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The African Worldview and Belief in the Demonic

African Traditional Religion's Worldview

The African continent displays rich diversity in geography, culture, history, and language. In spite of this heterogeneity in several respects it still has many similarities. These similarities are to a great extent evident in its rich cultures, but especially in its religious worldview. For that reason, the debate still rages whether the religion appertaining to the region should be referred to as African Traditional Religion (ATR), or African Traditional Religions. The arguments on both sides are compelling. A close examination of the worldviews held by a large portion of Africans however reveals amazing similarities. The African worldview associated with the religious beliefs of the people is one that contributes greatly to belief in the reality, power, and working of demons in the daily lives of its people. To better understand how a worldview contributes to belief in the demonic the religion and corresponding aspects of the African worldview will be examined.

ATR and the Spirit World

The principal elements of ATR comprise belief in God, divinities, ancestors, spirits, magic, and medicine (Idowu 1973:139). It has also been observed that Africans are notoriously religious; in other words, religion permeates every facet of their existence; therefore, there is hardly any function without religious significance (Mbiti 1969:1). The belief that all of life is affected by powers or beings greater than humans is prevalent in the psyche of the people. It is noteworthy that the major components of the

African cosmos are essentially spiritual in nature. In other words, God, the divinities, and ancestors are in essence spirits. Also, magic and medicine belong to the realm of spirit forces.

Indeed, an African scholar described the cosmos as “peopled by myriads of intractable and capricious spirits locked in an internecine battle at the center of which is humankind” (Okorochoa 1992:173). It could be said that Africans regard the cosmos as a sacred egg in which humans weave covenants with the munificent and the malevolent gods who are often at loggerheads in this world (Ogbu 2006:91, 92).

These spirits, or non-bodied beings, are prevalent throughout the cosmos. They often make their abode in nature—trees, forests, water, rocks, caves, or mountains. They could also dwell in creatures like animals and in humans.

Spirits are generally regarded as neutral in form and nature—they could be both beneficent or malevolent. Some people seek their assistance to have children, prosper in their business, have protection of life and property, or acquire power to control all of life’s circumstances. At the same time these spirits can wreak a lot of havoc on human lives and property, inflicting damage in the form of illnesses, disability, incapacitation, death, and devastation, and creating natural disasters. These spirits are considered more powerful than humans, so it is almost impossible to resist their power or influence. Life, therefore, is a negotiation that entails wisdom and tact with these ubiquitous spirits.

Certain persons by virtue of their training, experience, or allegiances are deemed powerful enough to control or manipulate evil spirits. Such are the shamans, diviners, or traditional healers. Through specialized rituals and sacrifices these ritual specialists can also command evil spirits to either leave or afflict people.

Another category of persons that have affiliation with evil spirits are witches. These are humans who become engaged with the world of evil spirits by initiation or covenantal bonds and are persons who can wreak untold havoc, to the extent of killing and eating their victims. These malicious beings are considered innately evil and totally under the control of demons to cause devastation and/or death to persons they perceive as their enemies, or whoever crosses their paths.

Animism and ATR Worldview

Although the expression animism has been regarded as derogatory, there are elements of this sociological notion that resonate with the African worldview. In their classic volume, *Understanding Folk Religions*, Paul Hiebert, Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou present several characteristics of

animism that provide insight to the reinforced belief in the demonic inherent in the African worldview. These elements include communalism, the role of the spirit world, existentialism, power and pragmatism, orality, transportation and transformation, and fear (1999:196).

Communalism

It is a widely known fact that Africans are communal in nature, that is, individual desires and aspirations are subordinated to the group's determination. Their cosmology is also reflective of another dimension of communalism—the African cosmos comprises the living, the living dead (ancestors), and the yet unborn. Each of these groups live in close connection with the other in such a manner that whatever happens to one group affects the other. Ancestors have the power to bless or to hurt living members of their families and the decisions of the living can bring curses or good fortune to the yet unborn. While a popular modern dictum states, “seeing is believing,” for many Africans the unseen spirit world is more believed in and feared than the natural world. For many Africans the belief in evil spirits is real and strong, and their dread for the spirit world is stronger than for any other thing or person in life.

Furthermore, ancestors are believed to be living in community with their progeny. These ancestors can be consulted for assistance in times of need and trouble. Africans believe that death is merely a transition from this realm unto another, and that the ancestors continue living in a new state with increased powers. Consequently, communication or consultation with the ancestors is encouraged, a practice which gives room for demonic spirits to manifest themselves among the living in the guise of dead ancestors.

Existentialism

The African religious worldview is extremely existential in nature. That is, there is more concern for this world than the world to come. Salvation to the African is not about cognitive assent to a set of beliefs but more about how to achieve more benefit in this world than in a future life. Therefore, salvation for the African must be evident in health, peace, blessings, security, and prosperity. Because of the desire for a good life here on earth it is not uncommon for some to seek such a life at any cost, even when that may entail seeking the assistance of the spirit world—even if that involves demonic spirits.

Stories abound of barren women who develop connections with mermaid spirits for assistance to have children so that the reproach of

childlessness may be removed. Some men in their quest for fame and fortune have also sought the assistance of demonic spirits to enable them to rise from lives of obscurity to prominence. In just about every African country tales are told of various means people can and have employed to obtain material blessings.

Power

As with most traditional religions the African worldview is power oriented. The ultimate quest is for power, which the people are keenly aware that it does exist. With the aid of spiritual power, people can obtain security, prosperity, healing, promotion, and every other material desire. Also, power provides protection from spiritual and physical calamities. Some Christians even believe that there are afflictions with demonic origins for which modern medicine and pastoral intervention are ineffectual to remedy. To them, the only remedy is to seek the help of ritual experts who, in consultation with the demonic spirits, can bring the healing or deliverance sought.

Another predisposing factor which prompts some Africans that leads them to engage with demonic agencies is the desire for speedy resolution to their predicaments. While the Christian faith teaches the virtue of patience and for waiting upon the Lord, the worldview of the African (which does not discriminate between good and evil power) seeks expeditious responses to petitions whatever the source of that response. Some Christians who engage in the practice of dual allegiance admit that prayer works, but complain that prayer may take a while, but when they go to the shaman, they receive instant results. Some Africans believe that there is only one true source of blessing or healing, and that is God. Therefore, whenever they are helped in any way, the source can only be God.

Pragmatism

Pragmatism is another key feature of the African religious worldview—it is what works that counts, nothing more or less. Because the African concept of sin is at variance with the Western or Christian one, when a child is sick all the parents are interested in is how to restore the health or life of the child, even if it entails going to the witchdoctor, shaman, or diviner. Their argument is, so long as the child is restored, however that may have occurred, it must have originated from God. This perspective follows from the notion that power is neutral; neither good nor evil, it is what one does with it that is important. Such an outlook opens the way for demons to find a way into the lives and experiences of such persons who

are oblivious of the wiles and devices of the evil one. A further danger is that the devil can bring about some form of healing in order to lead to allegiance and ultimately gain total control of a person.

Orality

African Traditional Religion has no written creed or scripture. It is a religion that has been transmitted orally. A mistake of the early missionaries, and still repeated often today, is that because ATR has no written tradition it is ignored and regarded as being of no consequence. Nevertheless, despite over a century and a half of successful mission activities on the continent ATR still thrives and flourishes and is actually experiencing a resurgence in certain regions. A primary reason for this is that its tenets, rituals, and services have been orally transmitted from generation to generation. Another reason for this could be that what is heard from a credible source is usually considered authentic, whether it is indeed factually correct or not. Because authority figures cannot be questioned due to respect for their age or positions, what they say is accepted as right. For instance, across the continent in various forms, accounts have been retold of some persons who after their deaths were later sighted in other different locations by persons who knew them in the past. These persons, as the stories go, became resettled, remarried, and began new lives in new locations, with new identities, until they were recognized and identified by those who knew them in their former lives. The moment this happened, the identified individuals vanished, never to be seen again. Such stories reveal the workings of evil spirits described in the Scriptures as familiar spirits who impersonate dead people in order to deceive the living (1 Sam 28:3-16). The reason tales like these abound and continue to be repeated, along with other supposed supernatural phenomena, is because of the power of orality in the African worldview.

Words are believed to possess innate power to create or recreate a new reality. For this reason, curses, especially from elderly persons are not lightly dismissed but treated as grave. Also, verbal threats of reprisals are taken very seriously because of the belief that some wicked persons in consonance with demonic agencies can unleash terrible afflictions on their victims.

Transportation and Transformation

Across the continent a strong belief persists that certain people possess the power to transform themselves into other creatures and thus move from one location to another with speed and agility to carry out whatever

evil purposes they seek. These creatures could be birds, so that they fly with speed, or animals such as wild cats, so they can maim or kill their victims. In most parts of the continent accounts are freely told of persons who have actually witnessed people mutating from human to animal forms. These phenomena can only occur through demonic assistance. There are also reports of witches who were found in the early hours of the morning in half-human, half-creature-like states as evidence of such occurrences.

There are a number of creatures which are commonly associated with witches or the demonic. The types of creatures differ from one region to another. They include cats, owls, crows, bats, snakes, buffaloes, geckos, and wild cats such as leopards and panthers. The sudden appearance or presence of such creatures is usually regarded as an indication that demonic agencies such as witches are present. The cries of certain creatures at night are often taken as an indication that death is imminent to someone in a nearby household.

Fear

Fear pervades and permeates much of the belief and worldview of African religion. This fear derives from the consciousness of a cosmos pregnant with spiritual agencies in which humans are pawns, and in many cases the people are powerless to overcome the control of these powerful forces. Because of the pain, misery, misfortune, and death that divinities, ancestors, enemies, and demons can cause, life for the African must be lived carefully so as not to antagonize any of these agencies. Many of the tales, myths, and narratives shared in most African communities underscore the proximity of evil spiritual forces to the extent that there is generally greater fear of the demonic in the African worldview than there is for God.

Causation

A fundamental element of worldviews is the concept of causation—Why do things happen? For most parts of Africa, it is strongly believed that nothing happens without a cause, and this cause usually has a spiritual origin. In other words, human existence is often plagued by the interference and interaction of powerful spiritual forces to the extent that most events are ascribed to supernatural or spiritual explanations. Occurrences from the mundane to the most complex are attributed to the all-powerful realm of the spirits. For example, among certain people groups if a person walking to the farm were to kick a stone with his left foot, it would be recognized as a portent of something ominous. The next advisable course of action in such a scenario would be to return home in order to avert possible evil.

In most parts of Africa when a death occurs it is believed that an enemy is behind it—even when the deceased may have died at a ripe old age. Obituaries have been written with statements such as, “The enemies have done their worst.” In other words, the family of the deceased is expressing their conviction that the death of their beloved was definitely the work of some enemies. These enemies could be envious relatives, neighbors, members of the community, or witches. Rarely, if ever, is death attributed to disease or old age.

In some places during a funeral if evil spirits or persons are suspected to be the cause of death of a loved one, the deceased is buried with an instrument of vengeance in their hands and are directed to carry out retribution for the death. The dead are usually addressed, as though they could still hear, during funerals and told not to rest until vengeance has been done.

Sickness and disease also have explanations attributed to the spirit world. Modern medicine through careful research and observation aduces that the origins of diseases is traceable to germs. The invention of the microscope made it possible to observe germs in laboratory settings, consequently, the germ theory has become accepted as the scientific explanation for the incidence of diseases. However, in opposition to the germ theory is the spirit theory which explains that sickness has a spirit origin. The spirit theory is the dominant explanation for the incidence of sickness among many Africans. While this is largely true for many uneducated Africans, even among the educated the belief that certain conditions have supernatural origins still exists. This is true even among academics, professionals, and medical personnel.

In one known instance, after extensive diagnostic tests had been conducted upon a senior citizen without the discovery of any clear cause for his ailment, the presiding physician, well-schooled in modern medicine and highly ranked as a consultant in his profession, advised that the old man be taken to the traditional healers, because the consultant believed the ailment did not have a scientific cause, therefore, only the traditional healers could help. This account demonstrates the resilience of the African worldview to the extent that education and experience appear unable to transform it.

Even when sometimes the germ theory for the cause of sickness is acknowledged, the next question some Africans then ask is, “Who sent the disease agent?” Underlying such a question is the belief that there is always a human agent working through supernatural means to bring about affliction. Some of the ways a person could be made ill include curses, the evil eye, and the use of charms or *juju* (witchcraft).

As previously explained, a curse can be directed at someone by another who has the spiritual power to do so. Curses may transcend generations and remain effective until something definite is done to remove the curse. The evil eye is the ability some persons acquire to cause pain, ailment, or death simply by focusing their gaze on the victim. This supernatural ability can be prompted by jealousy or envy and has demonic origins. In different parts of Africa, this belief encourages people to take various precautions to protect vulnerable persons such as pregnant women and especially children. Thus, amulets or other tokens are used to protect against the evil eye, which is believed to have demonic origins.

Through the practice of voodoo and the use of magical arts Africans universally believe that sickness and eventually death could be brought upon a victim. In such situations, the perpetrators employ supernatural spiritual powers to overpower the victim and induce a desired disease condition or sickness. These beliefs, studies reveal, persist among Africans despite their education, exposure, and experience as Christians (Onongha 2017).

Pentecostalism and Belief in the Demonic

Curiously, another factor that has contributed to reinforcing belief in the demonic is the growth and spread of African Pentecostalism. This strand of Christianity can be traced to the African Indigenous churches, which broke upon the scene in Eastern, Southern, and Western Africa in the early 1900s. The roots of Pentecostalism can be found in these movements that sought to make Christianity indigenous to the African people. Unfortunately, many contemporary Pentecostal churches in Africa can be regarded as reflective of what may be described as African Traditional Christianity. This is an amalgam of African Traditional Religion practices and Christianity resulting in a product with similar worldview foundations to ATR.

It is therefore little wonder that there are several popular Pentecostal preachers who subscribe to the spirit theory of sickness. They believe that demons are behind many common illnesses. As a result, ministries have arisen which promise deliverance from debilitating diseases such as HIV / AIDS, cancer, high blood pressure, and diabetes.

In addition, some Pentecostal preachers during their healing services seek to bind and cast out spirits of diverse illnesses by naming particular spirits considered responsible for the conditions of their patients: spirit of diabetes, spirit of hypertension, spirit of arthritis, spirit of malaria, etc. Evidently, these Christians still believe that demons are responsible for much that goes wrong in their lives, from illness to death.

This is reflective of the vast swing from when early missionaries denied, and even rejected the reality of the existence of spiritual powers and forces—the phenomenon referred to by the Christian anthropologist, Paul Hiebert, as “the flaw of the excluded middle” (2009:412-414). Both the biblical worldview and the African worldview acknowledge the existence of three realms of existence: the highest rung is the supernatural world with God and his angels, in the natural realm below are found humans, animals, and other creatures. However, between the supernatural and the natural is the realm where spirits operate. Missionaries, who were affected by the Enlightenment theories of their day, often questioned whatever was not considered empirical.

However, recently in missiological circles scholars have warned about the danger of what they refer to as the “expanded middle” (Pocock, Van Rheenen, McConnel 2005:198). This is a situation where just about every malaise and condition is blamed on demons—a complete swing from one end of the pendulum to the other.

Missiological Implications

Notice the missiological implications when Christians with unconverted worldviews continue to hold unto their previous views that spirits and angry ancestors are the primary cause of all sickness and misfortune.

First, the foregoing discussion demonstrates how factors in the African context and issues derived from its worldview can result in allegiance to demonic powers as people seek to allay their fears and meet their needs.

Second, the quest for power to gain control and attain security from the caprices of life often results in covenants and generational bonds with established demons, which will need to be broken for freedom in Christ to be attained.

Third, the scriptural narratives which demonstrate the supremacy and sovereignty of God need to be told and reemphasized in the African context so that believers may overcome their fears and the need for “fire insurance,” allowing them to live lives free from the practice of dual allegiance.

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