

Reaching Africa's Heart

Understanding the Core Beliefs of Traditional Religion for Effective Discipleship

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Traveling through most towns or cities in Sub-Sahara Africa, visitors encounter a mixture of poverty and affluence, religious houses of worship, bars and shops. A blend of Baptist, Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic and Pentecostal church buildings with crosses prominently displayed dot the landscape.

The appearance is that Christianity dominates the religious beliefs of the people. Yet, under the outward façade lies an enemy that fights against biblical Christianity: African Traditional Religion (ATR). ATR is a form of animism. Animism is the belief that all living beings and inanimate objects possess a spirit, and these spiritual forces influence everyday activities of life and are present everywhere. Animism is fluid and able to adapt to new cultures and religions, and it fights against attempts to bring those in its grasp from the darkness into the light.

In Africa, ATR was once the undisputed king, reigning over men, women and children from one generation to the next. When challenged by Christianity or another religion it adapts and integrates. ATR allows its followers

to carve out a religious niche in any of the major world religions while not releasing them. The chokehold is tight and deadly for those in its grip.

Curses, power, evil spirits, and similar questions come up regularly while teaching pastors in Africa. At a Maasai pastor training in Kenya, the conversation turned to curses and the power of spoken words over a believer. Some pastors questioned whether a person could even be a Christian if they had been cursed. This led to a discussion about pastors charging large fees to go and “break the altars” or “cast off” curses from families.

How should local churches address issues such as curses, magic and spirit possession? These are challenges animists struggle with. Essentially, they are asking if the Bible and Jesus are sufficient and able not only to save them, but also to overcome evil powers and protect them if they leave the traditional practices.

To address these questions, it is best to begin by looking at what followers of ATR believe. Additionally, an examination of the relationship between man and power is important when reaching followers of ATR with the gospel.

Basic Beliefs

ATR is complex. It is impossible to say ATR has standard and universal beliefs found everywhere. There are many forms and variations, often among the same ethnic group. ATR is localized in belief and practice as well as adaptable to changing circumstances.

However, there are basic beliefs which are found among most followers of ATR. These are:

- Belief in God or a Supreme Being
- Belief in ancestors
- Belief in spirits
- Belief in magic

These beliefs look different depending on where a person is from, but they will be there in some form.

God

It has famously been said missionaries did not need to convince Africans of the existence of God when they arrived in Africa.¹ Belief in God is foundational and unquestioned in nearly all African cultures.

In ATR, God is seen as the creator of all things and is ultimately in control. God is there, but unconcerned for the most part with what happens to man. God is distant. There is no desire on his part to interact with his creation. There are various stories about why this is, but the common thread is God became angry with man and left him alone.

Ancestors

The ancestors are to be respected. Ancestors are called the living dead. Although they have passed on physically, they are still alive in the spirit realm.²

Ancestors watch over their families and communities. They care for the people and desire a relationship with the living. The ancestors have physically left the earth and became mediators between men and the spirit world. For this reason, ancestors must be kept happy. If the taboos of a group are not kept, the ancestors will punish violators or entire families. If the ancestors are not honored, they will bring sickness, calamities, or death to the ones who dishonored them.

Ancestors give guidance to the living leaders and individuals. They help them navigate the world around them since they have walked before them.

¹ Yusufu Turaki, *Engaging Religions and Worldviews in Africa: A Christian Theological Method* (Bukuru, Nigeria: Hippobooks, 2020), 173-174.

² E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 184.

The ancestors want to see their families and communities thrive while also demanding respect and honor.

Spirits

Although God is distant, the spirit world is not. Spirits exist and are real to followers of ATR. The spirit world is all around and although not seen physically, their influence is seen and felt everywhere.

There are good spirits which will help man as well as bad or evil spirits who are to be avoided. Good spirits might heal someone or bring blessings to a family or individual. Bad spirits are there to cause evil and problems.

Evil spirits can often possess people, cause sickness, death, infertility, poverty, and many other disastrous things. People go to great lengths and expense to keep evil spirits at bay.

The spirit world influences daily life for followers of ATR. People attempt to manipulate the spirits to gain blessing on themselves and to bring misfortune on competitors or enemies. This can be done through the use of magic.

Magic

To navigate the complexities of ancestors and spirits, people resort to magic. In ATR, magic can be good or bad. Good magic discovers the source of a sickness, protects, and helps people succeed. Bad magic is used to curse, cause evil, sickness, and even death. Magic is used to manipulate the spirits or ancestors into getting what a person desires in this world or to counteract a curse put on them.

People take extreme measures to avoid being cursed because they fear magic and curses. They use charms, chants, rituals and amulets to protect them from magic or to curse others. Performing the correct sacrifice or saying the right words in the right way, obligates the spirits to give people what they desire.

Man and Power

In ATR man was created by God but not in the image of God. This is a major difference from Christianity. Man is only one of God's creations and not a special creation according to ATR.

Man's greatest need in life is power. Power is needed for protection from spirits, ancestors, curses, and other men. Power is needed for success in business. Power is needed to live a successful life. What is a successful life in ATR? It is a life of physical prosperity in family, wealth, land, children, honor and respect here and now in this world. People manipulate the spirits to get the power and the success they desire. Those who are more successful have more power. Those who are in poverty, diseased or struggling are not powerful in ATR.

Religious Impacts of ATR Today

The search for power is the main reason the so-called prosperity gospel is so prevalent among Africans. It offers them what ATR seeks: worldly success and material prosperity now.

One other important consideration in ATR is that there is no need for redemption or restoration with God.³ God is distant but that is not the concern for an animist. Living a successful life and joining the ancestors are the goals. Reconciliation with the creator and heaven are not what people seek. For this reason, many churches in Africa struggle to make disciples. Jesus is simply another way for them to gain power. The people do not seek what the Bible tells us to seek, instead people seek power not Jesus.

³ R.L. Calvert and David R. Crane, "Mission to Animists," in *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, the Church, and the Nations*, ed. Bruce Riley Ashford (Nashville: B&H, 2011), 273-74.

Syncretism

Syncretism is rampant in the African church. Unfortunately, many in the church are not concerned with syncretism. Their focus is on gaining power through any available means, whether it is through Jesus or other spirits. Jesus is too often only useful as far as he will give them the power they desire.

One challenge with making disciples among animists and particularly among ATR followers, is that they expect to receive something if they follow a ritual properly. If people say a prayer properly, using the right words, they expect the spirits to give them what they want. If they do not get it, then they know they did not do the prayer or ritual properly. The fault is with the person for not following the ritual correctly.

This mindset is brought into the church. For example, if people pray to Jesus for healing, they expect healing if they say the right words in the right way. If healing does not happen, they assume either they have not prayed right or done the ritual correctly, or Jesus is not able to deal with this situation. Either way, if they do not get what they want, they will then go to the spirits or ancestors and make their request of them.

Whoever heals is more powerful. And for ATR adherents, it is unimportant to be faithful to one spirit or God. Power and success are paramount. In essence, Jesus is a genie in a bottle to give people their desires. If they do not need anything, they put Jesus in bottle until there is a need. But when they call him to service, he needs to grant their request, or they will find another source of power.

Truth Encounter⁴

How should the church approach ATR? First, teaching a wholistic biblical approach like chronological Bible storying is wise. Covering the whole of

⁴ Rick Love, *Muslims, Magic and the Kingdom of God: Church Planting among Folk Muslims*. (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 2022) 89-195. I have adapted the 3 Encounters from Love's writing.

scripture from Genesis through Revelation is necessary to teach the exclusivity of Jesus. This allows people to grasp the grand narrative of Creation, the Fall, Redemption, and Restoration as seen throughout the Bible.

A gospel presentation which combines the 3 Circles⁵ but told using Creation to Christ⁶ has been effective. Another popular method is the Two Kingdoms story⁷. Each of these present the complete gospel from Creation to Restoration and show Jesus as the redeemer overcoming our sin.

Discipleship needs to include the truth that our focus should not only be on earth, but on heaven as well. The truth is that God is concerned with our character and how we live. Often, a truth encounter involves showing that man's focus is on power and material things of earth while God is concerned about who we are becoming and what is yet to come. A truth encounter is the first step, but you cannot stop there.

Power Encounter

Since ATR is based on power, often there will need to be a power encounter. Many Western Christians are uncomfortable discussing power and spirits, but for Africans it is a natural subject. Followers of ATR must hear the truth and know that Jesus is more powerful than the spirits and ancestors. Jesus created the spirits and man, and he is able to overcome the evil powers in the world.

Through the Holy Spirit there can be healing from physical sickness and spiritual and demonic powers. He protects us from curses and evil. This

⁵ "Three Circles Evangelism Guide - Africa on Mission," Africa on Mission - From Africa to the Ends of the Earth, September 4, 2023, <https://africaonmission.org/three-circles-evangelism-guide/>.

⁶ "Creation 2 Christ - Africa on Mission," Africa on Mission - From Africa to the Ends of the Earth, August 12, 2022, <https://africaonmission.org/creation-2-christ/>.

⁷ "Two kingdoms - Africa on Mission," Africa on Mission - From Africa to the Ends of the Earth, August 12, 2022, <https://africaonmission.org/two-kingdoms/>.

must be proclaimed and experienced for people to abandon ATR and follow Christ.

An example of a power encounter might be that a Christian refuses to offer sacrifices to the ancestors. Although others say disaster will strike, the believer puts his faith in Jesus and refuses to compromise his faith. Or, if a believer has been cursed, he prays to Jesus and trusts him to protect him without going to the witchdoctor to get a remedy to counter the curse. The believer stands firm in his faith that Yahweh can and will protect him.

A word of caution is needed at this point. Simply because we ask Jesus to heal someone or show his power in a tangible way does not guarantee healing. Sometimes, he allows us to struggle or experience sickness. This also needs to be taught to disciples of Jesus coming from an ATR background.

Cultural Encounter

After hearing the truth of the gospel and experiencing the power of Jesus, men and women need to examine their culture. In every culture there is good and bad. To see a transformed culture, there must be Christian men and women from inside the culture who are able and willing to examine it. What are the beliefs that can stay? What must go? What can be adapted? The goal is not to make cultures look alike, but for them to be like Christ and to be biblical in their beliefs. Culture transformation takes time but is necessary in the discipleship process.

As people become disciples of Jesus, their worldview will change. They will begin to become like Christ. As they become like Christ, their desires change. Their view of leadership and service, what is morally acceptable or unacceptable, will all be impacted as they are discipled. Each step should see them putting off the old ways and putting on the new as Paul teaches in Colossians 3:1-17.

Often, these changes are met with resistance. People don't want to dishonor ancestors or family. They struggle because their identity is in the culture, and rejection is a real possibility.

Conclusion

Syncretism abounds in Africa because many people have placed their faith in traditional religious practices and not in Jesus. They have added Jesus to their repertoire of spirits and ancestors to gain power and success in life.

A large percentage of Sub-Sahara Africans claim Christianity.⁸ However, is it biblical Christianity or a syncretized mixture that attempts to follow both ATR and Jesus simultaneously? Who or what is their faith in? What is their source of authority? Jesus and the Bible or traditions and ancestors? Africa needs men and women who know the truth, love the truth and live obediently to the Bible.

Despite the many challenges the church in Africa faces, there is hope. There are many faithful brothers and sisters in Africa combatting ATR. They have truly counted the cost and are walking with Jesus faithfully.

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⁸ Conrad Hackett, Marcin Stonawski, Yunping Tong, Stephanie Kramer, Anne Shi and Dalia Fahmy, "How the Global Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020," Pew Research Center, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.58094/fj71-ny11>.