The Ancestor's Body and the Body of Christ

Animism, Orality, and the Missionary Task

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Introduction

The Malagasy church leader bowed his head in shame. The missionaries and Malagasy pastors had discipled him for years, but now he had abandoned the faith. "But why?" they asked. "Did you not understand our teaching?" The old man shook his head. "I know God's Word, and I can see how I need to follow it forward. But I can still hear the voice of my father behind me, calling me back."

While the Western world tends to lodge epistemology in empiricism and objective reasoning, many people around the world adhere to what we will call an embodied epistemology.[1] Like this Malagasy church leaders, people with an embodied epistemology do not trust or identify with information

[1] Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that deals with knowledge, more specifically "epistemology focuses on the nature, origin, and scope of knowledge. It examines the defining ingredients, the sources, and the limits of knowledge." Paul K. Moser, ed., "Intro-

abstracted from study, education, or books, but that knowledge which comes from relating with others. Indeed, missionaries have seen this deeply relational trust firsthand. Lynn Thigpen found through her research working among animists in Cambodia, that they "preferred to learn by means of people instead of print."[2] Even when other avenues of education were available, they trusted what they learned directly from people whose bodies they could see, hear, and touch.

Early anthropologists viewed animists' relationally-driven epistemology as *failed* or underdeveloped, lacking the preference for empiricism and objective evaluation cherished by the West. However, proponents of New Animism, like Nurit Bird-David, insist that animists' "relational (not failed) epistemology"[3] is not inadequate but simply locates the authority for the epistemology not in facts or reasoning but in relationships—in a person, persons, the community, ancestors, and even personified spirits. Graham Harvey, following Bird-David's lead, adds that animists "live through and live out the expression of their own emplaced, located, and embodied reality. They perform who they are and thus come to know who they are—always in relationship to self and others."[4] Animists learn by relating to their ancestors through oral tradition and ritual.

This article contends that animists locate epistemological authority in the body of their ancestor(s), which requires Christians to communicate Christ to them in embodied ways. For this argument, this article will address how ancestors inscribe themselves on others through oral tradition, and

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duction" in *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.

[2] Lynn Thigpen, "Deconstructing Oral Learning," in *New and Old Horizons in the Orality Movement: Expanding the Firm Foundations,* eds. Tom A. Steffen and Cameron D. Armstrong (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2022), 57.

[3] Nurit Bird-David, "'Animism' Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology," *Current Anthropology* 40.S1 (1999): 69, 71.

[4] Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 76.

then examine a case study from Madagascar. Finally, we will explore how the Bible reveals an embodied person at the center of a Christian's epistemology, who testifies about himself not only through a book but through an embodied community.

Animism and Orality in the Body of the Ancestor

Animism is complex and not monolithic. However, Graham Harvey notes two key features: indigenous religions are in general marked by "almost ubiquitous centrality of elders and ancestors as holders and sharers of tradition."[5] Christian anthropologist Charles Farhadian notes a third binding feature: while World Religions are subject to "standardized scriptures and interpretations," in indigenous [animistic] religions, "The ways knowledge is received and employed are less formalized … communicated orally from one person to another, or from one group to another group." [6] Orality connects these three features. It is through the oral tradition that elders and ancestors both pass down as well as preserve power. Oral traditions also maintain the ancestral way of life and train others how to guard and cultivate their way of life. Orality connects animists to their ancestors—with the ancestor's body as the primary instrument.

While early anthropologists conflated animism with illiteracy,[7] it is better to understand oral tradition as a kind of writing. Haun Saussy has proffered one of the better formal definitions of orality: "Oral tradition is not the antithesis of writing, but a particular kind of writing, an inscription on other

[5] Graham Harvey, *Indigenous Religions: A Companion* (London: Cassell, 2000), 12.

[6] Charles Farhadian, *Introducing World Religions: A Christian Engagement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 119.

[7] Robert Harry Lowie exemplifies this kind of prejudice when he clarifies that anthropologists imply nothing more degrading in the title "primitive" than "peoples of a relatively simple culture; or, to be more specific, the illiterate peoples of the world," *Primitive Religion* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), ix.

human minds."[8] He describes orality as an embodied technique—lungs, lips, mouth, and teeth working together to inscribe sound on another human body—beating on the eardrum to finally register meaning in the mind. As such, oral tradition differs from writing not so much in technique as in material: human bodies are the transcribing (and thus transmitting) instruments, not pen and paper.[9]

For this reason, oral speech from a human body is the most prized form of animistic information. Hence, literary critic Lee Haring exclaims that for animists accustomed to an oral tradition, "[O]rality is the mark of authenticity."[10] People steeped in oral traditions see authority as particularly embodied in time and space and mistrust information they cannot directly see proceeding from one's body. Therefore, it is the ancestor, inscribing himself on another body through his own, that connects discussions of orality to the embodied epistemology of animism.

The only way animists can learn right relationships with self, others, and the environment is through the body of the ancestor. They must follow the oral tradition that the ancestor produced from their breath, tongue, teeth, and mouth, imitate the rituals they embodied, and, finally, worship their physical remains. Dutch missiologist J. Herman Bavinck observed that animists regard ancestors as the ultimate authorities—repositories of revelation, mediators of divine presence, and objects of worship.[11] Most animists acknowledge a *de jure* Creator God, but only ancestors, through their oral tradition, can reveal Him; thus, they function as the *de facto* Higher Power. In animistic thought, every epistemological thread converges here:

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[8] Haun Saussy, *The Ethnography of Rhythm: Orality and Its Technologies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 156.

[9] See Chapter 5, "Embodiment and Inscription," in Saussy, *The Ethnography of Rhythm*, pp. 156–171.

[10] Lee Haring, "Continual Morphing" *Oral Tradition* 18.1 (2003): 2.

[11] J. H. Bavinck et al., "Religious Consciousness and Christian Faith" in *The J.H. Bavinck Reader*, eds. John Bolt, James D. Bratt, and Paul J. Visser, trans. James A. De Jong (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 348–49, 379–80.

ancestors generate life, inscribe their identity on descendants, and stand as the essential intermediaries between the divine and the community.

Madagascar Case Study

We will examine an embodied epistemology at work in an example of the indigenous religion of Madagascar and with those Malagasy who locate epistemological authority in the oral tradition of their ancestors. Malagasy animists validate what they know and trust through their ancestors—specifically the bodies of their ancestors.

A Malagasy animist's identity is rooted in ancestors and the oral tradition they have passed down. Madagascar's indigenous religion, *fombandrazana*, "the way(s) of the ancestor(s),"[12] centers all spiritual access—whether to the creator God or other spirits—on deceased forebears. Therefore, like the aforementioned Malagasy church leader, many Malagasy consider their ancestors the highest authority.

The most important container of knowledge, power, or spiritual access is the ancestor's body and the knowledge it has passed down. An ancestor's body, specifically, is revered in both life and death. For example, certain Malagasy tribes have created euphemisms for every visible body part so that no one pronounces the words feet, eyes, mouth, stomach, etc., to refer to a living male elder.[13] Additionally, Malagasy worship the bodies of departed ancestors. Malagasy conduct elaborate community ceremonies to bury their elders, even returning periodically to the tomb to feed and reclothe the body.[14] Øyvind Dahl has called this ceremony (*famadihana*) a "manifestation"

[12] Malagasy has no plural form, leaving this word open to interpretation, depending on usage and context, whether one is referring to multiple ancestors and their ways or just one ancestor and his way.

[13] Jørgen Ruud, *Taboo*, 2nd ed. (Tananarive: Trano Printy Loterana, 1970), 15.

[14] Ruud, *Taboo*, 161-62; Øyvind Dahl, *Meanings in Madagascar: Cases of Intercultural Communication* (Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1999), pp. 27–28.

of the *fombandrazana* worldview—a kind of ultimate (physical, concrete) expression of ancestor veneration.[15]

Primary with the ancestor's body is the knowledge he held and transmitted. Every central tenet of the *fombandrazana* has a story or proverb or both behind it.[16] Most tribal taboos tie back directly to an exact event in an ancestor's life. For example, one clan cannot eat tortoises, citing a story of how tortoises protected their ancestors; another cannot eat mutton because their ancestor choked to death on it. The repetition and celebration of these origin stories is a central element of Malagasy culture, as Malagasy are famous as masters of oral art.[17] Significantly, Malagasy do not just transmit knowledge orally; they transmit knowledge from the ancestors as the ancestors transmitted it. As the popular tagline at the end of Malagasy folktales insists, "It's not me who's lying but previous elders."

Malagasy culture channels knowledge through ancestors, regardless of medium. Anthropologist Maurice Bloch (who lived as a researcher in Madagascar for several years) contends that learning to read and write, contrary to expectations, did not at all change the way Malagasy think. He recounts how a respected Malagasy historian, with an illustrious Western education, continued to regurgitate historical fictions that nonetheless supported ancestral oral tradition.[18] Writing gave the Malagasy another tool, but their ancestors still controlled how they used the tool.

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[15] Dahl, *Meanings in Madagascar*, 27.

[16] For example, traditional healers, village tribunals, polygamy, creation, sacrifice of zebu, etc. Cesar Paes et al., eds., *L'Origine des Choses: Récits de la Côte Ouest de Madagascar*, trans. Velonandro (Antananarivo: Foi et justice, 2002).

[17] Consider, for example, the work of Lee Haring, *Verbal Arts in Madagascar: Performance in Historical Perspective*, Rev. ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Lee Haring, *How to Read a Folktale: The Ibonia Epic from Madagascar* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2013); Also, Saussy's examination of *hain-teny* in chapter 1 of *The Ethnography of Rhythm*.

[18] Maurice E. F. Bloch, *How We Think They Think: Anthropological Approaches to Cognition, Memory, And Literacy.* (New York: Westview Press, 2008), 154–56.

Bloch points to the Bible as a prime example. "The fact that it was written and printed was significant," he says, "not because this marked a different kind of knowledge from the oral knowledge of the elders, but because it represented a more powerful, impressive, efficient form of the same kind of knowledge."[19] That is, even as Malagasy could read the translated Bible, their epistemology was still rooted in categories shaped by the *fombandrazana*.

Translating the Bible into Malagasy was indeed a noble feat. But a mere book—even the Bible—cannot unseat the embodied ancestors sitting at the center of the *fombandrazana* epistemology. In this way, the Bible becomes a medium of power. An animist with access to the Bible does not need to understand it, just to pass it on and manipulate it. The Malagasy Queen, who murdered Christians and burned Bibles, still converted her government to written documents and commissioned the transcription of folk tales. Still today, Malagasy witchdoctors cut up strips of the Bible and the Qur'an to use in their charms. Prosperity preaching quotes the Bible to support using water, blood, and cow horns for spiritual cleansing and blessing. They are using the Bible . . . just like the ancestors taught them.

These foundational elements of the veneration of the ancestor's body and the primacy of the oral tradition he mediated form the foundation for Malagasy epistemology. The Malagasy people implicitly trust those closest to them to embody what is most true. This kind of embodied epistemology is epitomized in the ancestors. The Malagasy proverb bluntly states, "Parents are gods you can see with your eyes."[20] When one presents the gospel to Malagasy, they commonly respond, "Why should I worship your ancestor (Jesus)? I saw my grandfather with my own eyes. And he looks more like me than your Jesus does!" In other words, those whom one saw, touched,

[19] Bloch, *How We Think They Think*, 160.

[20] Ruud also reports the proverb *Tsy maintsy hajaina sy homem-boninahitra ny ray aman-dreny satria solon-Andriamanitra,* "Parents must be respected and glorified as representatives of God," in *Taboo*, 21.

heard, and smelled—those with whom one related most closely and spent more time in everyday life—are more trustworthy and worthy of devotion.

Admittedly, most people trust their family more than a stranger. Nevertheless, while animism is not unique in valuing relational trust, it uniquely sacralizes, localizes, and absolutizes relational trust to the exclusion of other ways of being and ways of knowing. Everyone probably trusts their grandfather more than their new immigrant neighbor; only an animist will sift all information through what their grandfather said and treat him as a vessel of divinity.

It is also helpful to remember that animistic religions are classified as such because they have no binding textual tradition to which they adhere. That is, they have no recorded standard by which to compare competing claims. Christian adherents are subject to the Bible, Islamic adherents to the Qur'an, and Secularists to the Scientific Method. Animists, by definition, subject themselves not to a shared text but to people: local authority figures to whom they directly relate.

For example, a secular teen may trust an influencer more than their parent, depending on how persuasive the influencer is to the teen and their peer group. By contrast, the animist teen's parents control their eternal destiny: to disobey one's ancestors is to betray one's past as well as curse one's future. As a biblical example, for a Christian, Jesus' words to let the dead bury their dead demonstrate spiritual allegiance to Jesus; for the animist, this call is blasphemy.

The Gospel and an Embodied Epistemology

The Bible testifies that God revealed himself in Jesus's own embodiment (incarnation) and continues to reveal himself through human bodies who are indwelt with his Spirit, and together form Jesus' own Body, the Church. An animist holding to an embodied epistemology can find in the gospel a compelling call to trust Jesus and his way of living and being.

An embodied epistemology has biblical warrant. John's first letter opens by rooting the assurance of believers' knowledge of Jesus in embodied and relational terms:

> What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have observed and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life that life was revealed, and we have seen it and we testify and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us what we have seen and heard we also declare to you, so that you may also have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ (1 Jn 1:1–3, CSB, author's italics).

In other words, John affirms that believers' epistemology was not only shaped by but grounded in the fact that they knew Jesus with their bodies (eyes, ears, hands, etc.). Because they had personally related to him, they had the conviction to declare that to others so that they too could have a relationship with God the Father, his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit's testimony in fellowship with the church.

Of course, this embodied approach to relating to Jesus is not limited to our bodies. John writes in his gospel that Jesus chided Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you believe. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (Jn 20:29). One does not have to encounter Jesus face to face to believe in him. Nevertheless, the hope, even for those who haven't seen Jesus in person, is the continuity of the Gospel message, transmitted from person to person since the occurrence of a historical and embodied event.[21]

Missiologist Leslie Newbigin emphasized that Jesus did not entrust his mission to a book but to a community.[22] It is "through the church" that

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[21] John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 62.

[22] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission,* Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 80.

God is revealing his "multifaceted wisdom" (Eph 3:10, CSB). That is, God reveals himself to those holding an embodied epistemology through Jesus' incarnation as the Church continues to trust and embody him. As Newbigin again emphasized elsewhere, "[T]he only way in which we can affirm the truth and therefore, the authority of the gospel is by preaching it, by telling the story, and by our corporate living of the story in the life and worship of the Church."[23] The church embodies God's story, revealing Christ through its shared life and proclamation.

Abstracted doctrine never communicates as clearly to an embodied epistemology as oral methods of communication. Nevertheless, the Church's challenge is not merely to replace ancestral stories with biblical ones. The Church must embody the story of Jesus in such a way that the community trusts his presence and authority more than the ancestors.

Orality is people inscribing themselves on others with their voice. Therefore, the instrument of communication is the human body. If Jesus is to inscribe himself on others, it will be through his Body—his Church—as an instrument.

Indeed, just as the ancestor inscribes himself on others, so Jesus inscribes himself on his people. Paul prioritized the "Spirit" over "letter(s)" (2 Cor 3:6). He tells the Corinthians they are his evidence of apostolic authority because the "Spirit of the living God" has inscribed himself on their hearts. People and their changed lives fundamentally validate God's authority more than written words. Richard Hays comments that Paul illustrates in this word picture that "incarnation eclipses inscription. By incarnation I mean . . . the enfleshment of the message of Jesus Christ in the community of Paul's brothers and sisters at Corinth."[24] Paul saw that the greatest form of inscrip-

[23] Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996), 180-81.

[24] Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 129.

tion, similar to the oral inscription of the ancestors, was Jesus conveying himself through the bodies of his community of people living changed lives.

Therefore, missionaries must prioritize the formation of alternative communities that embody God's Word. To effectively pull away from one's leaders, who are the very embodiments of truth, people must find courage in community.[25] One way churches may do this is by forming story-crafting groups, doing what Paul Hiebert called "metatheology."[26] As groups pray over, meditate, exegete, dramatize, apply, sing, and proclaim God's Word together, they not only grow in communal reflection but in communal courage. For example, churches in Southern Madagascar meet weekly to tell Bible stories to each other. They bring these stories to life: telling them in their community, singing them, enacting them, and citing them as authoritative examples for Christian behavior as they consider the theological and moral questions they face in daily life. Yet instead of walking up to someone with a book (Bible) and reciting what is written, the groups are internalizing and embodying its message. Instead of a single pastor reinforcing his own incontrovertible (ancestor-like) authority, the body of believers lives out an alternative life that their Lord has written on their hearts. Their bodies—the collective Body—are the medium. In a group like this, animists can experience both the truth and the trustworthiness of Christ through an embodied community of allegiance. The Body of Christ must replace the ancestor's body in the animist's imagination.

[25] Niebuhr surmised that only as a collective body will individuals have the courage and insight to withstand cultural deformation. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 3rd ed. (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 274.

[26] Hiebert's vision was for self-theologizing communities applying Scripture to everyday life while personally relating to Jesus as a local community. Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 102.

Conclusion

This article has argued that animism and orality are linked in an embodied epistemology centered on the body of the ancestor. As ancestors psychosomatically (orally) inscribe themselves upon successive generations, animists then authenticate knowledge through direct relational experience with trusted figures. As the examples from Madagascar demonstrate, these ancestors are not only physical sources of communal knowledge; animists worship their bodies as mediums of revelation. Thus, the ancestral body lies at the center of their epistemology. Likewise, Christians also have an embodied epistemology. Yet while the animist submits to the authority of their local ancestor, the Christian submits to the authority of the Lord of all who inscribes himself on the collective body of his followers.

For Christian mission, the Church must present the gospel in ways that resonate with existing epistemological patterns. The incarnation of Christ and the Church's continuing witness as his Body are the theological basis for such engagement. The Church's task, therefore, is not solely the transmission of doctrinal content but the cultivation of communities whose shared life and practices credibly embody the authority of Christ. Jesus himself came in the flesh, and he continues to be known through the Spirit in his Body, the Church. Mission among animistic peoples must therefore prioritize forming credible and embodied alternative communities that live out together that Jesus is the only way, the truth, and the life.

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