

# Mission: Reflexion – 200 Jahre Berliner Mission

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## Chapter 8: Reconciling Christian Engagement with African Traditional Religions by Brighton Kataro

### 1. Introduction

The mission of the Church (often referred to as "missio Dei" or "the Mission of God") can be briefly described as an ongoing endeavour to reach other people, communities, and societies with the joyful message of salvation in Jesus Christ. It is God's own initiative to spread His love to all humanity, and the Church participates as an instrument in this enterprise. Only through the Church's involvement in this mission can it continue to exist.

Throughout its history, Christian missionary work has experienced encounters with new peoples, cultures, traditions, belief systems, customs, environments, worldviews, and circumstances. While Christianity has been enthusiastically embraced in some contexts, it has encountered resistance in others. This kind of response from people is also evident in Paul's missionary efforts. While his church planting efforts were enthusiastically received in regions and cities like Philippi and Thessalonica, they often encountered resistance elsewhere, such as in Lystra, where Paul was stoned and left for dead, and in Ephesus, where his teachings provoked a riot led by silversmiths feeling threatened by declining sales of idols. Similarly, Paul faced opposition from Jewish leaders who were hostile to his message and methods.

This was also the case in Africa when Christianity was primarily introduced by European missionaries in the 19th and 20th centuries. While the introduction of Christianity was positively and enthusiastically received by many indigenous African people and communities, it encountered resistance and skepticism from some followers of African Traditional Religions (ATR), especially their priests and deeply rooted practitioners who saw Christianity as interference in their indigenous belief systems and ways of life.

### 2. Spread of Christianity in Africa: Followers of ATR as the Main Target of Conversion

As mentioned above, Christianity was primarily spread in Africa in the 19th and 20th centuries by European missionaries. These missionaries were either sent by missionary organizations or felt a personal inner calling from God to proclaim the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. Many missionaries were motivated and enthusiastic

about sharing the good news about Jesus, whom they believed in as their personal Savior and whose goodness they had personally experienced. They wanted to tell other people and nations about their positive experiences with Jesus and share their encounter with him. Their desire was to share the goodness of Jesus that they had experienced with others so that all people could benefit from it, as the Swahili chorus says, "*Onjeni muone, Bwana yu mwema*" (Taste and see that the Lord is good).

African people who converted to Christianity did the same. They also became Christian missionaries and began to spread the good news of salvation to their fellow Africans. Therefore, Christian missionary work in Africa since the time of European missionaries until today aims to invite and convert all people, especially followers of indigenous African religions, to *communio sanctorum* (the communion of saints). In other words, the primary goal of Christian mission until today is to spread the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ to those who are considered lost in the eyes of Christians, including followers of African traditional religions, so that they too can become part of the "chosen group." It is about winning all lost souls, including individuals, families, clans, chiefdoms, and the entire continent, for the kingdom of God.

This is expressed in the 5th verse of the hymn of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT), number 62, "*Uamke Kwetu Tena Roho*" (Wake up, You Spirit of the First Witnesses, K.H.V. Bogatzky, 1690-1774):

*Utume mwema na uende,  
mahali popote huku nchini,  
wa dini zote waingie,  
kundini mwako mwa wateule.  
Amsha nao wana wa ahadi na  
wa imani zote wakutii.*

*May the good news go forth everywhere  
across the country,  
Let people of all faiths come into the  
group of your chosen ones.  
Awaken the children of promised land  
and people of all other faiths to obey  
you.*

Since the time of European missionaries to the present, traditional African religious beliefs have been considered pagan and godless. Their followers were and still are considered lost souls who need to be saved before they end up in hell and damnation. In Swahili: "*wapagani*" and in Luhaya/Lunyambo (my mother tongue) "*abatankansi*" are still common words indicating that someone is godless just because they are still followers of ATR. Followers of ATR were/are seen as people who seemed not to belong to the true God. They were/are considered people who worshiped idols, ancestral spirits, and other gods and deities such as trees and the sun. Much of what Africans traditionally believed and practiced seemed devilish. Even their customs and traditions were considered devilish and godless.

To be godly meant to separate oneself from one's traditional beliefs, objects, possessions, cultural practices, and ways of life that appeared/appear godless in the eyes of Christian missionaries. Those who wanted or want to be baptized had/have to renounce their old life and give up all African traditional objects, which were/are sometimes burned in front of the church or at the convert's residence.

Those who converted to Christianity began to view their own relatives as godless. A gap emerged between members of the same community and even within families. Fear and sometimes hostility arose between Christians and believers of ATR. The hunter-hunted relationship continued to thrive. All churches in Tanzania, for example, strive for these followers of ATR, sometimes not through persuasion but with a little force, as illustrated by the following case study from Kanyigo, Bukoba.

*A few years ago, I attended the funeral of a relative in Kanyigo, a remote village in the Kagera region of Tanzania. There, I experienced an unforgettable tension between Christianity and traditional African religion. The deceased was over 80 years old and had nine children. The children were divided into two groups: one group were Christians, and the second were followers of the traditional religion. The second group, led by an "embandwa" (a traditional priest), worshipped the gods of their ancestors and, for this purpose, erected a small grass hut (msonge) near the family home. There, they gathered to perform their traditional rituals. In this hut, which they considered a sacred place, they kept various traditional items, believing that these objects provided them with protection.*

*As part of the family wished for the deceased to be buried in a Christian manner, they called the pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church to conduct the funeral service. However, the situation was not straightforward. The pastor and the rest of the church leadership were informed about the hut and the items within it. Therefore, the pastor stipulated that they must first burn down the hut and all the items before he could conduct the funeral service.*

*A heated argument ensued within the family. One side demanded that the house be burnt down to have their father buried in a Christian manner, while the other side objected. From the perspective of Christianity, the hut was seen as a symbol of superstition. The other side also expressed their disbelief in Christianity. This led to significant religious and traditional tension, shaking the entire village and threatening peace and security. As a result, the pastor decided not to proceed with the funeral.*

*After he left, a group of family members decided to conduct the funeral themselves. They even erected a cross on the grave, leading to further tension between the pastor (the church) and some family members who conducted the burial. The pastor vehemently opposed the placement of the cross on the grave. He ordered it to be removed, but his command was not obeyed.*

This scenario illustrates how Christianity often considers itself as the only true religion, possessing the true God, while indigenous African religions (ATR) are often demonized and associated with the devil. Followers of ATR are consequently treated disrespectfully, and sometimes Christian pastors and/or evangelists attempt to forcibly convert these indigenous African believers to Christianity. Some Christian

churches and preachers vociferously preach against ATR followers as if they were not normal people.

For me, it's okay and good to continue sharing the good news of salvation and the kindness of Jesus Christ with other people, which we as followers of Christ have personally experienced. It's always beautiful to share something good with others. Inviting all people to share the many blessings and kindness of Jesus is commendable. However, it should be done with respect, without forcing anyone or painting a negative picture of people, as some Christian preachers have done. We must address such people in a humble and respectful manner. Additionally, it's important to respect the diversity of beliefs and treat each other with compassion and understanding, rather than with prejudice and condemnation. It's wonderful when people convert to Christianity because of the good things and mighty deeds they have heard or experienced from Christ.

### **3. How can Christianity positively engage with indigenous African traditions and religions?**

Reconciliation between Christianity and indigenous African traditions and religions requires a conscious and respectful engagement that honours the richness and complexity of African religious and cultural heritage. Below are some thoughts on building a more positive coexistence between ATR and Christianity:

#### **i. Overcoming prejudices against African traditional religions**

As mentioned earlier, African traditional religions have often been associated with their dark sides such as witchcraft and superstition, creating a fearful relationship between Christianity and ATR. They are often reduced to beliefs in witchcraft. Many followers of ATR are sometimes or often considered as witches and dangerous people. It is time for churches to build a closer and friendlier relationship with African traditional religions. They are also human beings and were created in the image of God. It's important to overcome the fear planted in people's minds towards followers of ATR and therefore seek dialogue with them.

#### **ii. Understanding and Acceptance vs. Demonizing and Distancing**

Christian pastors and evangelists need to understand and respect the values, beliefs, and practices rooted in African religion and culture, which could be successfully integrated with the biblical message. According to Anderson, "the church should preserve all that can be tolerated in African traditions, with some Christian reforms of these traditions." In other words, the encounter between the church and traditional African heritage should take place in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance and respect, as African heritage can be used as a medium for conveying the gospel.

There were quite a number of European missionaries who respected African traditional cultural elements and integrated them into their work. For example, Ernest Johanssen (1864-1934) considered the culture of the Bahaya/Banyambo people not as antagonistic to Christianity, but as a foundation for it. He believed that God had

already revealed himself to the Bahaya in various ways. He argued that the Bahaya's sacrifice ceremonies for ancestors and spirits could facilitate their understanding of Christ's sacrifice at Golgotha. Furthermore, the moral framework within the Bahaya/Banyambo society was seen as a means of supporting their understanding of sin, redemption, and forgiveness. Johanssen therefore advocated that the church should not reject all aspects of African culture but should find ways to connect Christian and African cultural elements.

Another good example is Bruno Gutmann, who respected African traditions and constructively integrated them into Christianity. He accepted the initiation ritual of the Chagga people because he saw no problem in it, as during this ritual young boys and girls were prepared and taught to become responsible and engaged adults in society. What I want to emphasize here is always trying to establish a positive connection between Christianity and African traditions and beliefs, rather than viewing them as godless and demonic. Instead of seeing them as obstacles to Christianization, they should be seen as potential bridges for dialogue and understanding.

### **iii. Humility and Willingness to Learn from Indigenous African Traditions**

Humility and the willingness to learn from indigenous African traditions are crucial. It calls upon Christians to acknowledge that God's presence and influence transcend the confines of institutionalized religion, and that divine wisdom is expressed through various cultural lenses. No single entity owns exclusive rights to and ownership of God. This recognition fosters humility towards other religious beliefs and systems.

### **iv. Emphasizing Common Values**

Despite differing religious beliefs, Christianity and ATR often share common values such as community, compassion, and respect for nature. These shared values can serve as a basis for collaboration and mutual support.

### **v. Tolerance**

By being open to different faiths and customs, we create an atmosphere of respect and tolerance that forms the foundation for peaceful coexistence. It is important to recognize that our world consists of a variety of perspectives and belief systems, all of which have their place and significance. This openness not only fosters individual growth but also promotes peaceful and mutual coexistence of all people in society.

### **vi. Being Informed**

Insufficient understanding of different beliefs is a big challenge in fostering a good relationship between ATR and Christianity. Many Christian pastors are often not interested in deeply learning and understanding the beliefs of practitioners of African traditional religion (ATR). This leads to misconceptions and unfair judgments. It is crucial to learn more about ATR and its sacred objects. This may lead to a more positive interaction with one another. Showing respect towards the sacred objects of others, even if they differ from one's own, promotes mutual appreciation. This approach also

helps to avoid prejudices. Sometimes we elevate our own faith as inherently superior, thereby disregarding the beliefs of others. As Christians, it is important to coexist peacefully with other faiths without undermining our own convictions.

#### **vii. Being Skeptical and Critical**

In certain situations, it is advisable to be critical, particularly in contexts where manipulation is prevalent. In contexts like Africa, where individuals try to exploit religion for profit, it is important to be very cautious, sometimes skeptical and critical. Blindly accepting all purported sacred items can lead to deception. For example, the marketing and sale of items such as holy water, holy cloths, holy salt, holy oil, holy underwear, etc., should be strongly criticized, as they deceive individuals and are often used for profit under the guise of missionary work. While tolerance and respect are vital, it is equally important to question practices that openly deceive others.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The process of reconciling Christianity with indigenous African traditions and religions is a complex journey that requires theological reflection, cultural sensitivity, historical awareness, and a commitment to justice. It requires a shift from a mission approach entrenched in cultural dominance to one based on authentic dialogue, mutual respect, and collaboration. By recognizing and embracing Africa's diverse cultural heritage, Christianity has the potential to serve as a catalyst for reconciliation and healing and to truly embody its transformative power.

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