vincent Donovan, a Catholic missionary in Tanzania some years ago, told a very moving story of a young Maasai man who yearned after God². His tribal belief told him that God’s contact point on earth was the Mountain of God (Ol Donyo leNgai). So he climbed the mountain and spent three

remote and unapproachable. He dwells far off. On earth he may inhabit a high mountain, such as Mount Kenya, sacred to some tribes.

Some tribes have legends that tell that God used to have a close relationship with humans but they angered him and he withdrew to his remote abode beyond the world. In one place where my wife Wendy and I worked, people showed us the water-hole where, they said, there was once a ladder from earth to heaven so that people could move up and down. But when God got angry with the human race, he cut it down, so people could no longer reach God. So in African belief,



In African Traditional Religion some people worship the sun and moon as they are considered to be visible symbols of the invisible creator God.

It is important for us to have some idea of what traditional religion is all about so that we can find points of entry for the gospel. As we preach and teach we also need to understand the pressures Christians face, what assumptions they have, and how these affect the way they hear what we have to say.

days looking into the volcanic crater hoping God would reveal himself.

Almost all African Traditional Religions have a belief in the great God, the Creator. God is all-seeing, all-hearing, all-knowing, and therefore sometimes shown symbolically in carvings with a huge ear or protruding eyes. But he is also

God is there, almighty, but generally beyond knowing.

The Spirit world

Traditional African beliefs assume that there is a range of spirit beings between humans and God. One African Christian writer describes it as a world

of 'distributed power'³. It is rather like a triangle, with God at the apex and people at the base. In between are spirits who really control all events on earth, for good or bad. The main purpose of religious practices is to keep the harmony with these potent spirit beings, so that they bring good to the people, and not harm.

Ancestral spirits

There are various categories of spirits. When old people die, their spirit lives on near the family and watches over them to make sure they maintain the correct procedures, keeping tribal law. If people break the customs, the ancestors punish them by bringing illness or disaster and then it is important to appease them by sacrifice.

Since God is beyond human communication, there is a need for intermediaries. This is the special role of the ancestors. They move between the human world and the divine, taking messages in either direction.

Evil spirits are different – they have never been human. They may be manipulated by people who wish to bring harm to others, through a 'medium' or 'witchdoctor'. They are often believed to cause illness or mental disturbance. They must be driven out by a medium using the correct procedures, and always at considerable cost. So the aim of African Traditional Religions is to appease or control the spiritual forces that are all around human communities. Very few African people would doubt the existence of these spirit forces.

The unity of existence

In African Traditional Religions the great triangle of God, the spirit world and the human world is essentially one.

The created world is part of this total spiritual unity of beings under the Creator. With this worldview all aspects of life are seen as spiritual – and no part of life is therefore outside of the work of the gospel. Thus the Church in Africa generally has a very holistic approach. The church is, and wants to be, involved in medical work and in development and this is seen as part of living as a spiritual Christian community.

Jesus brings freedom

It appears that more people are converted to Jesus Christ from Traditional Religions than from the major world religions. Some people may think that the explanation is that such religions are 'primitive' and basic, and therefore unlikely to hold people. The truth is more complex. It may be, that people in African Traditional Religions are more likely to turn to Jesus because he satisfies all that their religion is searching for, and more.¹ Jesus is the fulfilment of their traditional faith and meets their needs.

*And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.
Colossians 2:15*

First, the gospel is built on the background of belief in a Supreme Creator God familiar in the African past. Early missionaries were careful to use tribal names for God which seemed to reflect a deity consistent with the scriptural view of God.

In the incarnate Christ, God is reconnected to humanity. On the cross,

Christ offered the one perfect sacrifice that brings reconciliation and peace. He is the only and the perfect intermediary who intercedes to God for his people. Thus there is no longer any need for ancestral spirits or for sacrifices to them. So African Christians find here a satisfying freedom.

And evil spirits? Jesus cast out evil spirits while on earth and he still does. He triumphed over the Prince of Evil and all his powers on the cross – he leads them in his victory parade (Colossians 1:16-20, 2:15, and Ephesians 1:18-23). Therefore he overcomes the fear of the spirit world and those who use its power. All power is concentrated in him. Herein is great liberation.

So Jesus meets the deep needs of those brought up in African Traditional Religion. Christ is the source of reconciliation with God and of all power. But of course, the gospel goes beyond these two issues – and so must our presentation of it and our teaching. Christ is our peacemaker – but he came to do more than give us a trouble-free life here on earth. He came to give life in all its fullness, and for eternity. It is important for people from a background of African Traditional Religions to grasp the great truth of eternal life and the reality of the final bodily resurrection of Christian believers. This is something that their traditional belief system did not offer. This is the wonderful hope we have in Jesus.

Pray for the vital church in Africa, and for us who are privileged to work in it, that we will know how to teach and to live out the whole counsel of God. Pray too for missionaries to continue to learn of Jesus from the people with whom we share in his work.

1. Andrew Walls, 'Primal Religious Traditions in Today's World', *The Missionary Movement in Modern History*.
2. Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*.
3. Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa; the Renewal of a non-Western Religion*, page 99.