



Exploring African Spirituality and Cultural Beliefs



by Selom Sessou

Paul at the Areopagus



Apostle Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said to the Athenians, ***“Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you.”*** (Acts 17:22-23, NKJV)

In this passage, Paul teaches us a valuable lesson: **to reach people, we must first understand their beliefs and culture.** As Seventh-day Adventists, especially in the West-Central Africa Division, we are called to engage with people who follow African Traditional Religion (ATR).

Paul at the Areopagus



If Paul, were to be in Cotonou, or Ile Ife, or in Dakar, or in Douala he would have made the same statement as we see him walking our streets and villages ***“Men of Lagos..., I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you.”***
(Acts 17:22-23, NKJV)

While adherence to traditional religion in Africa is hard to estimate, due to syncretism with Christianity and Islam, practitioners are estimated to number over 100 million, or at least 10 percent of the population of the continent.

<https://iks.ukzn.ac.za/node/775#:~:text=While%20adherence%20to%20traditional%20religion,the%20population%20of%20the%20continent.>



An estimated **405 million people** – or about **6% of the world's population** – were adherents of folk or traditional religions in 2010, and that number is expected to grow to 450 million by 2050.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/04/02/adherents-of-folk-religions/>.



The African Traditional Religion: Understanding the Worldview

African Traditional Religion (ATR) is a diverse and rich tapestry of beliefs and practices, spanning across various communities and cultures on the African continent. **It is deeply rooted in the understanding of the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual worlds, where ancestors, spirits, and deities play significant roles in shaping daily life.** This interconnectedness creates a powerful sense of community and responsibility towards the environment and each other.



The Concept of God in African Spirituality

1 **Creator God**

The concept of a Creator God who is the source of all life and power is central to African spirituality.

2 **Immanence and Transcendence**

The divine is seen as both immanent, present in the world and nature, and transcendent, beyond human comprehension.

3 **Polytheistic Beliefs**

Many African traditions also acknowledge the existence of other deities, spirits, and forces.

4 **Spiritual Power**

God's power is often seen as residing in natural elements and sacred places.



The African Traditional Religion: Understanding the Worldview

5

Connection to Nature

The African Traditional Religion sees nature as sacred and imbued with spiritual power.

6

Ancestral Spirits

Ancestors are revered as intermediaries between the living and the divine, and their influence is deeply felt.

7

Community Focus

Traditional African religion emphasizes the importance of community and shared values, with a strong sense of collective responsibility.

Understanding their spirituality is crucial in sharing the message of salvation. As Ellen White writes, ***“We must meet people where they are, and be willing to learn how best to reach their hearts”*** (Counsels to Writers and Editors, p. 34).



As Adventists, we should recognize that this deep spirituality reflects a genuine search for divine connection. However, the Bible offers a clearer, more complete revelation of God's plan of salvation, which we must lovingly present.

Just as Paul found common ground with the Athenians by acknowledging their spiritual hunger, we can find points of connection with ATR:





Belief in a Supreme Being: Many African cultures believe in a Creator God, though often distant. **This is an opportunity to introduce the God of the Bible who desires an intimate relationship with His creation (Jeremiah 31:3).**

The Lord has appeared of old to me, *saying*:
“Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting
love; Therefore with lovingkindness I have
drawn you.

Jeremiah 31:3

Respect for Life and Community: African spirituality values community and life. Similarly, **the Bible calls for strong relationships among believers, where love and service are central** (Acts 2:42-47).

Ellen White emphasizes the importance of respect and patience in engaging with those of other faiths: ***“There are many who are sincerely seeking for light, who know not what they must do to be saved. We must show them the path to Christ”*** (The Desire of Ages, p. 349).



We must contextualize our message without compromising biblical truth. This means acknowledging cultural values like community, respect, and reverence for the divine, while introducing the fuller revelation of Christ.

Church leaders and members should be educated about ATR and how to respectfully engage in dialogue. Paul's approach in Athens serves as a model—he understood their spirituality before introducing them to the gospel.



Prayer must be central in this work. As we reach out to our ATR neighbors, we must patiently guide them towards the light of the gospel. Ellen White encourages us: ***“We must pray as we labor, for we need the divine blessing on every effort”*** (Steps to Christ, p. 94).



Conclusion: **Embracing Cultural Diversity and Spreading the Gospel**

As Seventh-day Adventists in West-Central Africa, let us strive to embrace the richness of our cultural heritage, seeking to understand and connect with our neighbors who hold different beliefs. Let us share the gospel of love and hope, demonstrating respect and compassion to all.

