



Africa's Aquifers

Reflections on John S. Mbiti's Contributions to African Christian Spirituality

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Abstract

While John S. Mbiti (1931–2019) is highly acclaimed for his scholarly contributions to the fields of African religion and philosophy, little attention has been paid to his reflections on African Christian spirituality. Arguing vehemently against “imported Christianity,” he contends that only a genuine encounter between African religiosity and the Christian faith will quench the spiritual thirst of African peoples. This essay identifies and explores a few key contributions Mbiti offers in this regard and outlines certain critiques of his work. The central argument is that like the tremendous resource of Africa’s vast aquifers, African religiosity is a deep, enduring reservoir for enriching the understanding and experience of African Christian spirituality. Examples of the wellsprings of African religiosity that African Christian spirituality draws from include prayer, a unified worldview that does not erect dichotomies between the physical and spiritual realms, and a deeply communal orientation. Mbiti also underlines that certain elements within African religion require discernment in light of the gospel, so that Africans’ prior religious experience might be transposed into the fullness of life in Christ. Thus, African Christian spirituality can enhance not only the faith experience of African believers, but also followers of Jesus throughout the world who seek to deepen their spiritual lives.

Résumé

Bien que John S. Mbiti (1931–2019) soit très apprécié pour ses contributions scientifiques dans les domaines de la religion et de la philosophie africaines, peu d'attention a été accordée à ses réflexions sur la spiritualité chrétienne africaine. S'élevant avec véhémence contre le "christianisme importé", il soutient que seule une rencontre authentique entre la religiosité africaine et la foi chrétienne pourra éteindre la soif spirituelle des peuples africains. Cet essai identifie et explore quelques

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contributions clés de Mbiti à cet égard et présente certaines critiques de son travail. L'argument central est qu'à l'instar de l'énorme ressource que constituent les vastes aquifères de l'Afrique, la religiosité africaine est un réservoir profond et durable qui permet d'enrichir la compréhension et l'expérience de la spiritualité chrétienne africaine. Parmi les sources de la religiosité africaine dans lesquelles puise la spiritualité chrétienne africaine, on peut citer la prière, une vision unifiée du monde qui n'érige pas de dichotomie entre les domaines physique et spirituel, et une orientation profondément communautaire. Mbiti souligne également que certains éléments de la religion africaine nécessitent un discernement à la lumière de l'Évangile, afin que l'expérience religieuse antérieure des Africains puisse être transposée dans la plénitude de la vie en Christ. Ainsi, la spiritualité chrétienne africaine peut enrichir non seulement l'expérience de foi des croyants africains, mais aussi celle des disciples de Jésus du monde entier qui cherchent à approfondir leur vie spirituelle.

Resumo

Embora John S. Mbiti (1931–2019) seja muito aclamado pelas suas contribuições académicas para os campos da religião e da filosofia africanas, pouca atenção tem sido dada às suas reflexões sobre a espiritualidade cristã africana. Argumentando com veemência contra o "cristianismo importado", defende que só um encontro genuíno entre a religiosidade africana e a fé cristã poderá saciar a sede espiritual dos povos africanos. Este ensaio identifica e explora algumas das principais contribuições que Mbiti oferece a este respeito e apresenta algumas críticas ao seu trabalho. O argumento central é que, tal como o enorme recurso dos vastos aquíferos de África, a religiosidade africana é um reservatório profundo e duradouro para enriquecer a compreensão e a experiência da espiritualidade cristã africana. Entre os exemplos de fontes da religiosidade africana de que a espiritualidade cristã africana se alimenta contam-se a oração, uma visão unificada do mundo que não estabelece dicotomias entre os domínios físico e espiritual, e uma orientação profundamente comunitária. Mbiti também sublinha que certos elementos da religião africana requerem discernimento à luz do Evangelho, para que a experiência religiosa anterior dos africanos possa ser transposta para a plenitude da vida em Cristo. Assim, a espiritualidade cristã africana pode melhorar não só a experiência de fé dos crentes africanos, mas também dos seguidores de Jesus em todo o mundo que procuram aprofundar a sua vida espiritual.

Keywords

John S. Mbiti, African spirituality, African religiosity

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Mots-clés

John S. Mbiti, spiritualité africaine, religiosité africaine

Palavras-chave

John S. Mbiti, espiritualidade africana, religiosidade africana

Jesus said, "Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst — not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life."

(John 4:13–14, The Message)

"The river swells with the contribution of the streams."

(Bateke proverb¹)

A decade ago, discoveries of Africa's aquifers — massive reserves of underground water — created a stir within and beyond Africa. Studies in Africa's geology found aquifers to be highly prevalent across the continent, even in some of the driest places such as the Turkana region in northwest Kenya and the Nubian Sandstone reservoir North Africa spanning Libya, Egypt, Sudan, and Chad. Water experts estimated that Africa's aquifers, filled with new or ancient rain, hold "more than 100 times the annual renewable freshwater resources in dams and rivers, and 20 times the freshwater stored in the Africa's lakes."² Despite the excitement at these enormous resources for easing water shortages, experts cautioned that the water quality within them was not always drinkable on account of the iron or saline content and other pollutants. Additional challenges in accessing the underground springs led to the conclusion that "they're not always going to help address water scarcity."³

Half a century ago, John S. Mbiti (1931–2019) created a similar stir within and beyond Africa with his fresh "discovery" of African religions. Against longstanding denigration of African religions by colonizers, anthropologists, and missionaries, Mbiti embarked upon extensive research of indigenous religions across the continent in attempt to rehabilitate African peoples' religious and cultural heritage. Moreover, he did so from the perspective of his Christian faith, despite strong criticism from both Christian scholars, suspecting

¹ The Bateke are a Bantu Central African ethnocultural group who live primarily in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

² Gaathier Mahed, "Africa's Aquifers Hold More than 20 Times the Water Stored in the Continent's Lakes, but They Aren't the Answer to Water Scarcity."

³ Gaathier Mahed, "Africa's Aquifers."

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syncretism, and proponents of African religion, accusing him of misappropriating indigenous religion in the service of Christianity.

Through decades of scholarship, teaching, and pastoring, Mbiti became known to many as the father of modern African theology.⁴ By 1979, he had gained “an international reputation as the leading African theologian.”⁵ Jesse N. K. Mugambi (b. 1947), another prominent African theologian, noted Mbiti’s acclaim as “the most widely published and the most distinguished African scholar in the research fields of African expressions of Christianity and African religions and philosophy.”⁶ Henri Mbaya and Ntozakhe Cezula added that his place within these fields of study is “undoubtedly colossal.”⁷

Mbiti’s contributions have been rightly noted in these and other fields, including biblical studies and creative writing in European languages and in his own Kenyan mother-tongue, Kikamba. Surprisingly, however, very little attention has been given to date on his contributions to African Christian spirituality.⁸ This oversight is even more striking given the tremendous surge of interest in Christian spirituality in recent decades and the relative lack of reflection on African resources. For example, in a 2001 historical survey, *The Story of Christian Spirituality: Two Thousand Years, from East to West*, the “story” of spirituality within twentieth-century Africa receives less than three pages out of a sixty-page summary of twentieth-century spiritualities, and out of the entire 367-page volume. Yet within those few pages, the author acknowledges that “on no continent did the Christian faith spread more rapidly in the twentieth century than in Africa.”⁹

A further challenge, as Chioma Ohajunwa and Gubela Mji point out, is that “literature on spirituality has been historically permeated with Western understandings and definitions of spirituality . . . largely due to the influence of Christianity.”¹⁰ Reflecting on the Western missionary inheritance in Africa,

⁴ E.g., in the DACB article on Mbiti, he is introduced as “generally acclaimed as the father of the Christian theology of African Traditional Religion (ATR) and of indigenous efforts for the inculturation of the Gospel on the continent.” Francis Anekwe Oborji, “Mbiti, John Samuel.”

⁵ Adrian Hastings, *A History of African Christianity 1950–1975*, 232.

⁶ Jesse N. K. Mugambi, “A Tribute to John S. Mbiti,” 437.

⁷ Henri Mbaya and Ntozakhe Cezula, “Contribution of John S Mbiti to the Study of African Religions and African Theology and Philosophy,” 421.

⁸ The only source I was able to find specifically on Mbiti’s reflections on African Christian spirituality is Richard H. Schmidt, “John S. Mbiti: African Christian Spirituality.”

⁹ Bradley Holt, “Spiritualities of the Twentieth Century,” 316.

¹⁰ Chioma Ohajunwa and Gubela Mji, “The African Indigenous Lens of Understanding Spirituality: Reflection on Key Emerging Concepts from a Reviewed Literature,” 2530.

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Mbiti repeatedly expresses appreciation for the sacrificial role of Western missionaries in proclaiming the Christian faith across the continent. Yet he famously declares, “The missionaries who introduced the gospel to Africa in the past 200 years did not bring God to our continent. Instead, God brought *them*.”¹¹ Against the cultural imperialism that Africans often experienced within the Western missionary movement, Mbiti strongly contends that Christianity will only last in Africa through “a serious encounter of the Gospel with the indigenous African culture when the people voluntarily accept by faith the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹² He is convinced that Africans have the resources to understand, articulate, and propagate the Christian faith, and he therefore argues vehemently against “imported Christianity”:

Until we can cultivate a genuine Christianity which is truly MADE IN AFRICA, we will be building on a shallow foundation and living on borrowed time. Let it be said once and for all, as loudly as technology can make it, that IMPORTED CHRISTIANITY WILL NEVER, NEVER QUENCH THE SPIRITUAL THIRST OF AFRICAN PEOPLES.¹³

Citing an African proverb, “that which comes from charity is never sufficient to fill the granary,” Mbiti affirms that Africa desires and needs the gospel. However, he insists, it does not require imported Christianity “because too much of it will only castrate us spiritually or turn us into spiritual cripples.”¹⁴

What, then, does Mbiti envision and advocate for African Christian spirituality? This essay identifies and explores a few key contributions which Mbiti offers in this regard. The central argument is that like the tremendous resource of Africa's vast aquifers, African religiosity is a deep, enduring reservoir for enriching the understanding and experience of African Christian spirituality. Following a brief introduction to the subject of African Christian spirituality, Mbiti's contributions and critiques of his work will be outlined before concluding reflections are offered.

African Christian Spirituality

If there is no word for “religion” in most African languages, as Mbiti points

¹¹ John Mbiti, “The Encounter of Christian Faith and African Religion,” 818; emphasis original. This theological assumption remains contested, particularly among some evangelical scholars. For example, see Alistair I. Wilson, “Missionaries Did Not Bring Christ to Africa – Christ Brought them’ (Bediako/Mbiti).”

¹² John S. Mbiti, “Christianity and African Culture,” 276.

¹³ Mbiti, “Christianity and African Culture,” 276; emphasis original.

¹⁴ Mbiti, “Christianity and African Culture,” 276.

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out,¹⁵ there is also “no word . . . which denotes spiritual life or spirituality.”¹⁶ The reason, Mbiti explains and other scholars affirm, is that in Africa, “religion permeates into all departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it. . . . Religion is in their whole system of being.”¹⁷ Indeed, Mbiti famously opened his early work, *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969), with the fundamental assertion that “Africans are notoriously religious . . .”¹⁸ In opposition to widespread views of African religion as paganism, animism, superstition, magic, fetishism, or ancestor worship, Mbiti sought to describe the beliefs and practices of hundreds of ethnic societies across Africa. In the process, he affirmed the validity and integrity of African religions that warrant study on par with other world religions. As Mugambi summarizes,

Professor John Mbiti's research reconfirms that the African cultural and religious heritage is founded on God the Creator and Source of life, with many attributes, who has sustained the hope of African peoples across generations, in their sorrow and joy; in their suffering and celebration. This African religiosity underlines all expressions of faith among Africans in the continent and in the Diaspora.¹⁹

“African religiosity” is Mbiti's preferred term, for he notes that “spirituality is a difficult word to define.”²⁰ Nonetheless, he explains in relation to African religion that “spirituality . . . refer[s] to those religious elements dealing with the direct relationship between human beings and the divine realm . . . including God, divinities, spirits and spiritual forces.”²¹ It is expressed through many avenues including prayers, symbols, rituals, dance and other art forms.

A major achievement in Mbiti's scholarship is his systematic analysis of the five-fold “religious ontology” of African peoples, including their apprehension of God, spirits, human beings, animals and plants, and inanimate objects and phenomena.²² Yet his seminal contribution to African Christian theology lies in

¹⁵ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2.

¹⁶ Spirituality Department, “A Search for An Authentic African Christian Spirituality,” 41–42.

¹⁷ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 1, 3.

¹⁸ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 1. Recently this claim has been rightly contested in view of the rapid rise of secularism in Africa. For example, see the chapters in Benno van den Toren, Joseph Bosco Bangura, and Richard E. Seed, eds., *Is Africa Incurably Religious? Secularization and Discipleship in Africa*. However, the assertion was apropos in its original context of examining African traditional religions before the colonial era.

¹⁹ Jesse N. K. Mugambi, “Foreword to the Second Edition,” 3.

²⁰ John S. Mbiti, *The Prayers of African Religion*, 23.

²¹ John S. Mbiti, “African Religion,” 514.

²² Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 16.

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his assertion that the African religious and cultural heritage formed a *preparation evangelica*, or preparation for the gospel. He writes,

It was in fact African religion more than anything else, which laid down the foundation and prepared the ground for the eventual rapid accommodation of Christianity in Africa, and for the present rapid growth of the Church in our continent. Without African religiosity, whatever its defects might be, Christianity would have taken much longer to be understood and accommodated by African peoples.²³

Within his interpretive framework of the gospel being “the crowning fulfilment of African religiosity,”²⁴ Mbiti sets forth three fundamental convictions related to African Christian spirituality that become recurring themes throughout his writings. First, he insists that careful attention must be given to oral, as opposed to written, theology. As in the early church before the New Testament and other theological writings were produced, Mbiti underlines that much of the theological activity across Africa is expressed in the lived experience of believers: “It is theology in the open, from the pulpit, in the market place, in the home as people pray or read and discuss the scriptures.”²⁵

Therefore, in a seminal article in which Mbiti outlined recommended sources for the development of African theology, he identifies the Bible as the primary “pillar” and the theology of the older churches, especially Christian tradition in Europe, as the second. However, it is the third and fourth pillars which metaphorically allow the resources of Africa’s aquifers — her religiosity — to emerge and engage with the Christian faith. Mbiti’s third pillar is the traditional African world which must be taken seriously since “it is within the traditional thought-forms and religious concerns that our peoples live and try to assimilate Christian teaching.”²⁶ His fourth pillar is the living experience of the church, or the actual life of African Christian communities reflected in their diverse forms of oral expression: worship, testimonies, sermons, prayers, blessings, rituals, etc. — all of which illuminate African Christian spirituality in dynamic expression.

Mbiti’s second major conviction is based on his extensive research of over five hundred African societies, in particular their names for God and attributes describing him, with his theological conviction that God is one. He concludes:

I have no doubt whatsoever that God the Father of our Lord Jesus

²³ John Mbiti, “African Indigenous Culture in Relation to Evangelism and Church Development,” 86.

²⁴ The phrase is Kwame Bediako’s, in his *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa*, 310.

²⁵ John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, 229.

²⁶ John S. Mbiti, “Some African Concepts of Christology,” 52.

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Christ is the same God who for thousands of years has been known and worshiped in various ways within the religious life of African peoples. He is known by various names, and there are innumerable attributes about him which are largely identical or close to biblical attributes about God.²⁷

However, far from equating the biblical revelation of God with the knowledge of God derived from African religion, Mbiti states categorically:

African Religion reflects God's witness among African peoples through the ages. It has been a valuable and indispensable lamp on the spiritual path. But however valuable this lamp has been, it cannot be made a substitute for the eternal Gospel which is like the sun that brilliantly illuminates that path. Yet it is a crucial stepping-stone towards that ultimate light. . . . The Gospel has come to fulfil and complete African religiosity.²⁸

Third, Mbiti contends that the essence of the gospel is the person of Jesus Christ. He underlines that "the uniqueness of Christianity is in Jesus Christ. He is the stumbling block of all ideologies and religious systems; . . . His own Person is greater than can be contained in a religion or ideology." Mbiti therefore longs for genuine encounter between Africans, with all the riches of their indigenous spirituality, and Jesus Christ, so that their prior religious existence might be transposed to that existence brought about by Christ. In Mbiti's words, "The Gospel enabled people to utter the name of Jesus Christ[,] . . . that final and completing element that crowns their traditional religiosity and brings its flickering light to full brilliance. . . . Without Him, [i.e., Jesus Christ], the meaning of our religiosity is incomplete."

African Christian spirituality, then, may be interpreted as the inner springs of African believers' cultural identity and religiosity welling up within to deepen their understanding and experience of life in Christ. Mbiti insists that the gospel is not a set of beliefs and practices, but a way of life in which Jesus brings "the whole [person], . . . [one's] total existence, into a deep and intimate relationship with God the Father."²⁹ Although Mbiti does not employ the phrase, "African Christian spirituality," his writings are replete with the call for African followers of Christ to "drink from their own wells," to adapt the well-known phrase from Gustavo Gutiérrez.³⁰ Mbiti is adamant that "African traditional religiosity can become an enrichment for Christian presence in Africa."³¹

²⁷ John Mbiti, "On the Article of John W. Kinney: A Comment," 68. This theological assumption remains contested, particularly among some evangelical scholars.

²⁸ John S. Mbiti, "Christianity and African Religion," 313.

²⁹ John S. Mbiti "Christianity and East African Culture and Religion," 4.

³⁰ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*.

³¹ John S. Mbiti, "Christianity and Traditional Religions in Africa," 153.

Wells of African Christian Spirituality

Since spirituality encompasses every dimension of life, this essay reflects on a few aspects of Christian spirituality that may be enhanced by the deep, life-giving aquifers of African religiosity. The primary well drawn from is prayer, which Mbiti emphasizes as “the most intense expression of African spirituality”³² and “the windows that open into people’s deepest spirituality.”³³ While prayer is undoubtedly a cultural universal, Mbiti emphasizes that “praying has always been the core of African religion.”³⁴ In *The Prayers of African Religion* (1976), he collects and studies three hundred prayers from across the continent, most of which date from before Christianity penetrated deeply into the interior of Africa. As Kwame Bediako (1945–2008) observes, “The merit of this work lies in its character as a theological interpretation of the prayers used in African pre-Christian religious life, which transforms a work of compilation into a major account and presentation of African spirituality.”³⁵

Mbiti summarizes key elements of indigenous spirituality reflected in these prayers under the following headings: (a) holiness, purity, and cleanliness of heart; (b) humility, as “absolutely essential” in being “a posture of spiritual surrender”;³⁶ (c) faith, trust, and confidence in the spiritual realm; (d) peace — a comprehensive peace encompassing individuals, the community, society, and nature — as the final end of prayer; (e) love, care, and gentleness; (f) praise, thanksgiving and joy; (g) blessings; and (h) spiritual wrestling with evil, including “moral evil, suffering, sickness, misfortunes, death, sorrow, separation, broken relationships, witchcraft, infertility, and so on.”³⁷ Mbiti explains that “in traditional life, African peoples understand and practice prayer as a natural form of relating to spiritual realities,” expressing “anxieties and gratitude, “fears and hopes,” “confidence and assurance,” “faith and intimacy.”³⁸ He then notes,

But people do not spend time theorizing about prayer, or analysing its academic meaning, or its form and structure. Praying is living spiritually just as walking or sleeping is living physically. Just as you live, so you pray, as an integral part of being a human being.³⁹

Having brought to light the primacy and richness of prayer in African religiosity, Mbiti points out that African Christians have inherited the traditions

³² John S. Mbiti, *The Prayers of African Religion*, 1.

³³ Mbiti, “Christianity and African Religion,” 312.

³⁴ Mbiti, *The Prayers of African Religion*, 2.

³⁵ Kwame Bediako, “John Mbiti’s Contribution to African Theology,” 377.

³⁶ John S. Mbiti, *Prayer and Spirituality in African Religion*, 9.

³⁷ Mbiti, *Prayer and Spirituality in African Religion*, 13.

³⁸ Mbiti, *Bible and Theology*, 72.

³⁹ Mbiti, *Bible and Theology*, 72.

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of both prayer in African religion and in biblical revelation, which are largely congruent in his estimation. As these two prayer traditions coalesce in the lives of African Christians, Mbiti highlights the interchange between them in animating African Christian spirituality.

Certainly, Christians build upon the foundation of African religiosity, "aided by the biblical revelation and faith in Jesus Christ."⁴⁰ Here Mbiti outlines new and distinctive contributions that the Christian faith offers, most obviously in the practice of praying in the name of Jesus. While traditional African prayers invoke and appeal to God, the use of God's name in these does not carry the type of authority that Jesus demonstrated and taught his followers. Mbiti underlines that for African Christians, the name of Jesus is not simply a distant, historical name but rather "a living experience" as "he is mediated to them first and foremost in and through prayer."⁴¹ Drawing upon the well of African religiosity, "African Christians are reinvesting the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth with the authority, the power, the force, the promise, the protection, the dynamism which it had in New Testament times. This is an extremely important christological emphasis in Christian prayer, at least as Africans are experiencing and promoting it."⁴²

Other aspects of newness arising from Christian prayer include confession of wrongdoing, requesting forgiveness, and seeking absolution, said to be very rare in African religion.⁴³ In addition, there is further emphasis on praying personally in Christianity, as well as corporately. Moreover, Mbiti explains, it is rare in traditional African practice for someone to request prayer for another person, whereas prayer requests are common practice within African Christianity. And significantly, in contrast to prayer in African religions, Mbiti highlights "the ecumenicity of prayer" in Christianity in that believers pray across boundaries of race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, and denomination.⁴⁴

Conversely, certain aspects of prayer in African religiosity potentially enhance prayer traditions within mission-planted churches in Africa. For example, women as well as men are priests in many African religions and there is no sex discrimination in performing religious functions including prayer.⁴⁵ Mbiti lamented that many churches in Africa have withheld leadership positions from women, a prohibition he hoped would change. Nonetheless, even if

⁴⁰ Mbiti, *Bible and Theology*, 88.

⁴¹ Mbiti, *Bible and Theology*, 77.

⁴² Mbiti, *Bible and Theology*, 77–78.

⁴³ Mbiti, *The Prayers of African Religion*, 131.

⁴⁴ Mbiti, *Bible and Theology*, 88.

⁴⁵ Mbiti, *Prayer and Spirituality in African Religion*, 3. Gender discrimination in many mission churches has contributed to the prevalence of women-founded, women-led independent churches.

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women in these churches do not pray publicly in church services, he underlined their freedom and spiritual force in praying with their families and women's groups.

Another aspect of prayer in African religiosity that enlivens African Christian spirituality lies in its relatively heightened awareness of spiritual realities. Mbiti observes, "Out of their traditional African background, Christians are sensitizing the church greatly to invisible and spiritual realities which have generally been forgotten or suppressed in the more technologically-oriented churches of the North."⁴⁶ In the interplay between African worldviews and the Christian faith, prayer affirms Jesus Christ as Lord over the principalities and powers and over any spiritual forces affecting people, thus making the ministry of healing prayer vitally important to evangelism and discipleship within African Christianity.

While far from exhaustive, this consideration of prayer within the coalescence of African religion and Christianity brings to light certain resources within African religiosity for vitalizing African Christian spirituality. Mbiti observes that millions of spontaneous prayers are uttered throughout Africa each day and each week. With very few of them recorded, their theological content cannot be ascertained precisely. Yet, Mbiti concludes, such prayers are, nevertheless, the bulwark of Christian spirituality in African circles; and they are the theological utterances by means of which Christians lift up their own beings towards God in private and public worship. They are based on scriptural passages, promises, insights and people's experiences; and others are based on the riches of African religiosity.⁴⁷

He therefore urges the Church to draw upon crucial elements in the prayers of African religion, "to show people that by becoming Christian their prayer spirituality is fulfilled and enriched by the Gospel."⁴⁸

A second wellspring of African religiosity that flows into African Christian spirituality is a worldview which reflects "a unified cosmic system" or "a sacramental universe" in which "there is no sharp dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual."⁴⁹ As Mbiti explains, "Because traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life."⁵⁰ He continues that wherever Africans

⁴⁶ Mbiti, *Bible and Theology*, 76.

⁴⁷ Mbiti, "Cattle Are Born with Ears, Their Horns Grow Later," 24.

⁴⁸ Mbiti, "Christianity and African Religion," 312.

⁴⁹ Harold Turner, "The Primal Religions of the World and their Study," 32.

⁵⁰ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2.

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are, there is their religion, whether in the fields, the beer party or funeral ceremony, the examination room at school or in the house of parliament. So intertwined are the physical and spiritual realms that “in effect the two worlds converge in the lives and experiences of the people.”⁵¹ Examples include a farmer dedicating seeds before sowing, a fisherman seeking permission from the river to fish, or a traveller entrusting personal safety to the spiritual realm. Mbiti explains,

In this way, . . . [humans are] treading on a path in which the physical and the spiritual intermingle. The prayers that [they] offer are the threads which interweave the two realms and [humans are], *ipso facto*, . . . priest[s] of the universe around [them], rubbing the physical against the spiritual and the spiritual against the physical.⁵²

In striking contrast to this unified worldview, Mbiti tells the story of an African who studied theology overseas, learning several biblical and European languages and eventually returning home with excess luggage containing works by major Western theologians. As his family and friends gather to celebrate his return, he struggles to speak his own language with them. Suddenly his older sister shrieks and falls to the floor; he rushes to her and urgently calls for them to take her to the hospital. The others are stunned, reminding him that the nearest hospital is fifty miles away with few buses that go there. The chief tells him, “You have been studying theology overseas for 10 years. Now help your sister. She is troubled by the spirit of her great aunt.”⁵³ He carefully checks the index of Rudolf Bultmann’s work to read about spirit possession in the New Testament and promptly insists that his sister is not possessed, for “Bultmann has demythologized demon possession.”⁵⁴

While Mbiti makes clear that the story is entirely fictional, it graphically conveys key challenges in the interplay between African Christianity and Western Christianity which, on account of the European Enlightenment, tends to erect a dichotomy between the natural and supernatural, or the physical and spiritual realms. Moreover, studies show the enduring impact of this ‘enchanted’ world as a predominant aspect of African Christianity today. Peter Nyende writes,

There seems to be a revival, relatively speaking, of the traditional African worldview, contrary to the expectations that economic and social modernization following on the worldview of the European Enlightenment would eliminate it. This African worldview, in which we have a constant interaction of the physical and spiritual

⁵¹ Mbiti, *Prayer and Spirituality in African Religion*, 2.

⁵² Mbiti, *The Prayers of African Religion*, 68.

⁵³ Mbiti, “Theological Impotence and the Universality of the Church,” 7–8.

⁵⁴ Mbiti, “Theological Impotence,” 8.

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worlds, with the latter perceived to be heavily influencing the former, is a crucial part of the context of Christianity in Africa.⁵⁵ Consequently, this distinguishing feature of African religiosity feeds into African Christian spirituality, with potentially deepening and possibly distressing effects that call for careful discernment from biblical perspectives.

A third wellspring of African religiosity that enhances African Christian spirituality is its deeply communal orientation. In contrast to the strong individualism characteristic of Western Christianity, African religiosity is grounded in communal existence: "To be human is to belong to the whole community."⁵⁶ Mbiti's dictum is well-known: "The individual can only say: 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am'. This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of [humanity]."⁵⁷ This notion is affirmed by other African scholars such as Laurenti Magesa (1946–2022), who writes, "Full personhood or humanity is made possible first and foremost by inter-subjectivity, meaning *insertion* into, connectivity to, and interaction within a community."⁵⁸ Magesa acknowledges the critique against Mbiti and others for romanticizing Africa's communalism at the expense of individualism's rightful place. However, he believes that the criticism is overdone and strives for an appropriate balance between the two, citing P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux: "The good life for an individual is conceived of as coinciding with the good life of the community, and a person's choice is highly or lowly ranked [that is, seen as moral or immoral] as it contributes to or detracts from the common good."⁵⁹

Implications of this aspect of African religiosity for African Christian spirituality are manifold. Mbiti laments,

Another example where African religiosity would have lent itself readily in Church development is its communality and corporateness. African Religion and social life lay great emphasis on communal welfare, values, concerns, and kinship, both horizontally and vertically (to include the departed). On the whole evangelism has presented Christianity on an individualist basis, making individualistic appeals, and the development of the Church has tended to ignore the communality dimensions of the Church's existence and concerns.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Peter Nyende, "An Aspect of the Character of Christianity in Africa," 43.

⁵⁶ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2.

⁵⁷ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 108–109.

⁵⁸ Laurenti Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred? African Spirituality*, 46; emphasis original.

⁵⁹ P. H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux, eds., *The African Philosophy Reader*, 276.; cited in Magesa, *What Is Not Sacred?*, 47; inserted text is Magesa's.

⁶⁰ Mbiti, "African Indigenous Culture," 86.

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However, he notes that this oversight was beginning to be remedied, and certainly the vitality of African church life reflects many aspects of this feature of African Christian spirituality — in worship, ecclesiology, discipleship, service, and mission. etc.

Two features of African communal life that flow into African Christian spirituality are noteworthy. The first is the scope of the community in African understanding, which encompasses the living, the departed, and the unborn. Moreover, the well-being of the community is inextricably bound with the well-being of creation, so that “African Church life should lead the way, in exploring Christ’s salvation as being not only personal, but also communal, corporate and cosmic.”⁶¹

A second feature is the emphasis within African religion on celebrating life, marking key events in life and in the agricultural season with joyous religious activities. Mbiti comments, “If traditional life filled these moments with celebration and festivals, the Church should also fill these events with jubilation.”⁶² Certainly Mbiti’s call is borne out in more recent reflections on African Christian spirituality. For example, Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator (b. 1967) states that its most significant aspect lies in being “a spirituality of life; it is a celebration of life in all its dimensions.”⁶³ Even funerals are usually celebratory in marking the deceased’s transition from this life to the next. Orobator further notes that worship, praise, and celebration form important elements of this spirituality as “Africans love to celebrate and express their faith in song and dance.”⁶⁴ Indeed, a Western observer notes that African Christian spirituality “is a deep and lively spirituality for all who have the privilege of meeting it.”⁶⁵

For all the resources that African religiosity offers to African Christian spirituality, like the aquifers that hold impurities needing treatment to ensure drinkable water, so too, African wellsprings require testing to ensure clarity in Christian belief and practice. Mbiti clearly acknowledges that “within our culture, there are elements that may obscure the preaching or elucidation of the Gospel,” which must be discerned and overcome by the power of the gospel.⁶⁶ This is undoubtedly a task for the entire African Church to undertake, not a single individual. Nonetheless, Mbiti has been critiqued for not adequately addressing certain aspects of African culture in light of the gospel. For example, despite his early call for re-examining culture and leadership regarding “such

⁶¹ Mbiti, “Christianity and Culture in Africa,” 277.

⁶² Mbiti, “Christianity and African Religion,” 311–312.

⁶³ Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 144.

⁶⁴ Orobator, *Theology Brewed*, 148.

⁶⁵ Holt, “Spiritualities of the Twentieth Century,” 316.

⁶⁶ Mbiti, “Christianity and Culture in Africa,” 279.

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issues as hierarchy, respect, authority, human rights, role and dignity of women and children, etc.,⁶⁷ he rarely addresses the plight of women in traditional African culture. For all his contributions in recovering African culture through proverbs, stories, and sayings, etc., he neglects the many cultural expressions that denigrate women. Furthermore, Esther Mombo (b. 1957) laments not only that “there is little about women and theology” in Mbiti’s works, but also that he did not engage with the theology of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.⁶⁸ Given the significance of the Circle since its founding in 1989, Mbiti might well have enriched his own reflections on African Christian spirituality through interacting with them.

Even more significantly, Mercy Amba Oduyoye (b. 1934), the mother of African theology and the founder of the Circle, incisively critiques Mbiti’s treatment of marriage and procreation within traditional African cultures. In brief, Mbiti states that “for African peoples, marriage is the focus of existence,” that “without procreation marriage is incomplete,” and that “everybody, therefore, must get married and bear children” as a religious and ontological duty.⁶⁹ The stipulated reason: to ensure a person becomes immortalised by having offspring to remember one after death, so that one’s existence is not extinguished. Surely if there are aspects of African religio-culture that must be evaluated, judged, and transformed by the gospel, as Mbiti advocates,⁷⁰ these fundamental beliefs must be among them. Hence Oduyoye questions Mbiti’s assumption about “the necessity of linking immortality to procreation.”⁷¹ Instead, she posits “Christian immortality . . . as identity with and in Christ,” which does not require marriage or physical reproduction.⁷² She and other theologians address additional aspects of African religio-cultures that are harmful to women, thereby demonstrating the need for certain elements of African religiosity to be purified by the gospel.

Conclusion

While Mbiti’s contributions to the study of African religion, philosophy, and Christian theology are extensive and well-documented, viewing his work through the lens of African Christian spirituality further illuminates the significance of his scholarship. As early as 1980, he upheld the final communiqué from the conference of African theologians in Ghana, 1977: “The God of history speaks to all peoples in particular ways. In Africa the traditional

⁶⁷ Mbiti, “Christianity and Culture in Africa,” 282.

⁶⁸ Esther Mombo, “Reflection on John S. Mbiti,” 421.

⁶⁹ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 133–134.

⁷⁰ Mbiti, “Christianity and Culture in Africa,” 281.

⁷¹ Mercy A. Oduyoye, “A Critique of Mbiti’s View on Love and Marriage in Africa,” 348.

⁷² Oduyoye, “A Critique of Mbiti’s View,” 347.

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religions are a major source for the study of the African experience of God. The beliefs and practices of the traditional religions can enrich Christian theology and spirituality.”⁷³ He devoted his lifetime to demonstrating this conviction by elucidating African religiosity in relation to Christian faith. In sum, he concludes,

African religiosity has indeed been a preparation for the gospel. It has provided the religious groundwork, religious vocabulary, religious insights, religious aspirations and direction for the gospel to find a hearing and an acceptance among African peoples. . . . Jesus Christ . . . colors the experience of Christians.⁷⁴

Like the vast aquifers bringing life to African landscapes, African religiosity vitalizes African Christian spirituality through spiritual wells like prayer, holistic worldviews integrating the physical and spiritual realms, and the communal and celebratory dimensions of life. With appropriate discernment of African religiosity in light of the gospel, these resources can quench the spiritual thirst not only of African believers, but also followers of Jesus throughout the world who seek to deepen their understanding and experience of Christian spirituality. For as Glen Scorgie points out,

Christianity has become a global religion. Consequently, no serious conversation about Christian spirituality can remain merely Western or otherwise parochially bounded, but now must include diverse and insightful voices from around the world. The globalization of Christianity also means that Christian spirituality is acquiring new faces as it becomes contextualized into various cultures.⁷⁵

May we all drink from the wellsprings of African Christian spirituality, as one source through which Jesus offers an “artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life.”

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⁷³ Cited in Mbiti, “The Encounter of Christian Faith and African Religion,” 819.

⁷⁴ Mbiti, “On the Article of John W. Kinney,” 68.

⁷⁵ Glen G. Scorgie, “Overview of Christian Spirituality,” 29.

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