

# The Role of African Traditional Religion in the Formulation of Policies in Civil and Political Leadership in Africa

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## Abstract

This paper aims at investigating the role of the African Traditional Religion (ATR) which is the indigenous religion of the African people prior to the coming of the new religions such as Christianity and Islam in the formulation of policies in civil and political leadership in Africa. Leadership is the biggest challenge facing the African continent today. The African society has experienced a tremendous growth yet the post-independence Africa has not produced leaders who are able to formulate policies to meet the rising needs of the African people. Africa is thus in desperate situation due to vices such as corruption, poverty, diseases, economic melt down, tribal animosity, unemployment, refugees, e.t.c. The paper suggests that African leadership should utilize ATR which is the dominant religion in Africa and which greatly influences the lives of many Africans in formulating policies in both civil and political spheres. This way we can address the current situation which Africa unfortunately finds herself.

**Keywords:** Africa, African Traditional Religion, Leadership, Civil and Political Leadership.

## 1. Introduction

The African Traditional Religion (ATR) is the indigenous religion of the African people before the introduction of any other religion on the continent. It is the aggregate of indigenous belief systems and practices which existed in Africa prior to the coming of new religions such as Christianity and Islam, and to which millions of Africans still adhere covertly or overtly. The term “traditional” is used to refer to the technique of cultural transmission, that is, oral tradition – stories, legends, myths, riddles and proverbs – that are used in passing this religion from generation to generation. Beliefs are passed on to posterity through songs, folktales, dances, shrines, and festivals. K. A. Opoku, an African scholar explains that the term “traditional” indicates a fundamentally indigenous value system that it has its own pattern, with its own historical inheritance and tradition from the past (1978 : 9). J.S Mbiti asserts that ATR is found in all aspects of the African people including social, political and economic, and it has been largely responsible for shaping the character and culture of the Africans throughout the centuries (1991: 29-30).

In Africa South of Sahara, ATR is the religion followed by the majority of the African people. Although new religions like Christianity, Islam and others seem to be doing well in Africa where they claim to have many followers; Africans always resort to ATR in the time of crisis. For instance, a survey by Pew Forum on Religion and Public life in 2010 in 19 African countries found that whilst Africans overwhelmingly practice either Christianity or Islam, they extensively incorporate elements of ATR into their daily lives, a clear indication that Africans are followers of ATR before they are followers of other religions ( Nkonge 2014: 49). Vicent Mulago is therefore right to observe that,

A superficial observer might make a mistake of believing that ATR is disappearing, but for anyone who lives in real contact with the Africans, the question does not arise. . . . The future of African Traditional Religions is not at all problematic for our generation. They have their place and play their role at every level of our societies (1991: 128).

Idowu (1967) makes this even clearer by his assertion that “ATR is a living religion . . . It is a contemporary living reality”. Although this observation was made more than four decades ago it would be erroneous to think that it is not applicable today. ATR remains a vital force in Africa where it greatly influences and continues to influence the lives of the African people.

Generally speaking, religion provides an encompassing world view to its followers and serves as a rationale for their activities. It then seems to be wide-ragingly considered as a way of life as well as a ‘society’ which aims at a spiritual end upon which the greater society places roles and responsibilities. ATR thus plays a similar role in Africa. Africa has her own culture and beliefs which are deeply depicted in its very strong traditions. The African culture is part of the African indigenous Religion. The African life is so much wrapped in religion, to the extent that some African scholars such as J.S. Mbiti argue that in Africa there is ‘no formal distinction between

the sacred and the secular' ( 1969:2). The whole community faithfully carries out all rites and rituals connected with rites of passage such as birth, naming, initiation, marriage and death. The ceremonies bind and form religious values which govern the family and society. Therefore, traditionally religion guides all activities of the African life be it be social, political or even economic. Thus, in the political sphere, traditional societies have rulers who hold all power and authority, assisted by family heads and a council of elders. These rulers, who ascend to their positions mainly by inheritance, derive their power and authority from God, ancestors or even the spirits. In this regard, Africans believe that their leaders come from God and whatever they do reflect the divine will. It is because of this conviction that the Ameru of Kenya sing that 'Munene aumaga iguru kiri Murungu.' (A leader comes from God). In this paper we want to show that since ATR is a living religion in Africa where it influences numerous aspects of life, it can be quite instrumental in designing policies in civil and political leadership. Nkonge (2012: 229) cites leadership as one of the major challenges facing the African society today. In this Dickson Nkonge is so critical. He says,

The twenty-first century as anticipated has come with numerous challenges, whereby Africa just like the rest of the world is undergoing rapid socio-economic and political changes, yet the leaders ( both in the church and political spheres) are not able to adjust to these changes.

Nkonge's views can be interpreted to mean that African leaders in the political, civil and even religious spheres are unable to formulate policies to effectively address the needs of the rapidly changing African society today. As such there is too much suffering with all kinds of vices including corruption, tribalism, nepotism, poverty, unemployment, ethnic tensions, refugees, insecurity, diseases, illiteracy, hunger, et cetera invading every part of the African continent. Archbishop Desmond Tutu laments that the picture is so bleak that it is as ' if the entire continent was groaning under the curse of Ham and was indeed in all respects the Dark Continent of antiquity' ( Ngara 2004: 5). We suggest in this paper that ATR can provide a solution to this desperate situation in Africa.

The relationship between politics and religion is not just in ATR alone but the Bible (Christians' sacred book) also provides guidance on political issues that a believer ought to master. It records that,

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not terrors to good conduct but to bad. Would you have fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience." (Romans 13:1-7) ESV).

Religion and specifically ATR is the glue that binds and unify a society, nation or a group of people. This paper attempts to discuss the role of ATR in the civil and political leadership by examining the various traditional systems as well as the impact that ATR has had over civil and political matters.

## 2. Leadership Defined

For us to explain how ATR can be employed in formulating leadership policies in Africa, it is preferable to commence by defining the term 'leadership'. The term 'leadership' may mean different things to many people. Nkonge (2008: 271) defines leadership as the 'ability to influence others', a view which is also shared by Elliston (1988:21) who sees leadership as the process of influence. Yukl (1981:3) explains this even further by denoting that leadership is simply a process of influence taking place in a group setting. In most cases this influence is systematically carried out by one person called the 'leader of the group'. This implies that whenever we think of 'leadership', there must be a group. John Haggai prefers to employ the term 'discipline' when defining leadership to show that discipline is very essential in any group. He then defines leadership as 'the discipline of deliberately expecting special influence within a group to move it toward goals of beneficial permanence that fulfill the group's real needs (1986:4). The biggest challenge facing many African nations today is lack of focused leaders who can influence them (nations) toward goals of beneficial permanence. Thus Africans' real needs remain unfulfilled. It can therefore be deduced that African leaders in civil, political or even ecclesial spheres lack the 'discipline' to move their groups/societies forward. This may explain why although many African leaders at independence in 1960s promised to fight the three main foes of humanity namely poverty, ignorance and disease, these vices continue to threaten the survival of many African nations.

Some people prefer to use the term 'relationship' to define leadership rather than influence. Perhaps they feel that that the word relationship is more appealing since it signifies the bond that exists between the group and the leader. The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines relationship as 'the state of being connected'. This implies that in the leadership situation, the leader and the group are closely connected to each other. They are connected physically, psychologically, spiritually e.t.c. A leader who is not connected to his/her group is bound to fail. Since many African leaders in civil, political and ecclesial realms have failed to get this 'connection' they have resulted to force, intimidation and dictatorship to induce it. But Lord Acton admonishes us by his sturdy

assertion that ‘Power tends to corrupt, absolute power corrupts absolutely’ (1887). Richard Hutcheson explains this further by defining leadership as, ‘. . . a function of the relationship between persons, those in charge and those who voluntarily follow. Leadership shapes and is shaped by those who follow’ (1981:158). This implies that leadership is a dynamic relationship by which the leader and followers influence each other within a specific situation. Nkonge (2008:273) elucidates that leadership is thus a triangular relationship whose elements are the leader, the followers and the situation. All these elements are equally important. If there are no people to lead, then there will be no leader. Leaders are leaders only when there are people to lead (followers). In view of this Gathaka (2005: 86) defines leadership simply as ‘the service to the people’. This then implies that in good leadership, all policies are geared towards service to the people.

### **3. The Role of ATR in Civil and Political Leadership**

According to Magesa, a person’s religious commitment and identity are certainly indicated by his/her public profession to observe certain laws and perform certain rites and rituals. Morality or ethics is the very nature of religion. The morality of the African people demand and enforces their emotional and behavioral commitment and so gives direction to their lives and world-view (1997: 10-14). African religious systems are a complete system. There is no section of African life which is not touched by religion. People practice it differently in different places, but there is enough commonality to call it singular. J.S. Mbiti captures the life of the African person when he says that ‘Africans are notoriously religious’ (1969:1). These opening words of Professor Mbiti’s classic work, *African Religions and Philosophy*, are just as notorious as the African religiosity they purport to describe and they still correspond to most people’s idea of the African reality. The words paint a picture of a holistic life in which the religious is inseparable from the other spheres of life for an African. As such civil and political leadership are part and parcel of the African’s religious life. Since politics is generally supposed to be concerned with the distribution of power in society, it cannot be distinct from religion which defines all forms of power in the society and regulates them.

#### **3.1 ATR and Politics**

ATR is very holistic since it impacts every area of the African traditional life, whether in the city or village, in the office or in the farm, in the building of a structure or in marriage. Professor Mbiti while talking about the African religious heritage denotes that, ‘Religion is part of the cultural heritage. It has dominated the thinking of African people to such an extent that it has shaped their cultures, social life, political organizations and economic activities (1969:10). This implies that no aspect of the African life remains untouched by religion. Opoku (1978:1) explains this more explicitly by remarking that,

Religion therefore becomes the root of the African culture and it is the determining principle of the African life. It is no exaggeration, therefore to say that in traditional Africa, religion is life and life, religion. Africans are engaged in religion in whatever they do whether be it farming, fishing or hunting; or simply eating, drinking or travelling, Religion gives meaning and significance to their lives, both in this world and the next.

According to Ellis and Haar (2007: 385), politics in Africa cannot be fully understood without reference to religious ideas that are widely shared in societies south of the Sahara. They observe that the religious ideas held by so many Africans – hundreds of millions of people – need to be taken seriously, and should be considered in their own terms in the first instance. African ideas about religion and its relation to politics are important not only for understanding Africa, but may have the potential to inform our understanding of religion and politics more generally, in a world that is presently characterized by new alignments of these two fundamental elements. G.A. Theodorson defines politics as ‘the process of creating public policy through influencing or controlling powers of authority’ (1969:303). This means that politics is about power and authority (Pobee, 1986: 25), but in the African situation, this power and authority cannot not be exercised in absence of religion which directs all aspects of life. Mbiti (1969:177-8) informs that in Africa, rulers are not simply political heads: they are mystical and religious heads, the divine symbol of their people’s health and welfare. They are divine or sacral rulers, the shadow or reflection of God’s rule in the universe. As such Africans highly regard them. In some communities, they are given highly elevated positions and titles such as ‘saviour’, ‘protector’, ‘child of God’, ‘Lord of earth and life’ e.t.c. This shows the close correlation that exists between religion and politics in the African mind.

All evidence points to the fact that most Africans understand and interpret the world mainly through the prism of religion. In other words, religion, whatever else it may be, is a mode of apprehending reality (Ellis and Haar, 2007: 387). Religion remains a prism through which many people view the world, those who believe in religion, spiritual power constitutes real and effective power. Thus, religion and politics become two facets of power that are in constant interaction (Ellis and Haar, 2007: 390).

Religion and politics have been linked throughout African history. In all known pre-colonial African political systems and states, public religious performance played an important role. In many societies of pre-colonial Africa, rulers were endowed with sacred duties such as causing rain to fall and crops to grow, and charged with upholding the cosmic order generally. In such societies any major disorder in the invisible sphere was held to

have a probable or even an inevitable effect on the physical fortunes of the community of believers. By the same token, any major event, such as war, a famine or an untimely death, was believed to have its root cause in the invisible world. Even in the so-called societies of old Africa, where village chiefs or councils of elders were responsible for the routine administration of government, real public authority actually lay with ritual experts who mediated between the visible and invisible worlds (Ellis and Haar, 1998: 187).

There is nothing peculiar to Africa about politicians seeking to make political capital out of displays of religious allegiance or respect. Politicians in almost every part of the world sometimes visit places of worship, especially during election campaigns, for the purpose of winning votes. This does not mean that they are necessarily believers themselves. In Africa, however, unlike in Europe or North America, there is reason to believe that political elites do not use religion solely as a means of increasing their base of popular support but that in many cases they also believe that access to the spiritual world is a vital resource in the constant struggle to secure advantage over their rivals in political in-fighting. This can be done by conventional techniques of communication with the spirit world, including the use of sacrifices and protective objects or through divination (Ellis and Haar, 1998: 188).

Religion and politics are both systems of ordering the power inherent in human society, in the process of which elements of authority and hierarchy tend to emerge. As such, religion and politics are closely related. Thus policies in political spheres can be formulated using religious ideologies. In this we suggest that ATR, which has remained a 'living religion' of the African people, can play a significant role in saving the African nations and organizations, some of which are at the verge of collapsing due to lack of clear-cut policies. The Overview of Economic and Social Conditions in Africa in 2012 reported that due to poor policy making in Africa, there are considerable downside risks, including political instability, social unrest in some countries, weak global economic performance and high uncertainty. Nico Riley bewails that in Africa today, poverty is a reality, corruption exists and people continue to suffer from countless ills and diseases. One of the causes for the worsening conditions in the African nations is the poor social and economic status brought about by poor planning and lack of good policies. For instance, it is clear that these nations continue to get worse due to corruption, yet many of them lack robust policies to fight the vice (2006). What possible lessons can we learn from the traditional African setting? What can we learn from ATR as we make policies in civil and political leadership in Africa today?

### **3.1.1 Political Organizations in Africa**

According to Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, there are three types of political organizations in African societies. These are, first, very small societies in which people are linked or united to one another by ties of kinship; secondly, the society in lineage structures is the framework of the political system and thirdly, societies in which an administrative organization is the framework of the political structures (1940:6-7).

Magesa (1997) argues that the three political systems suggested by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard have a moral and ethical intent which is the basis of reason for their existence. A brief outline of the structures and how they work is detailed below:

#### ***i) Political Organization based on Kinship***

The Kung people of the Kalahari Desert Basin of Botswana exemplify this type of political organization. The men hunt wild game while the women gather vegetables, roots and nuts. A person has access to hunting and gathering rights on the particular side of the waterhole according to his or her band affiliation. This band, which is based exclusively on kinship ties, is the basic political entity for the Kung. The headman's position is hereditary according to the patrilinear line. Leadership among the Kung depends heavily on a man's character, his hunting prowess, and especially his ability to focus on people's opinions. He has no coercive or administrative power, but only the authority of persuasion. He functions as an arbiter in quarrels, as a focal point in discussions of plans, a comfort to the bereaved and strength for those in doubt (Magesa, 1997:218-219).

#### ***ii) Political Organization based on Lineage and Clan***

This system is common among the Tallensi of Ghana. The society is organized by lineage political structures. The primary political unit is the settlement, which is conceived of in a social sense rather than in a territorial sense. A settlement is seen first as a clan each tracing its ancestry to a common remembered ancestor. The primary leadership structure of the Tallensi is constituted by the head of the lineage called the Kpeem, who claims only moral and ritual authority over the lineage. The chiefs are selected from male descendants of the founder of the Chiefship. Every significant action of the chief must have the blessing of the earth. The chiefs have mystical powers over rains. The political power of the Tallensi is gained through the power of ritual, particularly in the area of ancestor veneration (Magesa, 1997:221).

#### ***iii) Political Organization based on Administrative Authority***

This system of organization is found among the Banyoro in Uganda. All political authority stems from the king who appoints his territorial chiefs to office and their authority down to the lowest level. In the system, the most important qualification for chiefship is loyalty to the king. What the king expects of the chief, the chief expects of the sub-chief and so on. This is the nature of a hierarchical organization and it influences even the family in



which the relationship is one of superiority. It is one of “marked inequality: fathers rule their children and children fear their fathers”. A son should address his father as “sir” or my “master” – the very same terms that he would use to a chief. For the Banyoro, the system of kinship is the means to fullness of life for the community. The king’s personal shortcomings and his strengths are not only his own but those of the whole population (Magesa, 1997: 222-224).

All the three systems of political organization discussed above exemplify a system of leadership which is well organized. The roles of the leaders are clearly outlined and the relationship between the leader and the followers is clear. In all the three systems, leadership is not a one-man show, but a collective responsibility where decisions and policies are made through consultations. The biggest challenge facing African nations today is that at independence they adopted an oppressive and exploitative colonial system of government which, many African leaders do not want to let go due to the power and authority they enjoy. This is well illustrated by what Professor Jurgens Hendriks refers to as the ‘Kampala Silence’. Jurgens says that in August 2013, he was the plenary speaker at a Theological Education in Africa (TEA) conference in Kampala, Uganda. The conference had about 350 people. When he asked them ‘What are the main characteristics of true Christian leadership?’ he got many answers but none satisfied him. Upon his explanation to them that leadership’s most important characteristic is the giving away of power, their reaction was apparent disbelief, a dumbfounded silence. When he asked them if they knew of an African President who gave his power away after just one term in office – there was laughter and only the name ‘Mandela’ rang out (2014: 1-3). This is how serious the situation is in Africa. The inability to share and give power is one of the scourges of African leadership. From the African political systems discussed above, it is clear that leadership in the traditional African society was a shared responsibility. We thus can borrow this aspect of ATR in our current civil and political leadership in Africa.

#### **4. ATR and Development**

ATR is a holistic religion since it embraces all aspects of human life. Henry Okullu defines development as the transformation of one thing into another. It means to multiply, to create many out of few e.t.c (1984:98). The very nature of human cultures presupposes development. J.N.K. Mugambi defines culture as the visible achievement of human beings in their endeavour to improve their past experience. The activities associated with culture involve the modification of the natural and social environment (1996:28). Generally speaking, all cultures are involved with this modification. This implies that cultures are involved in development. The nineteenth century Christian missionaries had a negative attitude towards African culture and religion. Most of them believed that the African cultural and religious backgrounds had nothing to contribute to the development of Africa. They therefore strived to spread their culture and religion to the African countries (Mugambi, 2002:142). As they did this, they totally disregarded ATR which Nkonge (2014: 49) refers to as the foundation of African religiosity. Since ATR is part of the African culture, and as we have said culture presupposes development, then ATR is a religion of development. There is therefore no way we can ignore it if we are thinking of developing Africa. Any policies we may make of developing Africa should put into consideration ATR which greatly influences the thinking and lives of the African people.

Ellis and Haar (2007:396) give us an important advice to consider as we look at the relationship between religion and development in Africa. They say that,

In investigating the connection between religion and development, the first requirement should be to understand what religious believers are saying and thinking about the nature of society and its defects, and what ideas they have about its possible improvement. It is sometimes argued that the emphasis on deliverance found in neo-Pentecostalism diminishes individuals’ sense of personal responsibility for their own financial circumstances, as does the rhetoric of miracles. The religious views of charismatic – the argument goes – do nothing to encourage productivity or a work ethos. The spiritualization of politics can thus play into the hands of the worst dictators, who are able to use religion as a channel of political support.

The realization that development has an inescapable cultural dimension has, over time, helped to mellow some of the rigid and even dogmatic theories of modernization that were current in the middle of the last century. This is not to suggest the existence of fixed, development-friendly or development-unfriendly cultures, but only to underline that political choices affecting development contain a cultural dimension (Ellis and Haar, 2007:396).

ATR plays a significant role here in that the indigenous institutions and epistemologies can potentially adapt themselves to a wide variety of purposes, and that development is indeed most likely where the fundamental technical skills or qualities required have been incorporated into local social patterns. It is undeniable that Africa is indeed threatened by some massively destructive forces that can be quite precisely identified, including disease, debt and underinvestment. At the same time, however, many Africans also consider these conditions in a spirit idiom, seeing themselves as beset by evil forces that have a known material cause but that also have a spiritual dimension. The roots of this conviction that economic and political powers have a dangerous spiritual aspect, which Africans can no longer control, can be located in the continent’s history. Ultimately, this perceived

lack of control dates from the colonization and evangelization of the nineteenth and twentieth century that regarded indigenous spiritual forces as harmful, backward or demonic (Ellis and Haar, 2007: 397-398). But as we have already said, development of Africa will not be possible without giving prominence to Africa's religious cosmology.

## 5. Conclusion

Leadership remains the biggest challenge facing the African continent today. The African society has grown tremendously and continues to experience rapid change in all realms be it be political, social, economic, religious and et cetera. With all this, the post-independence Africa has not been able to produce effective civil and political leaders who are able to devise good policies to enhance them address the rapidly emerging needs of the African people. As a result the entire continent is groaning in pain and despair with all kinds of evil having made Africa their home. What is however encouraging is the fact that in spite of all these challenges, Africans have maintained their solid religious stance. All religions even the very new ones seem to be flourishing in Africa. What we are suggesting in this paper is that the African leadership should take advantage of the African religiosity to address the challenges facing the continent today. As they formulate various policies in both civil and spheres they should make use of ATR which is the dominant religion in Africa and which continues to influence the lives of many Africans to date. The paper has demonstrated the great role that ATR has played and continues to play in the civil and political leadership of the society. ATR has defined moral values in society and created benchmarks for ethics and in so doing it has become the light and salt to the civil and political leadership in the African society. Religion has for a long time shown direction in the society and added value to the lives of people in the society. The State (charged with political responsibility) is part of the larger society to which religions, ATR included have responsibility.

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