

Lesson 6

Traditional African Worldview

African Bank Slogan

“You are a person because of others”

African greeting

“I am well if you are well.”

Animist proverb

“If you follow the old people, you will not get bitten by the dog.”

I. What is the _____ African Worldview?

A. Traditional African Worldview is a form of Animism.

B. The Traditional African Worldview is a worldview that is not very coherent, cogent and systematic.

II. What are the Worldview themes of the Traditional African Worldview?

A. The cosmos – what is reality?

1. God is unknowable and inaccessible.

Eugene Rubingh, Sons of Tiv

“In the beginning Aondo dwelt near the earth and personally watched over it. One day however, as a woman was preparing food by pounding yams in her mortar, she struck her pestle against Aondo, and he in hurt anger left the earth and now dwells in the heavens. Indeed the word for sky is Aondo, and the clouds are his spots.”

2. The _____ pervades all areas of life.
3. The system is based on the mediation of spirits and ancestors.

“Human beings exist in a complex and dangerous world of seen and unseen powers and beings. Nature is influenced by these various spiritual beings and forces, which are capricious and able to disturb the balance of nature. Humans must therefore ally themselves with the forces of good, which cause the annual cycle of nature to bring forth its harvest. Failure to do so would disturb the balance of nature and bring disaster upon the whole tribe.” (David Burnett).

4. Water spirits are important in the life of the people.
5. Sacred sites and cursed areas are also significant and many superstitions surround them.

B. Knowing – what is truth?

1. Truth itself is not highly valued, but knowledge is passed on from spirits and ancestors, tradition and oral teaching.
 - Any questioning of tradition is frowned on and inquisitiveness is deemed unnecessary and incorrect.
2. Natural actions are perceived as having a spiritual cause e.g. crop failure, barrenness, sickness are all seen as having spiritual causes.
 - To reveal the cause requires divination and a trip to the sangoma to reveal and reverse the problem. Revelation may also come in the form of dreams.
3. As this worldview does not value rationality and fears the world it makes no effort to investigate it and thus is weak in education.

C. Self – what is human?

1. Humans are very much at the mercy of the world.
2. Much of animism is based on attempting to _____ this dangerous system.

“Because people live in a capricious world of hostile spirits they must follow the well-worn paths of their ancestors. People in traditional societies have learned to live in the world, and have passed on their wisdom in terms of mythology and rituals...An important aspect of knowing how to live within the hostile world is to know how to avoid disturbing the spirits, and how to manipulate spiritual powers. The cultic prohibitions (taboos) passed on by the ancestors provide rules that regulate human behaviours so as to avoid upsetting the spirits. If the equilibrium within the world is disturbed it may be restored by rituals that often involve blood sacrifices. In these ways, the non-material reality can be manipulated and influenced by means of religion and magic.” (David Burnett).

3. An important part of life is covenants made with the land or spirits that are affected by blood sacrifices. Every aspect of life reinforces these covenants e.g. birth, manhood, marriage etc.

D. Community – what is society?

“I am because we are.”

Seydou Badian (Minister of Development in Bamako, Mali under Modibo Keita)ⁱ

“Man is born, grows up, evolves, and fulfils his potential only within a social body that enriches him and that he is also supposed to enrich. Outside this concept, outside this logic, there is no man.”

Seydou Badian (Minister of Development in Bamako, Mali under Modibo Keita)ⁱⁱ

“The group is the reality, the sovereign good, the refuge, the citadel without which the individual would be at risk. Man moves, evolves, actualises himself with the group. Absolute refusal – schismatic refusal – is heresy. It fragments the group, undermining and damning the individual: it is a sort of suicide.

1. Again the African worldview contrasts with many Western worldviews in that the individual is subsumed in the group.
2. Family obligations are also pre-eminent and more important than individual preferences.
3. Having many _____ is the norm in African communities because continuity of the family is vital and many children ensure this.
4. Some people have described African culture as a culture of death as it is the 'living dead' (ancestors) that are important, not the living.
5. Moral choices are often made based on fear of banishment from the in-group rather than individual conscience.

“The clan or family is always right. To disagree with the family is an act of betrayal. The ultimate punishment for disobedience to the family or tribe is expulsion from the community. Without social ties the person loses all value and becomes a non-person. “Outsider” on the other hand, is generally regarded as hostile, and has no rights. It is acceptable to steal from them, or injure them, provided no repercussions come upon the tribe.” (David Burnett).

E. Time – How do we measure the procession of life?

“For the African, time has two dimensions. It has a past and a present, but virtually no future. Mbiti describes time as moving backwards rather than forwards with people focusing on what has taken place rather than what they wish to occur in the future. It is like travelling on a train with one’s back to the engine. One can see the space about the carriage, and the hills that have been passed, but the future is not perceived.” (David Burnett).

1. Many African languages have no future tense as they focus on a past golden age rather than facing the future.
2. The Traditional African Worldview is resistant to change as it values tradition not innovation. For this reason it is fracturing and losing youth to other worldviews.

F. Values – what is good?

1. Tradition is good and breaking with tradition is bad.
2. This worldview is based on appeasement.

G. Destiny – how will my life and the world end?

Xam oral traditionⁱⁱⁱ

“Sun, Moon, and Stars, many stars are in heaven; there are whole clans of people – men, women, and children – long since become stars.”

Barago Diop (former ambassador in Tunis, novelist)^{iv}

“Those who are dead are not dead – they are not under the earth. They are in the tree that shakes. They are in the water that flows. They are in the water that is still. They are in the hut; they are in the crowd. The dead are not dead.”

Sobonfu Somé (of West Africa)^v

“The spirit of the ancestor has the capacity to see not only into the invisible spirit world but also into this world, and it serves as our eyes on both sides.”

- An individual sees his life as not ending with death but transitioning to the shadowy world of the ‘living dead’ where they become one of the ancestors. There is no concept of heaven or hell.
- This worldview also has no clear concept of the end of the world – life will continue as cycles as seasons return in never ending rhythms. The spirits and ancestors are more in control of life than anything else.

III. How does the Traditional African Worldview apply to the seven areas of life?

A. Family

Sobonfu Somé^{vi}

“The family in Africa is always extended. You would never refer to your cousin as ‘cousin’, because that would be an insult. So your cousins are your sisters and brothers. Your nieces are your children. Your uncles are your fathers. Your aunts are your mothers. Children are also encouraged to call other people outside the family mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers.”

1. Ancestralism _____ a strong sense of family because this is the power base of the religion.
2. Ancestors are former family members that have now died, so elderly family members are the next in line to become godlike ancestors and thus the place of the family and elders is very important.
3. The power flow is from the father of a family, to the chief of a tribe, to the king of the nation.
4. However, although, there is a strong sense of family, it is one of male domination, with women having little status.

B. Religion

1. The Traditional African Worldview focuses on appeasing the controlling spirits through sacrifices and rituals.
2. The Traditional African Worldview views the church in one of two ways: 1) It is assimilated into the syncretistic African faith, or 2) It is considered an enemy of African religion.
3. The _____ is Biblical Christianity is by no means a “white man’s Gospel,” but it certainly challenges many traditional African cultural practises, which are based on idolatry (just as it challenged paganism in Europe earlier).
4. African nationalists, especially those wounded through racism perpetrated via colonialism, Apartheid and liberation struggles, are sometimes against the church.

C. State

1. Traditional African Worldview views the state, firstly as a Western concept, but has now mostly adopted it.
2. However, tribal boundaries are still very important and in some cases more important than state boundaries, especially where sacred sites are found.
3. This combined with a Communistic totalitarianism (most African leaders were trained by Communists) has led to severe abuses of power in Africa.

D. Economics

Jacques Nanéma (lecturer in University of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso)^{vii}

“It is more through its spirituality, its works of the spirit and art rather than its economic prowess that a community shows its eminence, its nobility.”

1. Because of the lack of education and therefore technological progress in the Traditional African Worldview, economics was very simple and based on a barter system.
2. Another important concept to understand is the support of witchdoctors through offerings for services rendered.
3. Another facet of their view of economics is that prosperity is the result of the ancestors blessing you.

E. Education

1. There is very little education in this worldview.
2. To the traditional African, the only education that was necessary was 1) how to relate to the _____ and 2) how to live life – especially how to make a living. Both of these forms of learning are done through personal apprenticeship, especially by fathers and extended family.

F. Law

1. This is derived from the ancestors and spirits where they do speak, from tradition and from the chief and his elders. However, there is no fixed source of law, such as God, the Bible, or even a constitution.
2. The law is _____ and subject to the circumstances.

G. Art

Léopold Sédar Senghor (African writer and novelist, politician – Senegal)^{viii}

“Art is a magical means through which the essence of the vital force from the ancestors is called up and made to empower the performers and the spectators.”

1. Africa has a long history of art, especially in the areas of music, dance, drama and sculpture. However, the art is very much a reflection of worship.
2. Art is one of the redemptive gifts that God has given Africa, and the church must reclaim this area for the Kingdom of God.

IV. Attitudes, Moods & Emotions.

Three dominant attitudes and emotions stemming from this worldview are fear, passivity and fatalism.

V. The Positive Features of the Traditional African Worldview.

The benefits to society of this worldview include:

1. An openness and receptivity to the spirit realm.
2. Humility and _____.
3. Good hospitality.
4. Respect for elders.
5. Concern for the community and not just self.
6. Strong family links with the extended family.

Francis Schaeffer

“With a Biblical Christian Worldview, Africa would lead the world.”

ⁱ SEYDOU BADIAN quoted in DANIELLE & OLIVIER FÖLLMI. African Wisdom 365 Days. 2005. Thames & Hudson Ltd

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^{vi} SOBONFU SOME quoted in DANIELLE & OLIVIER FÖLLMI. African Wisdom 365 Days. 2005. Thames & Hudson Ltd

^{vii} JACQUES NANEMA quoted in DANIELLE & OLIVIER FÖLLMI. African Wisdom 365 Days. 2005. Thames & Hudson Ltd

^{viii} LEOPOLD SEDAR SENGHOR quoted in DANIELLE & OLIVIER FÖLLMI. African Wisdom 365 Days. 2005. Thames & Hudson Ltd