

African Religious Beliefs And The Christian Faith

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“Christianity in its approach to the African will be most effective when the message of life in Christ Jesus has become thoroughly naturalized, that is, has been so related to the African’s own spiritual experience that he recognizes it as a fulfillment of the best that he knows and feels, an impregnating of the beliefs and longings of his traditional religion with the creative power of Christ.”¹

The above statement is an excerpt from the findings of an interdenominational missionary conference held in South Africa in 1934. It is obvious that this is an ideal hardly capable of being achieved by any single missionary or group of missionaries in any single field of work. But all the same, it is worthy of an attempt. The ideal represents about the most enlightened view of what all sincere and dedicated servants of God should always strive to do. In this paper we shall not attempt to cover all of Africa, for even if we were qualified to do so (which we are not), there is not sufficient time available to us. Therefore, as a compromise, we shall content ourselves with discussing a small phase of only one aspect of African cultural and social life, and relate it to Christian work.

It is common knowledge that most of the people of Africa south of the Sahara worship their ancestral spirits. We shall not enter into the discussion of the controversial question as to whether the African ancestral spirits are worshipped or simply venerated by those who believe in them. While it may be an important one for semanticists and others, we prefer to put it aside and deal with the problem with which we are interested,

¹ *The South African Outlook*, June 15, 1934.

namely the general attitude of the Africans toward their ancestors as it is related to the Christian belief.

ANCESTOR WORSHIP

We would like to introduce a few key concepts describing the major units of organization in Bantu African life. The order in which these concepts appear does not suggest a hierarchical ordering in terms of value standing. We list them in this order following their quantitative correlates, namely, from the smallest to the largest in the number of individuals involved. The first of these is the *family*. This includes husband and wife (or wives), children, their wives, and grandchildren of the male side of the unit. Then follows the *kinship group*, which is a conglomeration of families linked to each other by blood ties, always following the male side of the line, A *clan* includes all the individuals who share a common ancestral background. These do not necessarily have to compose a tribe.² A *tribe* is a cultural, linguistic, as well as political unit composed of people who belong to several clans and kinship groups.

Ancestor worship, i.e. "rites carried out by members of a larger or smaller lineage...with reference to the deceased members of the lineage," is, without doubt, the actual religion of the peoples of South East Africa.³ The deceased ancestors are the real gods. In a way, one can say that the deceased persons rule the community life of the Bantu peoples of South East Africa. According to the Bantu, the dead are interested in the living; they take part in the life of the tribe in a real way. The dead member lives in the memory of the living person of his family in a dynamic and real way, and so he becomes an active force, participating in their daily activities. The communion with the ancestral spirits of the family and those of the tribes guarantees the normal course of existence; such blessings as rain, sunshine, the growth of crops, and the thriving of the animals, the health of the family members and the harmony within a tribe, are the result of this relationship. The social position of the head of the family as well as that of the chief depends to a large extent on the ancestral spirits. The family, clan or tribal circle into which an individual is born is not merely a group of

² Junod, H. A., *The Life of a South African Tribe*, I, p. 89 ff.; and also Pettersson, O., *Chiefs and Gods*, CWK, Gleerup, Lund, 1953, pp. 13-14.

³ Schapera, I., *The Old Bantu Culture, Western Civilization and the Natives of South Africa*, Capetown, 1953, pp. 3-36; cf. Junod, H. A., "Le Sacrifice dans l'ancestraltrie sud-africaine," *Archives de Psychologie*, Geneve, 1932, pp. 305-35.

kinsfolk and fellow citizens, but it also embraces the ancestor spirits. These divine members of the family or tribe are supposed to dwell in the world of other dead members of the same tribe, organized according to mundane principles, and at the same time capable of constant communication with the living family and tribe. The presence of the dead individual's personality is always felt by the living. In this paper, we will discuss the sociological implications of the religious beliefs of the African people, especially as they relate to the Christian faith.

According to Driberg, the idea behind the ancestor worship is simply a social one;⁴ he maintains that ancestor worship is founded on the fact that the deceased person has acquired a new status⁵ and that, though he is physically separated from his tribe, he still belongs to it, takes part in its councils and shows an interest in it, just as he did during his life time.⁶ However, Smith, in *The Golden Stool*, presents an opposite viewpoint, namely, that the basis of African social life is of an evident religious character. He maintains, unlike Driberg, that the ancestor worship is a religious manifestation of the living toward the dead members of the tribe.⁷ As one who has had some experience in both the ancestral and the Christian faiths, I choose to believe that the former is more of a religious phenomenon than a social one. As Shropshire says, "The very atmosphere of this (the ancestor) worship, even if homely, free and easy, and without constraint, is religious."⁸ And as Pettersson states, "The ancestor cult is a religious phenomenon because the object of this cult, the dead, has a supranatural, a nonmundane status."⁹ The Bantu people look to their "unseen relatives for good health, and for protection of the village and its children," and great care is taken with regard to the correctness of the ceremonial, and in connection with this cult there are rites which very clearly show that they belong within the sphere of the holy, the sacral.¹⁰ The point we would like to stress in this discussion is that, regardless of whether ancestor worship is primarily religious or a social phenomenon, the fact remains that it (ancestor worship) acts as a uniting factor within the family and that, through the worship of the common ancestors, the

⁴ Hobby, C. W., *Bantu Beliefs and Magic*, London, 1938.

⁵ Thurnwald, R. C. *Black and White in East Africa*, London, 1935.

⁶ Driberg, J. H., *The Secular Aspects of Ancestor-Worship in Africa*, Supplement to Journal of the African Society, London, 1935.

⁷ Smith, E. W., *The Golden Stool*, London, 1927, p. 190, ff.

⁸ Shropshire, D. W., *The Church and Primitive Peoples*, London, 1938, p. 192.

⁹ Pettersson, O., op. cit., p. 136.

¹⁰ Smith, E. W., op. cit., p. 192.

living are knit together into a closed unity to which also the dead belong.¹¹ According to the Bantu, there is no fixed boundary between life and death; and this may very well be the reason for the social import of the ancestral spirits.¹² When the old die, their burial is the object of different rites, and later on they are placed in a new status, superior to that of the living old, but within the bounds of the individual family units. Later, when their sons die, the old dead automatically move up a step in the order of precedence, and so on. In a society where this kind of religious outlook is predominant, the family, the clan, the tribe form a strong community with deep roots in the past.¹³ The individual has his rights and duties to both the living and the dead. Through the rites which take place within the tribe, the kinship group, and the family, this solidarity is strengthened, i.e., “the complex system of sentiment towards the family, the clan or the tribe, its history, its present and future are kept alive and are strengthened.”¹⁴ It is perhaps safe to say that among all African peoples there is a strong dependence upon the ancestors. There is a strong belief among Africans that the individual receives every thing from the ancestral spirits: children, wealth, and what one might call “good fortune;” in short, they provide for his general well-being.¹⁵ But the ancestors also watch his behavior and if he fails in his duties toward his family or tribe, the ancestors can send sickness and other misfortunes to him, to punish him for his misdemeanor. The member of the family cannot stand alone and depend only upon himself. He must depend on both the living and the dead.¹⁶ But, of course, the power of any ancestral spirit over any one individual or family is relative to the relationship and social status, which existed during their lives on earth. Generally, the dead have power over their own children and descendants in the male line.¹⁷ The dead person’s status during his life on earth is to a great extent decisive for the attitude of the living toward him, when he has become an ancestor god. The ancestor worship sanctions the respect of rank and age.¹⁸ “The whole of the political and social life of the

¹¹ Wilson, M., *Good Company*, London, 1951.

¹² Driberg, J. H., op. cit., p. 10.

¹³ Radcliffe-Brown, A. R., “Religion and Society,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society*, London, 1949, pp. 33-1131

¹⁴ Pettersson, O., op. cit., p. 136.

¹⁵ Radcliffe-Brown, A. R., op. cit., p. 43.

¹⁶ Leaver, K. D., “Native Religion; its Constitution,” *The Southern Rhodesia Native Affairs Department Annual, Salisbury*, 1941, pp. 46-48.

¹⁷ Hunter, M., *Reaction to Conquest*, London, 1936, p. 233.

¹⁸ Hunter, M., *Ibid.*, p. 266.

Bantu is founded on this respect and loyalty. The younger members yield to the older ones who will become ancestor-gods to them. If they did not do so, the older members would become dangerous to their descendants after their death.”¹⁹ So one can safely say that the ancestor worship serves as a bastion of moral life, and in society as a conservative factor in the positive sense of the word. The dead man is still a member of the group of relatives; he has never been torn away from the social bonds, never been released through the promise of immortality.²⁰ The communalistic spirit also appears in the cult. When the living father addresses himself to his dead father, one gets the impression that two living individuals are talking to each other and each one represents a group of people, the living and the dead.

The man who has been excluded from the family community cannot become an ancestor god. In order to become an ancestor god he must also accept his obligations as a member of the community. It is possible at this point to venture the hypothesis that the ancestor cult is responsible for the low rate of crime in areas where the African culture is still unadulterated, as compared to Westernized areas. As the processes of industrialization and urbanization are progressing in Africa, one is likely to ask, in view of what we have discussed above, what is going to happen to the African individual? As a matter of fact, the processes of change are taking place now. In many parts of Africa, especially Southern Africa, family ties are fast disintegrating. In Mozambique alone, over 300,000 able-bodied men leave their homes every year to work in the Union of South Africa and Rhodesia for periods ranging from two to four years. Many of these men never return to their traditional homes. The consequences of this isolation have served as themes for several descriptive novels, and we need not belabor them here. However, we would like to point out one or two of the most important results. There is an apparent failure of the economic and political institutions to provide means whereby individuals who migrate from traditional to industrial areas could surround themselves with the necessary cultural environment. One reason for the disintegration of the African religious life could be assigned to the fact that Africans have lost the power to organize and order their lives. This power has been taken over by Europeans. This has far reaching consequences. A people whose economic and political affairs are in the hands of an outside group cannot be expected to organize themselves to cope with even the most elementary problems.

¹⁹ Pettersson, O., op. cit., p. 137.

²⁰ Kuper, H., *An African Aristocracy*, Oxford, 1947, p. 196.

Another reason for this social malaise is the development of individualism which seems to accompany the modern capitalistic economy. Maybe individualism is a good thing for Western Europe and North America. But it is doubtful whether it serves the immediate social needs of the African people. Even if, in the long run, Africans could adjust to it, at the present stage it is doubtful if this individualization fulfills basic human needs. We suspect that even the most industrialized of Western nations are not as happy with individualism as they often boast to be. Assuming that they are, why is it that we still hear of serious family, personal, and group maladjustments, as exemplified by high divorce rates, mental diseases, high suicide rates, high frequency of serious juvenile and adult crimes, and so on? The development of slum conditions along with high accumulation of wealth, and extremisms in inter-racial, inter-ethnic and inter-class tensions, are indications that all is not well in Western civilization.

In a way, the Christian churches are as responsible for these changes as the economic and political institution. Secularization has progressed very far in Western society, especially among the industrial countries of northern, western and central Europe, and North America. Although religion still plays an important part in the life of a great many people in North America, it must constantly compete with other institutions, which also claim priority in the attention of those who accept it. Religion plays a more basic role in African cultures than in Euro-American culture. It is, for instance, practically impossible to discuss methods of producing food in Africa -without taking into account religion. One may not understand the African systems of property rights, husband and wife relationships, parent and child relationships, etc., without understanding the African's beliefs in ancestor-gods, and their function in interpersonal relations.

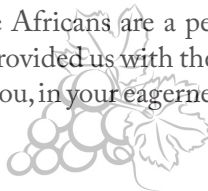
ANCESTOR WORSHIP AND THE CHRISTIAN PREACHER

If I were to make any recommendations to Christian preachers in reference to African culture and society, I would stress the points implied in the opening sentences of this paper, quoted from the South African churches: Christianity must give to the African what he has lost in his traditional religion. Unfortunately, Christian missionaries in the past tended to ignore the African beliefs, considering them as simply primitive. The spirit of community, embodied in ancestor worship, and as it suffuses the rest of life, including economics, politics, and social relations, was also basic for the early Christian church. Its revival in the Western Christian church will mark a turning point from crass individualism to cooperative living.

While the African communal life was exclusive in that it cared for the individuals who had a status within the extended family, and as such it was limited in its outlook, the Christian religion should be more inclusive. But, alas, this is seldom the case. The Christian church in Africa is divided not only along denominational lines but also along racial lines. If the Church were to return to the attitude of its founder it might be able to say with Him, "Whosoever will come, let him follow me." But instead what we often hear in Africa is, "Whosoever will come, let him believe in: Anglicanism, Reformism, Baptism, Methodism, Roman Catholicism, etc." For most Africans brought up in the systems discussed above, this is not difficult, for they have been following family and clan gods. The difference may be in the names. There is the implication that God only communicates with people of a certain denominational brand, just as the ancestors spoke to and communicated with persons belonging to certain families, kinship groups, and tribes. Here, then, we see two important dangers for the Christian church in Africa, namely, 1) in its eagerness to destroy the traditional, family-oriented religion, the Christian church will land to pull the individual from his social milieu, and 2) the tendency to develop sectarianism which often undermines the very basis of Christianity. The experience of the Christian church in both Europe and America ought to be an eye opener. The African has a rich religious background, which enabled him to live a fairly well integrated life; one within a community which combined both worlds. The Christian church, accompanied by its industrial and urban normlessness and confusion, is tending to disintegrate the communal life of the African.

In the West, life is no longer whole. This is a theme about which, of late, many scholars have written. This lack of wholeness of Western society is being brought to Africa. As Dr. Emory Ross says, "We need it (i.e., wholeness) in the West. Africa has not lost it. But Africa cannot bring it in its ancient form into its new life. In helping Africa hold, adapt and use it we may be furthering our own search for a unifying wholeness for ourselves in the West."²¹

When you Western Christian missionaries come to Africa, you should always remember that we Africans are a people with a traditional religion which for centuries has provided us with the moral codes necessary for a normal human existence. If you, in your eagerness to preach the Gospel



²¹ Ross, Emory, "Africa's Need of Wholeness," in Isaacs, H. R., *Africa; New Crisis in the Making*, from *Headline Series*, Foreign Policy Association, No. 91, 1952, p. 62.

of Jesus Christ, destroy this religion without substituting something as concrete, you are likely to do more harm than good.



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