



# Imperialism and its effects on the African Traditional Religion: Towards the liberty of African Spirituality

Joel Mokhoathi

University of the Free State

Faculty of Theology and Religion, Department of Religion Studies

Email address: [Mokhoathij@ufs.ac.za](mailto:Mokhoathij@ufs.ac.za)

## Abstract

This paper argues that the juxtaposition of the African Traditional Religion (ATR) with Ibramic faiths tends to deprive the African Traditional Religion its true status as an independent religion, and thus, the process appears to be a product of imperialism, which imposed racial bigotries and effected theories that conveyed socio-cultural and religious inequalities in Africa. Besides in this paradigm, even though imperialism has ended, its effects are still evident in the representation of the African Traditional Religion by non-practitioners, as they work to undermine the religion. It is undoubtedly desirable that religion and spirituality be used to generate greater understanding and harmony between peoples, rather than be used as a tool to divide people as was sadly the case in the past. Thus it becomes critical to allow ATR to recover its rightful place amongst the faiths on the continent.

**Key words:** Imperialism, Christianity, African Tradition Religion, African Spirituality, Early Missionaries.

## Introduction

The foremost faiths practiced in South Africa and to a extent, in the remainder of the continent, are Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Judaism. ATR is very popular and arrived with the migration of "traditional" groups of people from West and Central Africa almost 1500 years' ago. Most of these migrants were Bantu -speaking people who were the ancestors of especially the Nguni groups such as the Zulu and Xhosa. ATR has incorporated combined elements of mainly Christianity and also Islam to a lesser extent. Essentially, ATR has been passed down through the ages on from parents to children through oral tradition and thus stories, myths, legends and accounts.

There is an animated debate on the status of the African Traditional Religion (ATR) within the religious dome in Africa. A number of African scholars feel that the ATR has not yet received its appropriate place in the religious world (Magesa, 1997:28; Sarpong, 2006:1; Quarcoopome, 1987:12-13). Scholars like Nokuzola Mndende have been vocal in this regard. Like many other African scholars, Mndende argues that "[t]he lip-service paid to religious freedom and religious equality leaves much to be desired as 'freedom' and 'equality' are still based on racial prejudices regarding the concept of spirituality in Africa" (Mndende, 2009:1). The indigenous people, in line with this argument, are still denied their true spirituality, which they only get to experience in part when they profess allegiance to Ibramic faiths (Mndende, 2009:1; Onuzulike, 2008:163).

Within this modus, the spirituality of indigenous people is either juxtaposed with Christian or Islamic dogmas (Onuzulike, 2008:163). The collocation of the ATR with Ibramic faiths such as Christianity or Islam tends to deprive the ATR its true status as an independent



religion, which is sufficient on its own. As Mndende (2009:1) appropriately argued, this appears to be a product of colonization, which was closely linked to imperialism. Scholars like Lenin (1999:15) argue that imperialism was the highest stage of capitalism. Imperialism therefore imposed racial bigotry and effected theories that conveyed socio-cultural and religious inequalities in Africa. The current status, of the ATR which situates it among the 'other' religions of the world, mainly in Africa, has been wedged upon, negatively by imperialistic tendencies that seem to undermine the legitimacy of the religion.

As the earliest indigenous religion of the Africans, which guided the experiences of the forebears of the present generation, and preserved their cultural norms (Awolalu, 1979:26), the ATR should no longer be viewed in line with imperialistic attitudes. These have a tendency to hamper the legitimacy and autonomy of the ATR. The ATR has to be given its due recognition - that is the unconditional inclusion of the ATR among other established religions of the world (Mndende, 2009:1). However, with the contest for the recognition of the ATR amongst the religions of the world, there comes a need to reassess the damage that has already been done, and to understand how profound the damage is before it can be fixed. Otherwise, the status of the ATR may remain suppressed even though it is the earliest religion of the Africans. Therefore, the effects of imperialism on the ATR have to be addressed. It is a matter that must no longer be avoided.

The spirituality of indigenous people appears to be repressed and will not be freely expressed until the ATR has been given its due recognition (Mndende, 2006:153-173). For instance, Ibramic faiths like Christianity and Islam are understood to have more members than the ATR in Africa (Onuzulike, 2008:164; Meiring & Meiring, 2015:viii). However, the realism of this matter is that most of these members are still going after their African traditional practices (Amanze, 2003:43; Onuzulike, 2008:164; Jebadu, 2007:246). In most cases, their leaning towards the ATR and its practices is kept a secret while they acquiescently profess to be Christians or Muslims (Ntombana, 2015:106; Onuzulike, 2008:164). This is largely a result of imperialism. European colonizers and Christian missionaries saw the "African culture not only as lower than the Western culture, but also as undesirable and even dangerous to converted Africans" (Oduro, Pretorius, Nussbaum & Born, 2008:37).

Christian converts were therefore told that the African culture is to be dismissed, and were encouraged to adopt Western habits and values. The religious piety of Africans was viewed as "wholly erroneous, idolatrous, superstitious, and necromantic" (Sanou, 2013:7). Almost all the early missionaries, who advanced the colonial interests and served as instruments of imperialism (Ferguson, 2003:115; McQueen, 2007:21; Pobebe, 1979:15) were driven by the displacement paradigm, which denied that there is anything that is of God in non-Christian religions (Nxumalo, 1980:6). The quintessence of the ATR and its religious practices were regarded as completely erroneous, idolatrous and necromantic. Those who were influenced by, or came into contact with missionaries and had received their teachings, felt ashamed of the ATR and began to practice it secretly as it was often referred to as erroneous, idolatrous and necromantic (Masondo, 2011:33).

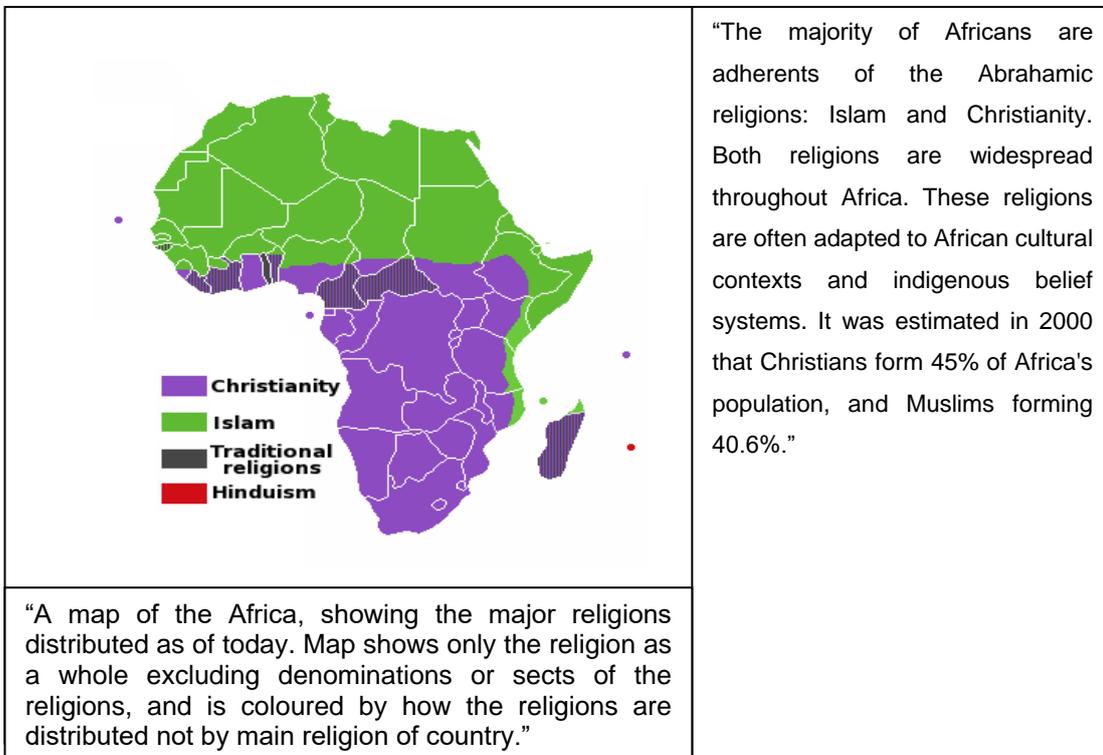
In order to add more force in the suppression of the ATR, the early missionaries adopted a policy of 'religious vandalism' or a 'smashing crusade' against the African local customs and belief systems (Chingota, 1998:147). Scholars like Höschele (2007:262) refer to this as the '*tabula rasa*' policy because it aimed at 'wiping out and replacing' the local cultural heritage with Western cultural values. Christian converts, under this policy, were often forced to break away with their African customs and local cultural heritage. Thus, European imperialists did not only elevate the status of Ibramic faiths like Christianity at the expense of the ATR, but also dented the African cultural heritage. What appears to

be more interesting in this matter is that the ATR is still not considered to be a majority in Africa - its own sphere of influence.

According to the statistical report which was published by White (1998) concerning the religions of Africa, it was reported that the majority of Africans are adherents of Ibramic faiths – Christianity and Islam. The report estimated that in the year two thousand, Christians formed forty-five percent of the African population, while Muslims made up forty-point six percent. This means that eighty-five point six percent of the African population belonged to both Christianity and Islam, and the ATR constituted less than fourteen-point four percent of the overall population of Africa. These statistical reflections of religions in Africa appear to be controversial. It is unlikely that both Christianity and Islam can make up eighty-five point six percent of the overall religious population of Africa.

Africans do not completely abandon their traditional religion; it remains with them for several generations and sometimes for centuries (Mbiti, 1975:13). Leonard (1906) must have observed this when he asserted that “[t]he religion of these natives (Africans) is their existence and their existence is their religion... The entire organisation of their common life is so interwoven with it that they cannot get away from it...,” (Leonard, 1906:429). The statistical report provided by White (1998) further affirms that “[t]hese religions (Christianity and Islam) are often adapted to African cultural contexts and indigenous belief systems” (White 1998, accessed 21 Jan. 2017). Therefore, professing allegiance to Christianity or Islam, in this case, does not imply the complete break-away of Africans from their indigenous belief systems. The statistical representations of religions in Africa, which were published by White (1998), have been reflected in the diagram provided below:

**Figure.1 Religions of Africa**



Source: White, Matthew 1998. Religion in Africa.



The ATR still appears to have a great influence, particularly in Africa. Before its disfigurement by imperialism, the ATR was the primary religion of Africans (Onuzulike, 2008:164). It existed way before the advent of Christianity and other religions in Africa, mostly in the Sub-Saharan part of Africa (Onuzulike, 2008:164). This implies that the ATR is one of the earliest religions in Africa (Kruger *et al.* 2012:18). During the rise of Christianity, which largely depended upon the successful conversion of Africans for continuity, the esteemed status of the ATR was demoralized, often by derogatory remarks made by Western colonizers, and Christian missionaries, who were the instruments of imperialism (Ferguson, 2003:115; McQueen, 2007:21; Pobee, 1979:15). Scholars like Bosch (1991:227,312-313) further asserts that “[c]olonialism and mission, as a matter of course, were interdependent; the right to have colonies carried with it the duty to Christianize the colonized... The ‘civilized’, however, not only felt superior to the ‘uncivilized’, but also responsible for them” (Bosch, 1991: 227, 312-313).

In that manner, the esteemed position of the ATR was stripped away by colonizers and Christian missionaries who felt superior and responsible for the civilization of the ‘uncivilized’. The ‘uncivilized’ in this case, referred to Africans who, though having their faith, were viewed as barbarians, with no morals and any knowledge of God (Kanu, 2014:9; Nxumalo, 1980:6). Their ‘civilization’ meant the ‘conversion’ to Christianity and the adoption of the Western culture and values (Tangelder, 2009:1). Even though this may have been the case, scholars like Mbiti (1975:13), and Leonard (1906:429) argue that African people still carried their religion with them because they only know how to live within their religious context. Leonard (1906) posited that Africans can only find proper expression within the context of their religiosity: “they eat religiously, drink religiously, and sing religiously” (Leonard, 1906:429).

Mbiti (1975) further asserts that “[e]ven if they are converted to another religion like Christianity or Islam, they do not completely abandon their traditional religion immediately: it remains with them for several generations and sometimes centuries” (Mbiti, 1975:13). The complete break-away of Africans from their traditional religion therefore appears to be a weighty mission; hence they opt to juxtapose their religion with others instead of discarding their own. Furthermore, the statistical figures that were published by White (1998) do not consider the exceptional case of people who juxtapose Christianity or Islam with the ATR. They generally categorise people in terms of their practice of one faith - as Christians, Muslims, or African Traditional Religionists - even though some people tend to blend two or more religions together (Kanu, 2014:6; Onuzulike, 2008:164; Ntombana, 2015:106). As to why these people are assertively classified as Christians, Muslims or African Traditional Religionists while they hold to two or more religions at once is bewildering. But it is a known fact that most people in Africa linger between two religions - Christianity or Islam and the ATR (Sanou 2013:7; Amanze 2003:43).

Instead of being classified as Christians, Muslims, or African Traditional Religionists, the people who juxtapose one religion with another should be referred to as ‘pluralists’ – since they hold to two or more religious beliefs at once, and as their religious temperament is dichotomous. One might argue therefore, that the statistical figures which were published by White (1998) do not provide a true reflection of the African religious representation. They mainly focus on the practice of one religion over others and exclude a large population of people who hold to two religious belief systems at once. This situation should be reviewed since a number of research studies have indicated that the temperament of religious disposition commonly adopted by Africans is largely pluralistic (Onuzulike, 2008:164; Amanze, 2003:43; Ntombana, 2015:106). It is often a combination of two or more religions together, as it is the case with Christianity



and Islam. Both Christianity and Islam are often juxtaposed with the African Traditional Religion (Onuzulike, 2008:164).

If this situation was to be considered, then the status of both Ibramic faiths - Christianity and Islam would be debatable. Both Christianity and Islam possess a claim over members who juxtapose Christianity or Islam with the African Traditional Religion. This has not been questioned so far due to the stigma that has been left behind by imperialism. Most African people tend to openly profess their allegiance to Christianity or Islam, while they secretly practice the African Traditional Religion. If the status of the ATR was not suppressed and its practice not kept a secret, the statistical representation of religions in Africa would be completely different. A large number of African people would probably be proud of their religion, and those who profess allegiance to Ibramic faiths such as Christianity or Islam would probably revert back to the ATR. The demise in the status of the ATR can therefore be attributed to imperialism, which tended to represent Ibramic faiths like Christianity as superior than the indigenous religion of the Africans.

Appropriate strides therefore need to be taken towards the reclamation of the status which befits the African Traditional Religion. This process however begins with understanding the effects of imperialism and how it has affected the free exercise of the African Traditional Religion in Africa, particularly in South Africa. Admittedly, this appears to be an enormous task as the transformation process does not occur overnight. But the contest is worth engaging in, especially if Africans are to be given a chance to reclaim the recognition of the African Traditional Religion within an African context and to locate its unique place among the religions of the world.

## **Imperialism**

Imperialism, according to Merriam-Webster (1828), refers to “the policy, practice, or advocacy of extending the power and domination of a nation especially by direct territorial acquisitions or by gaining indirect control over the political or economic life of other areas” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 1828, accessed 21 Jan. 2017). Reill and Wilson (2004) further define imperialism as “the political, cultural and economic domination of other countries by a nation, achieved through military or other means” (Reill and Wilson, 2004:294). It denotes the domination by one country or people over others (Lenin, 1999:8). Even though it has largely been defined by its political and economic interests, imperialism had a civilizational component, which did not simply focus on the acquisition of territories, but the transformation of cultural and religious norms as well (Corrie, 2007:62; Porter, 2004:316; Gorringer, 2004:188). Scholars like Oduro, Pretorius, Nussbaum and Born (2008:37) maintain that colonialism was driven by “three Cs” – Christianity, Commerce and Civilization. The main idea behind these “Cs” was that all three should go together and promote each other: Christianity must prepare the way for commerce so that Western civilization can replace the African culture, that is, the African ‘lack of civilization’ (Oduro *et al.*, 2008:37).

Popular historians like Ferguson (2003:115) further argued that the British missionaries were intentional tools of imperialism, while McQueen (2007:21) postulates that they were its “advance guard.” Imperialism therefore did not only influence the political and economic life of Africans but it also affected their cultural and religious norms. The earliest roots of imperialism, according to Lenin (1999:7), can be traced back from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century exploration of the New World, where European nations pursued various routes of trade. This is a period when European nations established settlements in North and South America and in Southern Asia (Reill &



Wilson, 2004:295). Because European imperialists mainly set up trading posts and worked closely with local rulers to ensure the protection of European economic interests, this period was referred to as 'Old Imperialism.'

Around the nineteen seventies however, European nations resolved to expand their empires and thus developed economic interests in uncharted territories and these included Africa, the Middle East and Asia (Reill & Wilson, 2004:296). During this period, European imperialists advanced their practice by setting up the administration of native areas for the benefit of colonial powers. It is a period in world history which is known as the Age of Imperialism (Lenin, 1999:7). During this time, the competition of colonies in Africa was so ardent that the imperialists' competitor soon realised that without proper rules of engagement for the scrabble for Africa, they might be drawn to arms with each other (Osabu-kle, nd: 3). Thus, they decided to meet at Berlin under the chairmanship of the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck to resolve their grievances. The imaginative point of enquiry, which they all sought to address, was: "Since we are all European wolves seeking to devour the African prey, why should we devour one another because of that prey when we can conspire and agree on which section of that prey population any of us should devour?" (Osabu-kle, nd: 3).

Accordingly, in order to claim their piece of the pie, all the Western countries, with the exception of the United States and Switzerland, attended the Berlin Conference which started on the fifteenth of November eighteen eighty-four to the thirty-first of January eighteen eighty-five (Osabu-kle, nd:3). There, the fate of Africa was decided without the presence of any African state. No single African country was invited to attend the conference; the Europeans needed no voice of conscience to remind them of the cost of undertaking such an expedition. Between eighteen seventy-eight and nineteen fourteen, the European powers divided the entire African continent except for the independent countries of Ethiopia and Liberia into imperial portions (Osabu-kle, nd:3). Liberia was settled by free slaves from the United States, and had become an independent republic in eighteen forty-seven. Ethiopia, which was already independent, routed out an Italian invasion around eighteen ninety-seven (Osabu-kle, nd:3). Thus, both Liberia and Ethiopia shunned the sway of imperialism.

## **Imperialism and Africa**

Africa has, for a long time, been the recipient of various descriptions by the outside world. Prominent historians like Hallett (1970:1) asserts that the ancient Greeks used to say that there is always "something new coming out of Africa". Thus, Africa appeared to have possessed a measure of mysticism for the archaic world. Pliny, for instance, who was a Roman encyclopaedist, who recorded their sayings, is believed to have:

[E]ntranced the imagination of Europe for more than fifteen hundred years with his stories of strange African beasts – elephants, and cameleopards and hippopotami – and of men even stranger – strap-foots and Goat-pants and headless Blemmyes with eyes in their breasts" (Hallett, 1970:1).

For the Portuguese of the Age of Discovery, Africa was presented as "the land of white Moors and black Moors, of fabulous gold mines and of mysterious Christian monarch, the fabled Prester John of the Indies" (Hallett, 1970:1). To the Europeans of the Age of Romanticism, Africa carried the image of "parching deserts and lion-infested wilderness and barbarous monarchs disporting themselves with savage magnificence" (Hallett, 1970:1). These mystical portraits of African roused the interests of European explorers, but also gave them a sense of fear for the unknown. Africa was both the attractive land



of white Moors and black Moors, of fabulous gold mines and of the Christian monarch, the fabled Prester John of the Indies; but also, the frightening parched deserts and lion-infested wilderness and barbarous monarchs disporting themselves with savage magnificence. Those who dared to venture to Africa were often thought of as risking their lives.

Before the eighteenth century, the main contact of Europeans with the Sub-Saharan Africa was through the traffic of slaves for the New World (Pawliková-Vilhanová, 2002:51). But in the middle of the nineteenth century, the imagery of Africa began to change as humanitarian efforts grew (Pawliková-Vilhanová, 2002:51), and as Christian missionaries began to present Africa in a different guise (Hallett, 1970:1). The mysticism, which had entranced the imagination of Europeans for many years, was soon replaced by the representation of Africa as the “theatre of the blackest ignorance and crime, where brutal slave dealers and tyrannical chiefs held sway over the suffering millions of heathendom” (Hallett, 1970:1). Africa was now perceived to be the beneficent of white man, shouldering his burden as he brought the blessings of civilization to the “new caught, sullen peoples” (Hallett, 1970:1). The equation of civilization with commerce became a common characteristic of humanitarian and missionary thought (Pawliková-Vilhanová, 2002:51). This implied the emergence of imperialism in Africa.

After the abolishment of the commercialisation of slaves or slave trade in Africa, the Europeans had only learnt two things from Africans and about Africa. They believed that Africans were an inferior race; and that they were a helpless group of people and therefore needed to be protected (Jones, 2012:2). This helped to justify the practice of imperialism in the minds of many Europeans. Even those who were actively involved in the fight against slave trade contributed towards the development of this racial bigotry against Africans. They argued that Africans have to be “protected” from slave traders because “they couldn’t take care of themselves” (Jones, 2012:2). This became the message which explorers like Mungo Park and Henry Morton Stanley passed on by books and through their lectures about Africa in Europe. They popularized the notion of Africa as “the dark continent” (Jones, 2012:2).

Brown (1970:3) reports that a first-time visitor to Africa from Europe once uttered the following:

As we steamed into the estuary of Sierra Leone on November 18<sup>th</sup> [1889], we found Africa exactly as books of travel had led us to anticipate – a land of excessive heat, lofty palm-trees, gigantic baobabs, and naked savages. At five o’clock we dropped anchor at Free Town, called, on account of its deadly fevers, the ‘the white man’s grave.’ Immediately, our vessel was surrounded by boats filled with men and women, shouting, jabbering, laughing, quarrelling, and even fighting... Without exception, it was the most confusedly excited and noisy lot of humanity I have ever seen (Brown, 1970:3).

European explorers regarded Africans as inferior people and often characterized them as “naked savages”, whose language was “jabbering”. Africa was also said to be full of deadly fevers such that it deserved to be termed “the white man’s grave”. The mortification of Africans and Africa as a whole was further perpetuated by Victorian philosophers. In their depiction of the nineteenth century science, the development of humans took place in three stages: savagery, which was marked by hunting and gathering; barbarism, which was mostly accompanied by the beginning of settled agriculture; and civilization, which required the development of commerce (Jones, 2012:2). The previous two stages – savagery and barbarism, are those that are commonly associated with the character and features of the Africans. The last stage,



which is civilization, is mostly associated with white pre-eminence and Eurocentric developments.

Thus, Africans fall under the first two stages of human development while the Europeans fall on the last. As savages and barbarians, the Africans were therefore regarded as inferior to the more civilized European groups, which were ever ready to help by bringing “civilization” to the “uncivilized”. Thompson (1995:5) has also observed that the Southern African archaeologists, following the precedents created by European archaeology, tend to classify the Southern African history in terms of ‘Stone Age’ (which is divided into the Early SA, Middle SA, and Late SA) and ‘Iron Age’. He further argues that these terms are illogical, ahistorical, and inaccurate:

[I]llogical because they confuse chronological phenomena with cultural phenomena, ahistorical because their ages do not correspond with the historian’s chronology, and inaccurate because they imply that, for example, every member of an Iron Age community used iron tools and weapons (Thompson, 1995:5).

This implies that the categorization of Africans as falling under the first and second stages of human development, and their referral by Europeans as ‘savages’ and ‘barbarians’ is unwarranted. Under these stages, they are regarded as savages and barbarians who were only capable of hunting and gathering, and later of farming and agriculture, but this was not the case. Hunting and gathering, just as farming and agriculture, was part of their culture and not a stage of human development. Their hunting and gathering, or farming and agricultural practices did not make them any inferior to their so-called ‘civilised’ counterparts.

A writer like Thompson (1995) contends that:

Scholars now recognize that in Southern Africa as elsewhere the changes they have identified in the shape and size of the stone tools of the hunter-gatherers represents the development of increasingly specialized methods of exploiting the resources of the different environments in the region. Each group adapted its hunting methods to the climate, topography, and animal species of its territory. The outcome of this territorial specialization was diversity. From area to area, groups became increasingly different from one another (Thompson, 1995:6).

The move from being hunter-gathers to farmers and agriculturists was a result of adaptational methods rather than the stages of human development. Their lifestyle did not suggest any lack of, or need for civilization. In fact, their cultural practices were modest, even though these practices were later referred to as savage-hood and barbarism by European imperialists. Describing the kind of life which Africans lived before the colonial era, Thompson (1995) asserts that:

...They occupied caves or camps constructed of portable materials and moved from one watering, foraging, and hunting area to another as the seasons dictated. As in other preindustrial societies, there was a division of labor between women, who stayed close to the campsite and were responsible for childcare and most of the work of collecting edible plants, and men, who were the hunters. They were skilful in fashioning tools from wood and stone, clothing from animal hides, musical instruments from wood, catgut, and ostrich quills, and bows and arrows with tips smeared with poisons extracted from snakes or insects or plants. Their artists have left an impressive record in the rock painting and engravings that have survived in protected places (Thompson, 1995:7).



More than the basic stages of human development, the kind of lifestyle which Africans lived, as depicted by the above citation, denotes an element of adaptation which occurred in various forms as the Africans moved from one hunting area to another as the seasons of time detected. They often occupied caves or camps constructed of portable materials as they moved to areas where there was plenty of access to food and water. As intellectual beings, they fashioned their tools, weapons and clothing with regard to the available resources of the time. Their level of skill and acumen can be seen from the tools and weapons that they designed, and from the artwork which they left behind. They were extraordinarily inventive, unpretentious and possessed the spirit of innocence. An English traveller by the name of William J. Burchell is reported to have once said about Africans in 1811:

[T]hey (the men) appeared firm and hardy; and my attention was forcibly struck by the proportional smallness, and neatness of their hands and feet... The women were young; their countenance had a cast of prettiness, and, I fancied, too, of innocence; their manners were modest, though unreserved... One of them wore a high cap of leather, the edge of which protected her eyes from the sun..., (Vinnicombe, 1976: 323-327).

Relative to this depiction, there was hardly anything about the African's representation or countenance that deserved to be titled as "savage-hood" or "barbarism" by Europeans. But these were the primary name-tags that were associated with Africans during the Christian missionary activities in Africa. In section IV – "The Practicability of something being done, more than what is done, for the Conversion of the Heathen" – of his famous treatise – "Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use means for the Conversion of the Heathens" - which discusses the challenges that missionaries faced in spreading the gospel, William Carey (1792) referred to Africans in the following manner:

[T]he impediments in the way of carrying the gospel among heathen... their distance from us, their barbarous and savage manner of living, the danger of being killed by them, the difficulty of procuring the necessaries of life, or the unintelligibleness of their languages (Carey, 1792: 93).

Africans were often referred to as "heathens", "barbarians" and "savages", who spoke unintelligible languages. These derogatory terms motivated or informed the theories which imperialists and early missionaries used to "Christianize" and to "civilize" Africans. With regard to the aspect of "civilisation," Africans had no need for European contraption. Most African societies fulfilled their own needs for a wider range of articles for domestic use, for farming tools, and for weaponry. This has been expressed by scholars such as Rodney (1973:16). He contended that:

African manufactures have been contemptuously treated or overlooked by European writers, because the modern conception of the world brings to mind factories and machines. However, 'manufactures' means literally 'things made by hand', and African manufacture in this sense had advanced appreciably (Rodney, 1973:16).

Thus, the Africans' use of ordinary tools, weaponry and clothing manufactured by hand, reflecting the cultural practices of their time, did not make them any inferior to their 'civilized' European counterparts but revealed the level of advancement in terms of their cognitive abilities and innovation. This echelon of ingenuity was often contemptuously treated or overlooked by Europeans because their understanding of civilization included the establishment of factories, machinery and formalized institutions such as schools, hospitals, churches, etc. Even though some contend that colonization or imperialism benefited the Africans, scholars like Ramachandra (2005) argue that it "not only



plundered wealth from the colonies but also violently reshaped physical territories, social terrains, knowledge systems and human identities” (Ramachandra, 2005:119).

Young (2001) further asserts that even though it may have brought modernity, “it also caused extraordinary suffering in human terms, and was singularly destructive with regard to the indigenous cultures with which it came into contact” (Young, 2001:6). Imperialism, therefore, privileged the Europeans and disadvantaged the ‘colonized’ colonies. This can be observed from the imperialistic attitude of early missionaries in their evangelistic efforts in Africa. They believed that “they knew what was best for Africa. Their goal was not so much colonization as ‘civilization’: introducing a way of life that was first and foremost Christian, but was also distinctly North European in its reverence for industry and abstinence” (Ferguson, 2003:94). Thus, Europeans used Christianity to impose their western culture upon the Africans. Since it sought to destroy the African cultural heritage, and replace it with the European culture, Christianity became a faith that implies a break-away from cultural norms and traditional practices.

### **Imperialism and the African Traditional Religion**

The embodiment of the ATR, since the late nineteenth century, has largely been under the influence of Christianized scholarship (Parrinder, 1962; Daneel, 1973; van Rooy, 1978; van Deventer, 1991; Mbiti, 1975). A vast number of scholars, who have written extensively about the ATR, are non-practitioners and mostly profess the Christian faith (Mndende, 2009:6). The scholastic study of the ATR by non-practitioners, in itself, is not an issue. The problem only arises when the representation of the ATR begins to show some elements of bias and does not adequately reflect the premise of the religion. Unfortunately, a lot of scholarly works produced by Christian scholars has taken this direction. Westerlund (1985) asserted that: “Although scholars of religion have primarily aimed at description and understanding, or depicting an ‘inside view’ of African religions, they have clearly been influenced by theological biases and thus tended to ‘Christianize’ these religions” (Westerlund, 1985:59).

Mndende (2009) further argues that the work of these scholars often falsely refer to the ATR as “ancestor worship characterized by spirit possession, secular spirituality, nature religion, primal religion or just African culture” (Mndende, 2009:6). Thus, even though the practice of imperialism, which sought to destroy the African cultural heritage, including the traditional religion of Africans has long gone, its effects are still felt by the ATR (Mndende, 2009:6). As in the time of imperialism, the esteemed status of the ATR continues to be undermined, often by Christian scholars who tend to represent the ATR with biases (Westerlund, 1985:59). This is a major quandary because the narrative and interpretation of the ATR is often carried out within a Christian backdrop.

In this sense, Christianity becomes the ideal benchmark from which the quintessence of the ATR is constantly viewed and critically judged (Crafford, 2015:22). This bias undermines the unassailability of the ATR, since it is frequently being disapproved of and judged in terms of the Christian viewpoint. This has over-flown into the political circle. During the centenary celebration of the African National Congress (ANC), President Jacob Zuma initiated the traditional cleansing ceremony by the ritual killing of a bull. The ANC secretary general, Gwede Mantashe, thereafter explained that the ritual sacrifice or slaughtering of a bull carries a traditional significance which has a variety of meanings: “traditionally, the act of slaughtering has different meanings. All nations have a way of celebrating through slaughter...,” (Frontline Fellowship, 2016, accessed 21 Jan. 2017). The meaning behind the slaughter of a bull during the centenary celebration was to



celebrate the journey of the ANC from the anti-apartheid movement to its being the ruling party.

As an integral part of the celebration, the ANC remembered and invoked the spirits of the former members of the party, who have died (the ancestors). This phenomenon did not sit well with Christian leaders such as Dr. Kenneth Meshoe, of the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP). Dr. Meshoe argued that invoking the spirits of dead leaders will have devastating consequences for the country. So, together with other Christians who were outside the Union Building in Pretoria, Dr. Meshoe instead offered prayers and conducted a worship ceremony to dedicate South Africa to God and Jesus Christ (Frontline Fellowship, 2016). As bizarre as this incident may seem, it shows the towering levels of religious intolerance and the suppression of the ATR by Christians in South Africa. When the President dedicates the country to the protection of the ancestors, the Christians argue that there will be devastating consequences. But when Christians gather together to dedicate the country to God, all becomes well. This appears to question the issue of religious tolerance. The prohibition of one's freedom to exercise their beliefs, in a manner that reflects their faith, seems to go against the position of the South African Constitution, which seeks to promote the practice of religious tolerance. All religions must be acknowledged and treated equally with respect; so that there will be no religion that is undermined.

Scholars like Maimela (1985:75) seem to have appreciated the magnitude of this problem. He contended for the recognition and acceptance of the ATR by Christians, as the divinely given religion for the salvation of the African humanity:

I am aware that my contention that African Traditional Religions must be accepted and respected as the normal divinely given means for the salvation of the African humanity is going to be a bitter pill for us as Christians to swallow, because it threatens long held beliefs about the "absoluteness of Christianity"... Rather than feel threatened by the admission that God saves people outside the historical church, we should praise our Creator for not hiding the divine truth from any section of humanity (Maimela, 1985:75).

It appears as if Christians find it difficult to accept the legitimacy and absoluteness of the ATR. It probably threatens their belief in the "absoluteness of Christianity". But as Maimela (1985:75) contended, the ATR needs to be accepted and respected as the normal divinely given means for the salvation of the African humanity, whether this is a bitter pill for Christians to swallow or not. Perhaps it is time that Christians began to give the ATR its due recognition, and for non-practitioners to respect the sufficiency of the religion (Ekwunife, 1990:[npp](#)), as the given means to offer salvation for the African humanity (Maimela, 1985:75).

Together with the acceptance and due respect given to the ATR, the imperialistic attitudes which tend to downplay the unassailability of the religion by referring to it by derogatory terms such as ancestor worship (Kanu, 2014:10), secular spirituality (du Toit, 2006:61), nature religion, primal religion (Crafford, 2015:2), or just African culture (Mokhoathi, 2016:8) must come to an end. It robs the ATR of its universal character (Magesa, 1997:28). The ATR must therefore be respected and given its due recognition - that is the unconditional inclusion of the ATR among other established religions of the world.

## Conclusion



The issue of religious freedom and equality seems to be a major concern in Africa, as the concepts of 'freedom' and 'equality' are still based on racial prejudices regarding the practice of African spirituality. The religious piety of indigenous people has been undermined. They only get to experience it in part when they profess allegiance to Abrahamic faiths like Christianity and Islam. This compromises the status of the ATR, as it situates it among the 'other' religions of the world. As the earliest religion of the Africans, the ATR should be a majority in Africa, mainly in Africa South of the Sahara. But due to imperialistic attitudes, which tend to undermine the legitimacy of the religion, the status of the ATR continues to be trodden down.

The primary suppressers of the ATR, post the imperialistic period, have become the non-practitioners of the religion. This includes philosophers, theologians, and students of comparative religions, who allow their description and understanding, or the depiction of the ATR to be influenced by their theological biases. These biases tend to 'Christianize' the ATR, as it is often judged in terms of the Christian perspective. The ATR must therefore no longer be viewed in line with these imperialistic attitudes. It must be accepted and recognised as a normal divinely given religion for the salvation of the African humanity.

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