The Relevance and Influence of African Religion in Post Apartheid South Africa and Beyond—Part 1

Julius Mutugi Gathogo

This paper sets out to show that despite the globalisation trajectories that have been ushered in—in the post-Cold War South Africa and in the rest of the continent, African Religion is still a force to reckon with. In particular, it still has influential elements such as Ubuntu concept that can be exploited for the good of us all. It also points out that various elements in African Religion, however, deserves revision (or is it reconstruction?!) so as to be compliant with the prevailing realities that are redefining the people of the modern day Africa. To achieve this goal, the paper starts by revisiting the definitions of African Religion and the environment within which African Religion is done. It then attempts to point out the influence and the relevance of the African Religion in the rest of Africa. As the paper comes to a close, it points to the need for studying African Religion as one way of understanding the African personality on one hand, and the need for religious dialogue on the other.

Introduction

Culture, as Jesse Mugambi observes, has six main pillars. That is: politics, economics, ethics, aesthetics, kinship and religion. This does not however mean that there are no other pillars that manifest culture in Africa. And out of these, religion 'is by far the richest part of the African heritage'. Why? It is found in all areas of human life. That is, it shapes their cultures, their social life, their politics, and their economics. And while it is 'closely bound up with the traditional way of African life', it is at the same time shaped by this same way of life.

J. O. Awolalu attempts a definition of African Religion. He says that when we speak of African Traditional Religion we mean the indigenous religion of the Africans. It is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forbears of the present generation of Africans. It is not a

fossil religion (a thing of the past) but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living it and practising it. (1976:275).

African Traditional Religion (ATR) as a contested phrase.

In most publications, African Religion is commonly referred to as the African Traditional Religion (ATR). This phrase is a however a contested description of the African religiosity. To some, the term 'traditional' has some Christian biasness—meant to portray the African religiosity as archaic, ancient, old fashioned, outdated; hence irrelevant. Some have advanced the view that it should simply be referred to as the 'African Religion' just as there is, for instance, Muslim Religion or Hindu Religion.

The debate however goes beyond these explanations—as some have argued that with the centre of Christian gravity having shifted to Africa, it is imprecise to talk of African Religion (AR)—as Christianity has also become an African Religion. Others would talk of Islam as an African religion. So how do we tell the difference between Christianity and the pre-Christian or pre-Muslim religious discourses in Africa?

For our purposes in this study, it refers to an indigenous system of beliefs and practices that are integrated into the culture and the worldviews of the African peoples. Like in other primal religions, one is born into it as a way of life with its cultural manifestations and religious implications. African Religion is thus an integral part of the African ethos and culture.

In general, African indigenous religion
(i)   cultivates the whole person. e.g. African religion permeates all departments of life.
(ii) provides people with a view of the world, e.g. the views of the universe
(iii) answers some questions that nothing else can, e.g. unlike science it has no limitations. Does God exist? Theodicy, suffering, purpose of human life etc.

(i)   It provides humanity with moral values by which to live; e.g. it tells us right and wrong, what is good and evil, just and unjust, virtue and vice etc.
(ii) It gives food for spiritual hunger; e.g. it provides spiritual insights, prayers, rituals, ceremonies, sacrifices and offerings, dedication, devotion and trust

in God among other religious discourses.

(iii) It has inspired great ideas; e.g. moral life, cultural achievements etc

(iv) It is a means of communication; e.g. Through prayer, sacrifice, common myths, legends, morals and views.

(v) It pays attention to the key moments in the life of the individual; e.g. Birth, initiation, puberty, marriage and death. In so doing, it shows the value/concern of the individual.

(vi) It celebrates life; e.g. they dance life, ceremonize, festivize, etc—thereby affirming life.

(vii) It shows people their limitations; e.g. that life is short, temporal hence the need to depend on the Creator.

It is a unique religion whose sources include: Shrines, that is, sacred places and religious objects such as rocks, hills, mountains, under certain trees, caves and other holy places; rituals, ceremonies and festivals of the people, for example, childbirth, naming, initiation, marriage, funerals, harvest festivals, praying for rain etc; Art and Symbols, for example, wood, stools, calabashes, stones, sticks, pots, handicrafts, domestic animals and human bodies—also in masks, wood carvings, ivory and stone; music and dance; proverbs, riddles, and wise sayings; names of people and places, for example, in Nigeria, the name Babatunde means 'father returns'. It is given to a male child born immediately after the death of his grandfather; myths and legends; it is also found in beliefs and customs. Beliefs cover topics such as God, spirits, birth, death, the hereafter, magic, witchcraft etc. And in all aspects of life—as religion, in the African indigenous context, permeates all departments of life.

Is it African Religions or African Religion?

John S. Mbiti explains that 'we speak of African traditional religions in the plural because there are about one thousand African peoples (tribe), and each has its own religious system'. He cites the fact that there are numerous different peoples in Africa, each having a very different religious system of beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, and its own religious leaders. Conversely, Mbiti considers African philosophy as another matter; for while the religious expressions in the African context are observable, one cannot claim the same thing about the philosophy (thinking) behind them. Thus, to Mbiti, the philosophy underlying the religious expression of the African people is in the singular form.

This is, however, contested by Nokuzola Mndende, a South African, who holds that it should be referred to as 'African Religion'—as 'no religion is monolithic but people look at the common features'. She says, 'We never hear people talking about Christianities, Islams, Hinduisms etc. We cannot, for example, talk about Zulu Religion or Xhosa Religion—African Religion is one. While there are differences in some of the customs and objects used to perform rituals, the underlying principle remains the same.'

Mndende builds on her credentials as an authority in her field of African Religion when she says, 'I am writing from the perspective of a believer in and practitioner of African Religion. I am not a Christian. Christianity constitutes one but not the only way to God; there are many ways and African Religion is one of them.'

Mndende's contention finds some strength from some African Christian theologians who argue, in their diverse ways, that 'the God of Africa is as good as the God of Christendom if not better'. They include Samuel Kibicho, John Gatu, Gabba and Gabriel Setiloane.

In general, there is a regular rhythm in the pattern of the people's beliefs and practices. And this regular rhythm is the universal belief in the Supreme Being as 'an integral part of African world view and practical religion'. In the words of Bolaji Idowu—

> We find that in Africa, the real cohesive factor of religion is the living God and that without this one factor, all things would fall to pieces. And it is on this ground especially—this identical concept that we can speak of the religion of Africa in the singular.

If we take, for example, the case of the Xhosa community of South Africa, we find that their worldview is that Qamata (God) was approached through the ancestors. In addition, the ancestral spirits have always acted as mediators between human beings, who stood at the bottom, and Qamata, who stood at the top. This imagery, like many others, is a wide-spread notion; for even among the Kikuyu of East Africa the ancestral spirits acted as mediators between human beings and God (Ngai). This shows that the African religiosity has fundamental commonalities that makes it African Religion rather than African Religions. In recent times, however, most African scholars of African

religion, including Mbiti, have agreed that 'African Religion is one in essence.' For despite its varieties, there is undeniably, a 'basic world-view' which John V. Taylor who wrote before Mbiti asserts, 'which fundamentally is everywhere the same'. Thus, one may argue that Africa may have one religion that is African religion—which is expressed in diversity since it has common elements among the various ethnic groupings.

The Plural Context in doing African Religion

As a matter of fact, we must acknowledge that any religious discourse in Africa will have to be done within the context of religio-social pluralism; for indeed, Africa is full of plural faith traditions. The dominant ones are: African (Indigenous) Religion, Christianity and Islam. Even within the traditional religions John Mbiti rightly says that—

> Traditional religions are not universal: they are tribal or national. Each religion is bound and limited to the people among whom it has evolved. One traditional religion cannot be propagated in another tribal group. This does not rule out the fact that religious ideas may spread from one people to another. But such ideas, spread spontaneously, especially through migrations, intermarriage, conquest, or expert knowledge being sought by individuals of one tribal group from another. Traditional religions have no missionaries to propagate them; and one individual does not preach his (or her) religion to another.

Even within the Christian churches, African diversity can be experienced for African Christianity is, too often, described in terms of Catholicism, Protestantism and African Instituted churches. In view of this diversity some African theologians have expressed the view that the terms 'Africa' and 'African' should be interpreted ideologically rather than racially.

The diversity of the African people is further compounded by the history of the colonial experience in each particular African state. That is, the fact that we have Lusophone Africa, Anglophone Africa, Francophone Africa, Arabphone Africa and the immediate post-Apartheid South Africa and Namibia who have been under the Boers up to the early 1990s adds to the diversity of Africa as different powers had different ways of orienting their subjects. The Arab slave traders, for example, in the East Coast of Africa intermarried with the local inhabitants and their intermarriage produced the Swahili people.

Apart from the colonial history, the emigrational patterns by the people of Africa themselves from one region to another also contributes to the diversity of Africa. For example, while colonialists partitioned Africa after the Berlin Conference of 1884/5 thereby dividing the various African communities, the internal rivalries and warfares among the African people themselves also contributed to the current diversity that defines Africa today. An illustration on this: After colonialism, the Maasai found themselves in Kenya and Tanzania; the Luo found themselves in Uganda, Kenya and Sudan; the Chewa found themselves in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia and so forth. On the other hand, Shaka the Zulu wars of the 19th century saw the Nguni speakers migrate from South Africa to Malawi, Zambia, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania among other places.

The fact of homogeneity in doing African Religion: A pointer to its relevance? Walter Rodney, who wrote in 1972, rightly emphasises that what has commonly characterised Africa in 'recent history is its political and economic exploitation.' In this, Rodney was alluding to how Europe was 'continuously under developing Africa.' Curiously, Africa is still marginalized in the New World Order—a view that Tinyiko Maluleke and Mercy Oduyoye strongly hold.

And in view of the fact that African homogeneity is seen through the common characteristics such as: same history of colonialism, slavery and slave trade and now the New World Order, we realise that 'African homogeneity' is, to an extent, a product of defeat. Consequently, one may feel duty bound to question whether there is genuine homogeneity at all. In other words, is there any genuine religious homogeneity in Africa? Suppose the forces of neo-colonialism are completely erased, would we still talk of African homogeneity? What is that 'Africannes' that John Pobee talks about? Do we have African homogeneity without foreign attachment? Is there anything good that can come from Africa? Is Africa united in defeat?

Nevertheless, Africa's religio-cultural diversity can be said to have been exaggerated at the expense of its religio-cultural unity; for this can be explained by addressing the Ubuntu philosophy, which, in my considered opinion, would best describe the African homogeneity. Augustine Shutte observes that the concept of Ubuntu, which is a Zulu word for humanness, was

developed over many centuries in traditional African culture. As he further says, this culture was pre-literate, pre-scientific and pre-industrial. This concept of Ubuntu was originally expressed in the songs and stories, the customs and the institutions of the people. As an African philosophy, Ubuntu is well summed up in Mbiti's words, 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.' Mbiti's summary of the African philosophy is sharply opposed to 'I am therefore I exist' by Rene Descartes—the French philosopher who can be said to have summed up the Western philosophy.

Mbiti appears to be building on the Ubuntu philosophy when he says—

> Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his (or her) own being, his (or her) own duties, his (or her) privileges and responsibilities towards himself (or herself) and towards other people. When he (or she) suffers, he (or she) does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when he (or she) rejoices, he (or she) rejoices not alone but with his (or her) kinsmen (or kinswomen), his (or her) neighbours and his (or her) relatives whether dead or living. When he (or she) married, he (or she) is not alone; neither does the wife (or husband) 'belong' to him (or her) alone. So also the children belong to the corporate body of kinsmen (or kinswomen), even if they bear only their father's name. Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual.

The strength of this philosophy in our modern African society is seen in Shutte's contention that 'since many of the old customs would be a betrayal' to the spirit of Ubuntu in our contemporary society, it is important for us (in Africa) to find a way of 'living Ubuntu in a society where the dominant culture is European, not African, and where many other cultures from other parts of the world exist together'. Shutte's view, however, does not mean that there is nothing uniquely African today, as this paper is seeking to show, rather, he means that, as a result of socio-historical factors, African cultural systems have been greatly affected by the dominant European culture that mainly came to Africa through the process of acculturation.

As a spiritual foundation of African societies, Ubuntu is a unifying vision or worldview enshrined in the Zulu Maxim Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu, that is, 'a person is a person through other persons'. This Ubuntu concept is also

found in other African communities, even though there are different vocabularies and phrases that are used to describe it; and it will suffice to illustrate it by a few examples. The Kikuyu idiom, which says that *Mundu ni Mundu ni undu wa andu* means that a human being is a person because of the other people. The same can be said of the Sotho whose idiom says that *Mothe ke motho ka batho* with a similar translation to those of other African communities. This African aphorism articulates a basic respect and compassion for others—as its bottom line. It can be interpreted both as a factual description and a rule of conduct or social ethic. It both describes human being as 'being-with-others' and prescribes what 'being-with-others' should be all about. As such, Ubuntu has a certain Africanness and religious commitment to the welfare of fellow human beings that is manifestly African in essence. While Western humanism tends to underestimate or even deny the importance of religious beliefs, Ubuntu or African humanism is resiliently religious.

While to the Westerner, the Maxim 'A person is a person through other persons' has no obvious religious connotations, as this can be interpreted as nothing but a general appeal to treat others with respect and decency, the maxim, however, has a deep religious meaning in African tradition. When Julius Nyerere coined his Ujamaa concept (from *Jamii*—meaning family), he was talking from this Ubuntu backcloth. He therefore saw Africa as one family and the whole world as an extended family. It is in this same spirit that the whole clan is seen as a family and as Mugambi says, 'Most Africans still think of themselves in the context of this extended relationship.'

Another distinctive quality of the Ubuntu philosophy is the African emphasis on consensus. In other words, Ubuntu underscores the importance of agreement or consensus. Indeed, the African traditional culture has, seemingly, an almost infinite capacity for the pursuit of consensus and reconciliation. Democracy in the African way does not simply boil down to majority rule since it operates in the form of discussions geared towards a consensus.

This view is clearly captured by Jesse Mugambi when he says that, 'the traditional court would appreciate the views of every participant, and weigh the opinions of everyone irrespective of social status'. Equally, decisions are reached through consensus, as there is no voting. Whenever there are

'irreconcilable difference, decision is postponed until a consensus emerges'. This important aim of consensus building rather than dividing the people along the lines of 'winners versus losers' is expressed by words like tw? *hamwe* (Kikuyu for 'we are together') *tuko nawewe* (Swahili for 'you are not alone') *Simunye* (We are one), (that is, Unity is strength) and slogans like 'an injury to one is an injury to all.'

Despite Ubuntu's articulation of important values such as respect, human dignity and compassion, it can however be exploited to enforce group solidarity and therefore fail to safeguard the rights and opinions of individuals and the minority (though this is a Western concept). True Ubuntu however requires an authentic respect for individual rights and values and an honest appreciation of diversities amongst the people. Whatever the argument, Ubuntu, best illustrates the African homogeneity which can be exploited for the good of the Africa in the twenty-first century.

It is however disheartening to note that Ubuntu, in our modern times, is undermined by the violent ethnic and political conflicts that have plagued the sub-Saharan Africa. Of course, it is a result of a failure to adhere to the original ideals of the philosophy, which sees every 'neighbour' as part of the extended family, and thus treats him or her with lots of African hospitality.

Nevertheless, Maphisa argues that South Africans are slowly re-discovering their common humanity. He says—

> Gone are the days when people were stripped of their dignity (ubuntu) through harsh laws: Gone are the days when people had to use ubulwane (that is, animal like behaviour) to uphold or reinforce those laws. I suggest that the transformation of an apartheid South Africa into a democracy is a re-discovery of ubuntu.

As part and parcel of Africa's religious heritage, Ubuntu is clearly in need of revitalisation in the hearts and minds of the African people so that its ethos can be truly the 'one single gift that African philosophy can bequeath on other philosophies of the world.'

JULIUS MUTUGI GATHOGO is a Reconstructionist African Theologian, a specialist in African theology of reconstruction (ATOR).

ENDNOTES

1. Jesse Mugambi, *Religion and Social Construction of Reality* (Nairobi University Press, 1996), p. 32; and *African Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1989), p. 128.

2. John S. Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 9.

3. See J. S. Mbiti, 1975 p. 9.

4. J.O. Awolalu. "Sin and its Removal in African Traditional Religion." Journal of the American Academy Religion 44/2 (1976): 275.

5. See Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture Upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 1992).

6. See A. O. Hance & H. A. O. Mwakabana (eds.), *Theological perspectives on other faiths*, LWF Documentation 47/1997 (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1997), pp. 21-24.

7. See J. S. Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1975); E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973).

8. See Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion*; cf. E. B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973).

9. J. S Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: E.A.E.P., 1969), p.1; cf. E. Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions* (Onitsha, Nigeria: IMICO Publishers, 1975), pp. 5-10.

10. Nokuzola Mndende, "Ancestors and Healing in African Religion: A South African Context" in Ingo Wulfhorst (ed.), *Ancestors, Spirits and Healing in Africa and Asia: A challenge to the church* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation), 2005, p. 13.

11. If we look for examples of the concept of God in various regions of Africa we will find more commonalities than differences. For example the terms (for God) uMdali, uHlanga, uMenzi, iNkosi yezulu, uMvelingqanqi and uNkulunkulu were commonly found among the branches of the Nguni, the Zulu-speaking as well as the Xhosa-speaking people (See Janet Hodgson. *The God of the Xhosa: A study of the origins and development of the traditional concepts of the Supreme Being* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 62.

12. Nokuzola Mndende. "Ancestors and Healing in African Religion: A South African Context," 2005:13.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

14. Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, "The Rediscovery of the Agency of Africans: An emerging paradigm of post-cold war and post-apartheid black and African theology," Journal of Theology for Southern Africa 108 (November, 2000): 25.

15. *Ibid*: 25.

16. P. A. Dopamu. "Towards understanding African Traditional Religion" in E. M. Uka (ed.) *Readings in African Traditional Religion: Structure, Meaning, Relevance, Future* (New York: Peter Lang), 1991, p. 23.

17. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A definition* (London: S.C.M Press) 1973, p. 6ff.

18. Janet Hodgson, *The God of the Xhosa: A study of the origins and development of the traditional concepts of the Supreme Being* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press), 1982, p. 85.

19. Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion, The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Mary Knoll: Orbis), 1997, p. 16.

20. John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion* (London: SCM Press), 1963, p. 19.

21. J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: E.A.E.P) 1969, p. 4.

22. Refer Jesse Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton, 2003), p. 113.

23. See Jesse Mugambi 1989b, *African Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Nairobi: Heinemann), p. 4.

24. This is reminiscent of the situation in South Africa where the interactions between the Blacks and the Whites produced the so-called the coloureds.

25. Zablon Nthamburi, *The African Church at the Crossroads* (Nairobi: Uzima) 1991, p. 39.

26. Shaka was a military genius of the nineteenth century who believed in conquering the whole of Africa and ensures that the whole of Africa spoke one language – the isizulu.

27. Quoted in Jesse Mugambi, 1989b, p. 6.

28. T. S. Maluleke, "The Rediscovery of the Agency of Africans: An emerging paradigm of post-cold war and post-apartheid black and African theology," Journal of Theology for Southern Africa 108 (November, 2000).

29. M. A. Oduyoye. *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press) 2001, p. 19.

30. See Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, 2000 and Mercy Oduyoye, 2001:19.

31. John S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), p. 24.

32. Augustine Shutte. Ubuntu: An ethic for a New South Africa (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), p. 9.

33. John S. Mbiti, 1969, p. 108.

34. See Julius Gathogo Mutugi, *The Truth About African Hospitality: Is There Hope*

for Africa? (Mombasa: The Salt, 2001), p. 21.

35. John S. Mbiti, 1969, p. 108.

36. See Shutte, 2001, p. 10. Some of the customs that can be a betrayal today include the saying that 'we are the people and others (referring to other communities) are not'. It would be a betrayal if it sticks to its original version where African people were the targets yet today Africa has more than one race.

37. Augustine Shutte, *Philosophy for Africa* (Rondebosch, South Africa: UCT Press, 1993), p. 46.

38. John Mbiti (1969: 108) builds on this theme when he contends that 'to be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community'.

39. E. D. Prinsloo, *Ubuntu from a Eurocentric and Afrocentric perspective and its influence on leadership* (Pretoria: Ubuntu School of Philosophy) 1995, p. 4.

40. Shutte, 2001, p. 10.

41. Mugambi, 1989:5.

42. J. Teffo, *The concept of Ubuntu as a cohesive moral value* (Pretoria: Ubuntu School of Philosophy, 1994a): 4.

43. A. Busia, *Africa in search of democracy* (London: Collins Press, 1967), p. 28.

44. Jesse Mugambi, *From liberation to reconstruction: Africa after the Cold War* (Nairobi: E.AE.P., 1995), p.132.

45. Mugambi, p.132.

46. See J. Broodryk, *Ubuntu management and motivation* (Johannesburg: Gauteng Department of Welfare/Pretoria: Ubuntu School of Philosophy) 1997, pp. 5, 7, 9.

47. S. Maphisa, *Man in constant search of Ubuntu: a dramatist's obsession* (Pretoria: Ubuntu School of Philosophy) 1994 p.8.

48. J. Teffo (a), *The concept of Ubuntu as a cohesive moral value* (Pretoria: Ubuntu School of Philosophy, 1994), p. 5.