

Christianity, Traditional Knowledge, and Africa's Advancement

That Africa's traditional knowledge is crucial to the continent's advancement is fast becoming a well-understood fact. Within the continent's larger Christian community, however, embracing Africa's traditional knowledge remains unpopular. A fear of hell fire, entrenched Euro-centric aspirations and subservience are few of many reasons why traditional knowledge remains somewhat of an enigma in the growing African Christian community.

I here seek to dispel existing fears, and in its place hopefully proffer reasoning in support of involvement of Christians in the promotion of Africa's traditional knowledge.

At the core of the case made here is that first, there are several direct instructions in the Bible on the need to respect a people's traditional knowledge as a pathway to advancement. Further, there is a clear-cut distinction between Africa's traditional knowledge and African Traditional Religion (ATR) and recognizing the former does not translate to embracing the latter.

Humans are ever in search of ways to quench their spiritual thirst and one must be careful to not impose an opinion on the spiritual terrain upon which another's soul has berthed. Therefore, the argument presented in this piece sidesteps the prevailing thought among many that Christianity by itself is a religion of the West. Christianity never originated in the Western world and this piece will move beyond that argument in a forward-looking search for progress among adherents. The focus here will be on broadening the understanding of the hundreds of millions of African Christians who have found and made peace with that religion.

That Christianity, if followed according to the Holy Bible's instructions, strongly expects adherents to respect the knowledge of their forebears can be gleaned from numerous Scriptural passages. God Himself traces himself back to generations, calling Himself the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; throughout Scripture, He is referred to as the Ancient of Days. If a reference to one's historical knowledge is not foundational in the understanding of the person, why would the Almighty be clear on the role of history in defining who He is and what He is able to do?

More so, God encourages the Israelites to dig back in their history to understand Him and His relationship with them as a people. Many Bible passages support this stance, including Deuteronomy 5:15; 6:20-23; 7:17; 8:2; 9:7-8; 26: 4-11; Exodus, 14: 3, to mention few. In Scripture, God Almighty commands the Israelites to never forget their history, how they were slaves in Egypt and how he lifted them up out of Egypt by His mighty hand. The formation of Israel as a nation shows that God indeed is a God who considers nationhood as fundamental to human existence. In Acts 17:26, the Bible says that God "Has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings..."

In Numbers 14:21, the Bible notes that all the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord. This earth includes pre-Christian Africa, and during that period, Africans manifested God's glory across sectors and areas, including governance, social organization, pharmacology, science, technology, the arts, architecture, to mention few. This collective, evolving knowledge of Africa's forefathers is what is today known as traditional or indigenous knowledge.

In times before European missionaries introduced Christianity to Africa, God was moving among His children in Africa. The merciful Father was working in our ancestors, He was working for our ancestors and He was working through our ancestors. If

God was at work among Africans in traditional, pre-colonial Africa, how then do we access the archive of His works in Africa? Through a study of Africa's traditional knowledge, is the quick answer.

The second line of reasoning to encourage interest in traditional knowledge among Africa's Christians is that contrary to widespread beliefs, Africa's traditional knowledge is not African Traditional Religion. This separation of religion from intellectual knowledge might seem like an obvious fact in many other cultures, but it is an issue that many African Christians have had to grapple with since the introduction of Christianity to the region. Before I proceed with further clarification, it is necessary to state strongly that the distinction between Africa's traditional knowledge system and African Traditional Religion as stated here does not in any way denigrate the latter. As far Christians are concerned, African Traditional Religion should be viewed just as any other religion whose worshippers should be treated with utmost respect as children of the same Father.

That said, the introduction of Christianity to Africa did not come from pristine, unsullied angels. Human beings, mostly of European origin, with entrenched pre-conceived notions, biases and convictions were used as vessels to convey the message of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ to Africans. In many instances, these missionaries mingled their perception and personal opinion with Scripture and imposed doctrinal piety on the hybrid.

In introducing Christianity and Western Education to Africa, quite a few missionaries sought to convince Africans to abandon their own traditional knowledge and embrace the God and knowledge of the Europeans. In the envisaged warm and lasting embrace between the variant of God introduced by European Christians in Africa, Africans are to assimilate European culture, values, mores and history as their own, and regard their own past as darkness and bedeviled.

In striving to achieve this aim, many European missionaries were quick to dismiss Africa's traditional knowledge across sectors and disciplines as backward, fetish, superstitious and therefore untenable with the 'progressive' Christian faith and European education. Christian converts were expected to give up everything they or their fathers stood for and take sides with the knowledge of their now adopted European ancestors. Down to names of persons, places and things, Africans inadvertently embraced the new religion and knowledge system, while allowing themselves be stripped of their identity and knowledge system.

The dawn of colonialism in Africa resulted in the entrenchment – through education, policy and practice – of a belief in the superiority of the European god, ancestors and knowledge. By the time colonialism ended, African Christians had inherited and imbibed a mindset that deified European knowledge and belittled or even demonized Africa's traditional knowledge.

The present disposition of African Christians towards Africa's traditional knowledge is not what Scripture demands of worshippers of God. Worshippers of God are to remember God's goodness to their ancestors through an appreciation and study of indigenous knowledge. That same knowledge will be used to measure God's goodness to the present generation and serve as a platform of hope in a better tomorrow. In Job 8:8 the Bible states that in order to make progress, we should, "Just ask the previous generation. Pay attention to the experience of our ancestors." The Europeans who brought Christianity to Africa are experts on the preservation and exploration of their own indigenous knowledge; indeed, the present Euro-American civilization is built on foundations of ancestral knowledge. African Christians should focus on the exploration of Africa's intellectual heritage as passed down from generation to generation. Within Africa's traditional knowledge system is housed profound knowledge across all fields of human endeavor; knowledge with the capacity to

transform human existence for the better.

The time has come for African Christians to study the Bible for themselves in order to understand the true nature of the Supreme Being they worship. African Christians should no longer see God through the eyes of Europeans and Americans. The African believer must seek to know God for himself as an African, in order for Africa to advance using the principles stated in the Word of God.