

# African Religion

## Concepts of God in Africa

©Simon Gisege Omare

Moi University, Uasin Gishu County, Kesses, Kenya



John Samuel Mbiti wrote *Concepts of God in Africa*.. He was born on November 30, 1931 in Kenya and died in 2019. He studied, first in Kenya and, thereafter, in Uganda before taking his Philosophy Doctorate degree in 1963 at the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom. He was an ordained pastor in the Anglican Church and taught Theology and Religion for many years at Makerere University in Uganda. Thereafter, he served as Director of Ecumenical Institute Bossy of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva, Switzerland. He was a visiting professor at many universities in Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and Africa, and had travelled widely in many countries within and outside Africa (Oborji, 2019)

Mbiti published over 400 articles and reviews and many books on Theology, Religion, Philosophy, and Literature. He retired a few years before his death as a part-time professor at the University of Bern and a parish minister in Burgdorf, Switzerland (Oborji, 2019). His book I first review here has been edited and printed 16 times since 1970 and the last edited 1992 edition has 20 chapters.

### Book Review

Mbiti's *Concepts of God in Africa* was originally published in London by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) in 1970. The publisher is a United Kingdom-based Christian charity founded in 1698 by Thomas Bray. The book presents the ontological roots of Africans' religious consciousness and to highlight their ways of showing their commitment, praise and adherence of the Supernatural Being.

The book is divided into four parts: (1) the nature of God, (2) the dynamic (active) attributes of God, (3) anthropomorphic and natural attributes of God, and (4) God and humans. I review this book here vis-à-vis these parts.

As aforementioned, Part 1 of the book talks about the nature of God. The first chapter addresses the intrinsic attributes of God, the eternal attributes of God and, the moral attributes of God. Under intrinsic attributes of God, Mbiti uses various examples from different African communities to explain the immanence, omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience and the transcendence of God. He notes that for many African communities, God is equally transcendent and immanent in nature. He uses the example of the Lugbara to demonstrate the notion of God's transcendence and immanence. To the Lugbara, God is both transcendent *Adroa* and immanent *Adro*. In addition, they believe that in His transcendent nature, God is creative and "good." Nonetheless, in His immanent nature, He is "bad" and "dangerous." Just like most of the African indigenous communities, the Lugbara envisage God anthropomorphically. They believe that *Adro* comes into direct contact with His creatures on earth and lives in the rivers, large trees

and mountains. Mbiti notes that in the immanent aspect, *Adro* is associated with diviners, witches and sorcerers (Mbiti, 2012).

Mbiti has been criticized for overgeneralization. For instance, his assertion that all Africans attribute creation to God is misplaced. Several exceptional cases demonstrate that some African communities do not recognize God as Creator (Schebesta, 1936; Smith, 1950; Setiloane, 1976; p'Bitek, 1953). For example, the Sotho-Tswana have no creation story (Setiloane, 1976). In the Central Country, there are no words for "creation" and "to create" (p'Bitek 1953), and the Luo do not have the notion of a God who is the Creator (p'Bitek, 1953). In Mbiti's assumption that *all* African peoples attribute creation to God, the word *all* is therefore incorrect.

With regard to the Omnipotence of God, Mbiti demonstrates this attribute through the people of Zanzibar's conception of the God as thunder. To them, thunder is metaphorically the mighty voice of God. Also, Mbiti uses the Abaluhya of Kenya to indicate that God has the power over natural laws which He established. In addition, Mbiti employs the idea of the Shona that God has the power to change things (Mbiti, 2012). Indeed, the first chapter shows the richness, variety and influence of African heritage in the understanding of the transcendent and immanent nature of God.

In Chapter 2, Mbiti explores the eternal attributes of God using examples from different African communities. He starts by explaining clearly that God is eternal, infinite and immutable. Next, he shows how God is incomprehensible and mysterious; His invisibility, pre-eminence and greatness, self-existence, spirit, first and last cause; and His unity and plurality. Mbiti uses an example of the Ngombe who believe that the forest denotes agelessness and they use it metaphorically to praise God as *Bilikonda*, meaning, the "Everlasting One of the Forest." Furthermore, he uses the Ila and the Balube who perceive God's as eternity and an infinity in terms of the sun; hence, they address Him as *Mutalabala*, meaning "The Eternal One." To Mbiti, just like the sun that is everlasting, so is God. He uses a Tonga proverb whose name for God is *Tilo*, which also refers to Heaven that says: "Heaven never dies; only men do!" This means that God is eternal, infinite and immutable. He uses the Gikuyu expression that "God is the same today as He was yesterday and that He is neither a child nor an old man" to illustrate His eternity. In addition, he uses an example from the Akan who think of God as eternal, infinite and the Creator of the universe. Moreover, he notes that the Yoruba also call Him the *Mighty Immovable Rock that Never Dies*. In a popular song, the Yoruba sing of God as "One never hears the death of God" (Mbiti, 2012).

The chapter also presents God as incomprehensible and mysterious. Mbiti claims that "just as people say that God is invisible so they hold that He is incomprehensible" (2012, p. 46). He also points at the Ashanti expression of this concept by speaking of God as the "fathomless spirit" who made all things. As such, they argue that "No mind can measure Him and no intellect can comprehend or grasp Him" (Mbiti, 2012, p. 47). The Bakongo, say that God is the marvel of marvels that is "self-created." In addition, in case they are confronted with the phenomenon which they cannot understand such as the flow of blood in the body, or the immensity of the forest, they say that it is a thing of God. The foregoing means that, they direct the phenomenon to the mystery of God (Mbiti, 2012).

Chapter 3 interrogates the moral attributes of God whereby Mbiti discusses the anger of God; His faithfulness, goodness, holiness, justice, righteousness, love, pity, mercy, kindness; and His will. Mbiti's approach is quite real and interesting as he uses real examples from diverse African cultures to buttress his claims. From the analysis, it seems that Africans are monotheistic. Mbiti alleges the sameness of the content of revelation regarding the knowledge and nature of God. He

further asserts that some African societies explain the experience of sorrowfulness, pain, disasters and calamities to be signs of the rage of God. He uses the Chagga myths which tell about how the early persons angered God through their wickedness and disobedience leading Him to destroy them. Also, death is personified and considered as the most explicit manifestation of God's anger in most African communities. In addition, the chapter explains faithfulness as a moral attribute of God. Mbiti uses the Akan who use a personal name *Tweaduampon*, which means "The God in whom you may put all trust." They also use another name *Nyaamanekose*, which denotes "He in whom you confide troubles in." In essence, the Akan imply that both names show their belief that God will not let anyone down; He is reliable and unchangeable. The Bakongo invoke God as just and merciful. Presumably, this means that God is just in punishing evil and shows mercy unto his people. Furthermore, the Nuer people of South Sudan believe that God is always right. Mbiti explains that Africans express God as love. Most Africans assume that God loves them and shows His love through concrete acts and blessings (Mbiti, 2012).

Part 2 encompasses three chapters just like part one. It addresses the dynamic (active) attributes of God. Chapter 4 portrays God as The Creator; The Founder of Natural Order, Laws and Customs; and continues to create and in charge of predestination. Next, Chapter 5 explains God's providence and sustenance. Under providence, Mbiti utilizes examples from different African communities to explain their belief of how God provides for His creatures. Under sustenance, Mbiti explains using numerous examples of the beliefs of different African people about how God sustains His creatures as a keeper and guardian, protector; how He saves (work of salvation); and His healing, nursing and cherishing work. Thereupon, Chapter 6 explicates the governing work of God by addressing the relationship between God and human warfare where some African communities interpret warfare as a punishment from God. After that, Mbiti characterizes God as a Judge, King, Ruler and Master using examples from the Riga, Akan, Acholi, Meru, Banyarwanda, Lodagaa, etc. (Mbiti, 2012).

Furthermore, in Chapter 7, Mbiti writes about God and human afflictions; mysteries which often defy explanation among Africans such as death, diseases, drought, famine, poverty, locusts, calamities, misfortunes and evil (Mbiti, 2012). It can be noted that the materials Mbiti uses are well organized and gathered from different authors too. Nonetheless, one cannot unequivocally say that the work is precise in every aspect and details because he presents information about the attributes of God in general and does not scrutinize a specific people's association to God in depth.

In Part 3, which comprises six chapters, Mbiti explores the anthropomorphic and natural attributes of God. Chapter 8 talks about the anthropomorphic attributes of God, where he argues that Africans employ anthropomorphic language and images as aids of conceptualizing God who they have not seen and know little about Him. Using various examples, Mbiti explains God in relation to body and bodily parts; His bodily activities, as a father, a mother, a grandfather, a grandmother, elder, ancestor, friend; and people as children of God. In Chapter 9, Mbiti talks about God and animals. He uses myths from various African communities to explain the relationship between humans and domestic animals such as the dog, cattle, sheep, goats and horses. Later, he explains beliefs concerning wild animals; birds; animals that crawl, creep, leap or swim; and insects. Chapter 10 examines God and plants. Mbiti describes mythical trees, sacred trees, forest, wood, bush and groves, reeds, grass and food crops. He then discusses trees associated with burial, living dead, spirits and divinities and, lastly, explains beliefs concerning trees that symbolize God's presence or manifestation using different examples across Africa.

This chapter portrays that God's creation was perfect and He created everything in its kind (Mbiti, 2012).

Chapter 11 deals with God and other spiritual beings. Mbiti starts by talking about some African communities which perceive God to be having a "wife" or "goddesses" and explains God's assistants, servants, messengers and agents; God's brother and sister; God's daughter, son and children, divinities and demigods, spirits, culture heroes and related beings; and, lastly, he talks about the word of God being kind (Mbiti, 2012). Mbiti does not critically evaluate some negative attributes of the African God that are irreconcilable with the God of the Bible.

In Chapter 12, Mbiti looks at God and heavenly objects and phenomena. He begins by discussing hail, mist, storm and wind using examples from the Lugbara, Lango, Banyarwanda, Bavenda, San, Haya, Yoruba, Bambuti and Yao. Next, he discusses Heaven, sky and firmament, light, eclipse, rain, rainbow, clouds, stars, planets, comets, meteors, sun, moon, thunder and lightning. In the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter, Mbiti offers explanations about God, earthly objects and other phenomena. He starts off by talking about colors and numbers using several examples from across Africa. After that, he discusses African beliefs about day, night, heat, cold, earth, earthquakes, fire, smoke, holes, caves, mountains, hills, rocks, stones, water, rivers and lakes in relation to God. He further talks about the African worldview about God and introduces a new aspect on the anthropomorphic psychological perspectives on the Supreme Being (Mbiti, 2012).

Part four of the book focuses on the creation and primal state of humans. Mbiti commences with Chapter 14 wherein he explains how God brought humans from Heaven to Earth using tales from the Akamba, Bachwa, Chagga, Lango, Mondari, Ovimbundu, Shona, among others. He acknowledges that Africans do not have a common explanation for the origin of humans; for instance, the Chagga say that the first humans came from a vessel, the Nandi say from the knee, and the Bambuti say from clay. Reading most stories of creation portrays that most African stories of creation have some little similarity to the Biblical stories of creation (Mbiti, 2012).

Chapter 15 tells us about the mythological and apparent separation of God from humans. Mbiti starts by portraying that God's relationship with humans was good, closer and perfect using different myths. Next, he argues that after creation, God gave humans clear instructions which they did not follow, leading to consequences of the apparent separation. The foregoing seems to be similar to Christian and Islamic teachings on the fall of humankind: an idea that needs further investigation on whether there is an element of interreligious borrowing on interpretation of the same kind (Mbiti, 2012).

In Chapter 16, the examination is about worship through sacrifices and offerings. By worship, Mbiti means human acts of turning to God and the spiritual realm. He speaks about sacrifices and offerings in different African communities and identifies items and articles that people use for sacrifices and offerings by those different communities. Chapter 17 is where Mbiti explicates worship through prayers. He uses examples from various parts of Africa to explain how and why those communities prayed. Mbiti shows how prayer, of all the facets of Religion, contains the greatest powerful expression of African religious spirituality. From his account, it seems that prayers encompass insights into religious and philosophical thoughts of Africans. Finally, Mbiti explains how various Africans worship through invocations, appeals, oaths, curses, greetings, congratulations, salutations, blessings and thanksgiving. Reading keenly, this section indicates that worship in Africa is the same compared to other religions, what differ are the approaches and the names of the Supernatural Being. Mbiti indicates ways of worship as a clear demonstration of Africa's rich spirituality and adds a valuable dimension to our understanding of African Religion (Mbiti, 2012).

Chapter 18 is a continuation of the previous chapter as it explains other miscellaneous acts and expressions of worship where Mbiti singles out dedications, self-resignation to God, music, singing, dancing, using God's name, veneration, adoration, fear and praise. He concludes by stating that African people do not have creeds to recitations like other religious beliefs (Mbiti, 2012).

The 18<sup>th</sup> chapter talks about worship functionaries: i.e. persons in the African society who teach and conduct religious acts. These persons are treated by Africans with respect and honor, and Mbiti indicates the worshipper's humility to God. He further explains that a person's approach of God through religious functionaries is showing respect to God as He is too powerful; thus, the need for intermediaries. The chapter mentions animals used by various communities to convey worship and later identifies a number of God's functionaries such as chiefs, elders, kings, queens, rulers, diviners, priests, rainmakers, prophets, seers, mediums, oracles and medicine persons. He categorically corrects the misperception of the term "witchdoctor" as loosely used to refer to traditional doctors. He then talks about good and bad magic and cites an interesting example from the Zulu who believe that God loves certain magicians who they call "shepherds of heaven" through whom God influences the weather (Mbiti, 2012).

Chapter 20 reflects on the places and times of worship. Mbiti, clarifies that in Africa, God is not tied to particular places of worship; however, he identifies several places using examples from various parts of Africa for public worship such as shrines, temples, alters, groves and sacred places. Thereafter, he explains times of worship such as every day in the morning, evening, and midday. Worship is done during rites of passage, harvest, planting, during war, raids, droughts, annually, monthly, before journeys and thanksgiving. He further notes that prayers are either personal or communal (Mbiti, 2012). This is an excellent observation that rejects earlier scholars' observation that Africans never knew anything like worship of Supernatural Beings.

The 21<sup>st</sup> chapter pertains to God, human history and ethics. Mbiti begins by pointing out that God is actively interested and involved in human affairs. Next, Mbiti argues that some communities believe that God does not create evil and blame ancestral spirits for evil. It is also believed that the greatest taboo is evil and humans have a free will to choose between evil and good with explained consequences. He further informs us that God has a code of conduct which humans must obey; if they do not, they will be punished, and it is the duty of the living to maintain law and order to avoid communal punishment. The chapter emphasizes that African Religion is the basis of African ethics (Mbiti, 2012).

Chapter 22 assesses the eschatological concepts and starts with the notions of death, disappearance, and ascension as portrayed by various African ethnic groups. The main ideas captured in this chapter are that Africans explain that a person is made up of body and soul; once the soul departs, the person is declared dead. That some communities like the Lugbara think that each person has a guardian spirit from God. That God is in charge of life; He gives and takes it away through His agents. That it is not normal for a young child to die; if it happens, some rituals are performed to avert the same from happening. That all humans will die someday and death is taken as resting and that almost all African communities do not believe in ascension (Mbiti, 2012).

Thereupon, Mbiti talks about the journey to the land of the departed arguing that Africans perceive that the dead go to the land of the death which is similar to the earth. That people who are alive must perform rituals for the dead so that they can be admitted into the land of the dead.

That the dead must be put through rituals that will determine the person's position and place of his/her burial. Next, Mbiti talks about the land of the departed that is either underground, in bushes, forests, or wilderness—a decision that is made differently by various ethnic groups. He further explains that the spirit of the dead lingers around where the person lived for a while. After that, Mbiti talks about judgement, reward and retribution in the hereafter. He says that it is most African communities' belief that the dead are judged once they arrive in the next world according to their deeds while they were alive on Earth leading them to be rewarded a happy, easier life or punished by hard life. Interestingly, some communities such as the Lodagaa explain that God eventually forgives those suffering for their evil acts on Earth after a while. The nature of the hereafter is explained by Mbiti by noting that most African communities believe that life on Earth is similar to life in the next world. He further posits that Africans believe in reincarnation of the dead through rebirth or transmigration into animals, reptiles and birds. He further notes that most African communities believe that the dead keep reappearing to the living in the form of ghosts (Mbiti, 2012). In sum, the chapter portrays death as a basis for worship in African Religion and asserts that Africans appreciate the gift of life through worship.

### **Book's Greatness**

Many attributes underlie the greatness of Mbiti's book reviewed here. First, it provides information from 550 African peoples and languages on the worship of God. It also identifies 1,600 names of God. In addition, it gives concrete evidence for who God is, His attributes, how He is worshipped, and His relationship with humans.

Second, the book is an amazingly thoughtful and well referenced work, covering numerous ethnic groups across Africa. It deals with fundamentally all conceptions of God, His attributes, worship, invocations, relation to divinities and spirits. In addition, Mbiti offers a list of all the names of God in Africa with translations into English wherever possible. He explores the indigenous African perceptions and knowledge of God confined in oral traditions such as proverbs, short statements, songs, prayers, names found in myths, tales, proverbs, stories, and religious ceremonies marking rites of passage.

Third, for this book, Mbiti collected over 1,600 primary and attributive names of God; thereby concluding that all African persons and linguistic symbols have one Supreme Being known by different names. He deduces that African Religion is compatible with Christianity and that many elements of the two religions can amalgamate with each other without conflict. He supports the foregoing claim by his attributive understanding of God from natural, geographical, historical, cultural, economic and sociopolitical factors. For him, the understanding of God is directly influenced by the daily activities of Africans.

Fourth, Mbiti focuses on the concepts of God as independent elements and describes the attributes of God out of that context and mixes them without bearing in mind on their cultural, sociological and cosmological systems (Onyango, 2018). It is important to note that unlike some of the Western scholars who regard the African Religion as a religious "tabula rasa," Mbiti pays attention to Africa's rich cultural heritage and religious consciousness and attempts to build a close connection between the past religious beliefs and practice and the Christian Gospel in order for African Christians to have the true character of African Christian identity.

Fifth, in his approach, Mbiti studies God from anthropological, phenomenological-comparative perspectives of what Africans say about God. In fact, the concepts of God were

collected from various African ethnic groups and then lined up in comparison to the concept of God as viewed in the Bible.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The preceding analysis leads me to the conclusion that the book reviewed in here provides significant understanding of the African worldview. It shows an African perspective on six worldview questions about (1) From where do we come? (2) Where are we? (3) Where are we going? (4) What is right or wrong? (5) How shall we act? (6) What is true or false? The foregoing questions pertain to the African worldview on the spiritual world, humans, the earth and the hereafter; specifically, this is what Mbiti explains in his book.

Given all this, I make two recommendations here for future researchers. First, the book reviewed can serve as part and parcel of the literature review and analytical sections of future works on African Religion, Anthropology, Theology and African Philosophy. Second, in light of the multidimensional nature of African Religion, I encourage scholars to take the multidisciplinary approach to the study of African Religion. There is a lot of undocumented, valuable knowledge about African Religion that should be studied objectively and phenomenologically without downgrading the Religion.

### References

Mbiti, J. S. (1970). *Concepts of God in Africa*. New York, NY: Praeger.

Mbiti, J. S. (2012). *Concepts of God in Africa* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Nairobi, Kenya: Acton.

Oborji, F. A. (2019). Mbiti, John Samuel. Retrieved on November 7, 2021 from <https://dacb.org/stories/kenya/mbiti-johns/>

p'Bitek, O. (1953). *Religion of the Central Luo*. Kampala, Uganda: East African Literature Bureau.

p'Bitek, O. (1971). *African Religions in Western Scholarship*. Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau.

Schebesta, P. (1936). *Revisiting My Pygmy Hosts*. London, UK: Hutchinson & Co.

Setiloane, G. M. (1976). *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: A. A. Balkema.

Smith, E. W. (1950). The whole subject in perspective: An introductory survey. In Smith, E. W. (ed.). *African Ideas of God: A Symposium*. London, UK: Edinburgh House Press.