

THE AFRICAN LEADERSHIP LETTER

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EVALUATING TRADITIONAL PRACTICES FROM A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

Every people group is identified by many things including culture, language and traditional practices. These traditional practices have been fashioned over the years by the collective experiences of the group. It explains among other things how the people understand their relationship to God and their natural environment, how they understand their origins, life and death and whether or not there is life after death. These beliefs which are passed down from generation to generation govern the ethical and moral behavior of a people. A typical example would be that sometime ago it was believed that the earth was flat. It took the mathematician Galileo to prove that it was not possible. Now, it goes without question that the world indeed is spherical. This paper will attempt to evaluate how traditional practices may differ from the biblical worldview to enable people make choices regarding faith and belief.

It is said that when people want to acquire the skill of being able to detect counterfeits, they study the original document to know it thoroughly. It is then a matter of comparing everything to its original. The Apostle Paul says in Romans chapter 5:13 that “before the law was given sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law.” In order words for a people who do not have the Bible and its perspectives in their daily lives, the perfect law of God is of no effect to them. This

surely explains why the Gospel must be preached to every people group and tribe so they may have opportunity to order their lives accordingly. When people have the Bible then they have a basis for evaluating their beliefs because then they have the inerrant word of God to compare with.

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Examples from Ghana

Many tribes within Ghana including my own the Asantes believe in an unbroken relationship between the living members of a family and those who have died and are living in the spirit world. It is claimed that those family members may influence the affairs of the living so must be consulted in making important decisions. This is done by offering food or alcoholic drink and prayers to the dead.

What does the Bible say about what happens when people die?

Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment. (Heb.9:27) The Bible states plainly that the only thing that comes after death is judgment. There is no indication

that the dead can in any way influence or interfere in the affairs of the living. It is therefore an affront to biblical principles to assume that dead people can somehow remotely control the living.

Marriage

Among many tribes in Ghana a man can marry more than one wife. Indeed the number of wives a man has may indicate the extent of his wealth and social standing. Although in modern Ghana more men choose to marry just one wife the practice of polygamy is accepted traditionally. Polygamy is widespread especially in the rural areas where because many men are involved in farming activities, they need more hands. I know that many people will look at some Old Testament characters like Solomon and David and try to justify taking on multiple wives but what really is the perspective of the Bible on this issue?

The original intent of God was and still is for one man and one woman to be united in marriage and become one flesh. (Gen.2:24) (Matt.19:4-6) The fact that in the past God overlooked certain sins of the people does not indicate

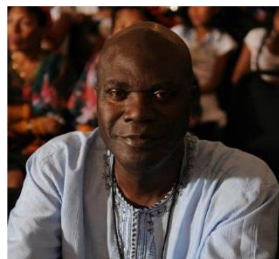
acquiescence on the part of God for those sins. The scriptures forcefully condemn such practices and the Christian ought to know the difference between what is culture or tradition and the biblical perspective.

Conclusions

From the two examples cited one could see that not all traditional practices are compatible with biblical perspectives. Christians ought to know what the Bible says about different issues so they can spot falsehood when they are confronted with it.

This piece is not to suggest in any way that all traditional practices are out of sync with the scriptures but just to remind Christians to be aware of the disparities that could exist.

Christians ought to know what the Bible says about different issues so they can spot falsehood when they are confronted with it.



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# How Biblical is the African Understanding of the Spirit World?

## Introduction

I want to admit that this is a difficult issue to tackle or wrestle with. What we cannot deny is the fact that it is practically difficult or unbelievable for a modern person in black Africa today, or a westerner, or any European, to believe that one can live or survive from the menacing disease of tropical Africa without a clinic or hospital. But the fact remains true that, before Europeans came to the “Dark Continent” of black Africa to introduce civilization, black Africans depended upon herbal medicines which colonial whites and missionaries condemned. These medicines helped them heal all kinds of diseases such as: malaria, TB, measles, running stomach, leprosy, headache, toothache and many others too many to mention.

Black Africans long before whites brought the Gospel of Jesus Christ, knew that a human being does not finish or end at physical death. They had beliefs that there was life after death, and that, there were contacts between the living and the dead. Richard J. Gehman in his book, *African Tradition Religion*, call these spirits the living dead.” He says, “Death is, therefore, the necessary door through which the living pass in order to take up the inevitable role as the living-dead”(2000.54).

This simply meant that the living knew that when they would die they would join the dead relatives.

## 1. African Beliefs in Spirits

Africans were not taught by missionaries that a human being does not end at physical death like animals, birds and many other creatures, but is transferred to an invisible world. They believed that the dead visited the living siblings and

relatives, even friends. It was not always that the visits of the dead were dangerous or harmful to the living. Some visits brought blessings to the living. Because of this belief, the Tonga tribe of the Southern Province of Zambia, has a custom in which the name of the dead person is given to one of the surviving siblings. This is because, if this is not done, the spirit of the dead will be looming around looking where it will rest, and when this happens another member of the family will die. The giving of the dead person’s name to the living person is known as “*Muzimo*.” The muzimo is the spirit of the dead which visits the living.

When one member of the family fell sick, the elders of the family always identified or rather diagnosed the cause that came as result of the living-dead or by witchcraft. Then they could perform the necessary ritual duties to appease the spirits. To ignore this cause the spirit could take the living, meaning, the victim can die.

The African knew that, a human being does not finish at physical death. There were many cases where the deceased were seen in their usual physical bodies. When I was a pastor in Livingstone {1971 – 1996}, a true story was told of a taxi-driver who picked a nice girl at night. As they chatted in the vehicle, the girl introduced herself who she was and mentioned her name. On the way the girl asked for a jacket from the taxi-driver because she felt cold. The driver gave her his jacket and continued driving up to the home in Maramba Compound where she was going.

Upon arrival she quickly came out of the vehicle and promised the driver that she was going to bring money from the house to pay for booking him, but she did not return. It was midnight, so

the driver thought that he would come in the following morning to get both the money and his jacket since he had known the home.

The following morning the driver went to check his customer who did not pay and also took his jacket. He arrived at the home and all the household members were present. He introduced himself that he was the driver who brought one of the female family members at that home at midnight. They asked him the name of that girl; he mentioned it. The driver was astonished because the response to that was tears from some family members. Finally, he was told that the person he mentioned was dead and buried a few days ago. The driver did not believe that because he brought a human being the previous night who even asked for a jacket from him, therefore, he wanted his money and a jacket. They told him that before they would pay him they would take him to the graveyard and show him the grave. He agreed and he drove them to the cemetery, eager to prove the unbelievable story. They parked the vehicle outside the cemetery and walked to the fresh grave. When they approached the grave they saw the jacket on top of the grave and they asked him whether that was his jacket. The driver recognized his jacket but could not pick it up because he became very afraid. He was told that the customer who hired him at night was no longer living at the home she was brought to. When they wanted to pay him, the driver refused to receive the money because he was afraid that he had carried a dead girl, he just drove back home in great fear. A few days later the driver became sick and died.

Another story was told of a man who was working in one of the towns. After working for some years he took leave and went home. He came to his home town by train and he walked on foot for some kilometers from the rail line to his home in a rural area. Before reaching home he had to cross a stream. Therefore, when he

came to the stream he found a young man he knew very well taking a bath. He was very happy to see a home mate and also the young man was equally very happy to see him. They spent quite a good time chatting. The man from town asked the young man if they could travel together for home so that they would continue chatting, but the young man declined and promised to meet him later in the village. Therefore, the man continued his trip until he arrived at home. Family members and all other people were very happy to receive him. After greetings, the man told the people that gathered around him that he was delayed by the young man whom he found taking a bath in the nearby stream and mentioned his name. No-one answered him - he just saw that people stopped talking and were just looking at each other with total consternation. He later asked why people behaved like that. They told him that, that was the news they wanted to inform him, actually. They thought he had come to mourn him. The man said, What? Mourning who? They told him that, the young man he found bathing and spent time chatting with, had died the previous week, they even took him to the grave. The man was very surprised and got afraid.

This belief is still very alive, particularly, in the death of a one couple. It was and still is, strongly believed that, if the surviving spouse is not cleansed the dead spouse would haunt the living spouse. Therefore, if the deceased is the husband, to avoid the dead to visit and have sex with the surviving spouse, the brother or any very close to the deceased would be chosen by the elders to have sex with the surviving wife of the deceased. If it is the wife that died the same method was followed. This evil practice is still in existence among the heathen. But, with the menacing HIV/AIDS pandemic, in some cases, sexual intercourse has been discouraged or avoided all together and the use of herbal medicine has been employed. This is because even when siblings were used to cleanse the

surviving spouse, herbal medicines also existed and used. Sexual intercourse was happening due to lust and desire to marry the surviving spouse.

## 2. What Does The Bible Teach About The Spirit World?

The Bible does not deny that the dead are still living somewhere and can be contacted. The first missionaries did not bother to find out or learn how those things worked among black population in relation to the teaching of the Bible. When a white missionary and colonialist failed to understand how these things worked they simply condemned and nullified the existence of spirits in this world.

It is incredible that such incidents are found in the Holy Bible. The first incidence of this is found in the issue of King Saul and the prophet Samuel. This is a difficult episode to fully grasp, but it clearly states that, the medium woman was able to bring the dead Samuel back to this world. In the first place, King Saul stated that he wanted to consult the dead when God refused to answer him. He knew that, if God refused the dead would not refuse. Literally, the dead prophet Samuel asked the living King Saul, “Why have you disturbed me by calling me back” (1 Sam. 28:15).

The dead prophet and the living King Saul had a chat in which the dead explained again to King Saul that God had taken away the kingdom from Saul because of disobedience. (1Sam.28:1-25) This Jewish episode sounds very African in essence. That is exactly what non-Christian Africans do when they want to find out the cause for the death of their beloved.

However, the Bible is very clear concerning the relationship between the living and the dead that there must be no contact between them.

It must also be understood that Africans

believed that long before the Bible came, but when the Bible came to teach about the destiny of Christians after death, this brought a conflict of interest in their spiritual world. That when a Christian dies the soul and spirit go to be with the Lord and not join spirits of the world. But it is very clear in Matthew 22:32 that the Bible tells us that God is not for the dead people but for the living people.

The Bible is very clear concerning the relationship between the living and the dead that there must be no contact between them.

While the spirit world is real, God has given a standard by which Christians must live. He does not allow his people to be connected with the dead. The chosen nation of Israel is our example to emulate and follow. When they were at the plains of Moab Moses presented his final address, warning them about the evil practices of the inhabitants of the Canaanites. Among those having to do with consulting the dead we read, “When you arrive in the land the Lord your God is giving you, be careful not to imitate the detestable customs of the nation living there. For example, never sacrifice your own son or daughter as burnt offering. And do not let your people practice fortune-telling or sorcery or allow them to interpret omens, or engage in witchcraft, or cast spells, or function as mediums or psychics, or call forth the spirits of the dead. Anyone who does these things is an object of horror and disgust to the Lord.... The people you are about to displace consult with sorcerers and fortune-tellers, but the Lord your God is forbids you to do such things” (Deut.18:9-14).

In nutshell, I would say that Africans, indeed, lived that life in total ignorance of God's existence. Though there are still many who live

in this culture but in a different perspective because if you ask them, they will tell you that they know God. Or, probably, at first they were Christians and on the way they were led astray

by circumstances and environment and turned around and say, there is no God. But those of the ancient days were living in that life style out of ignorance.



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## LEADERSHIP SKILLS FOR WORKING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE

Leadership is a combination of the required skills and behavior patterns to influence people to pursue and achieve common goals. It requires the leader's total transformation of attitude and behavior. Fundamental to this transformational attitude and behavior is love, a kind of love that demonstrates the willingness of the leader to lay his life for his people (Jn. 15:13). Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that the leader will receive a similar transformational behavior pattern from the people he leads. However a loving leader might act, there will always be difficult people to deal with. When it became apparent that Joseph will become a leader over his family, his brothers chose to become difficult by hating him and plotting to kill him. Moses led a difficult nation, Israel. Jesus came to provide leadership for the reconciliation of man to God; unfortunately he was resisted and rejected by

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his own people. Two of his disciples disowned him by betraying him (Judas) and denying him (Peter). In all of these circumstances the said leaders moved forward and excelled in their leadership career.

Today God continues to raise leaders who are bound to face similar difficult people and situations. This work will examine the nature of these difficult people and the skills that might be adopted to deal with them. When this is achieved leaders will be able to face difficult people with positive minds knowing that they have the required skills to deal with them.

Moses is one of the most successful leaders in the Bible. God used him as an instrument to deliver Israel from the hands of Pharaoh. They were coming from a state of slavery to a land that flows with milk and honey (Ex. 3:8). It will be expected that Israel will show a sense of humility and obedience to God regardless of hazards they might encounter on the way. Events show that Israel proved to be a difficult nation particularly so during the leadership of



Moses. My Assistant National Superintendent (ANS) shared with me his experience in dealing with a difficult assistant pastor at the headquarters Church. I am going to use this scenario to bring out the experiences of both Moses and my Assistant National Superintendent, to discover the nature and skills required by Christians to deal with difficult people.

The Nature of Difficult People: Difficult people in any leadership exhibit some of the following characters:

**Failure to Recognize the Authority of the Leader (EX. 2:4):** As a grown up man Moses visited and identified himself with the misery of his people. Though not fully instituted as a leader, Moses had begun to demonstrate his leadership prowess by defending his people. While he succeeded in killing an Egyptian taskmaster in the first instance, his leadership was questioned while trying to judge between two Hebrew boys, 'who made you a prince and judge over us...?' (Ex. 2:4). In frustration Moses fled to Midian where he grew to full potential as a leader.

Failure to recognize the authority of any leader is fundamental to identifying difficult people in any institution. When my ANS became senior pastor of the headquarters Church the assistant pastor practically refused to recognize and accept his authority. The three years they worked together were marred by crisis.

**Rejecting the Authority of the Leader (Ex. 5:21; 6:9):** The question as to who made Moses a prince and judge over Israel remained unanswered for considerable period of time. After being commissioned by God, Moses had his first encounter with Pharaoh, he asked for the release of Israel. Pharaoh's reaction increased Israel's daily burden (Ex. 5:15-16). In turn Israel confronted Moses and Aaron and they interpreted their undue intervention as

putting a sword on the servants of Pharaoh to kill them (Ex. 5:21). Israel was furious; they rejected their authority by refusing to listen to their advice (Ex. 6:9).

People who fail to recognize the legitimacy of any leader will reject his authority. Rejecting one's authority is refusing to take orders from the leader. My ANS had this bitter encounter with his assistant pastor, he persistently refused to take orders from his senior pastor. When he chooses to perform any function he will always do it his own way ignoring the instruction of his senior pastor.

**Rebellious attitude:** the general aim of any of difficult people is to break down the leader. This can be achieved through rebellion. Rebellion is active opposition to authority. Israel demonstrated rebellion on several circumstances: during the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex. 14:10-12), when they became hungry and thirsty (Ex. 16:1-3; 17:1-3), when they receive the report of the spies (Num. 14:1-4) etc. Israel's rebellion was characterized by murmuring, stoning, and choosing a leader who will lead them back to Egypt.

Rebellion as an active opposition to authority is being demonstrated by many difficult people today. My experience as National Superintendent shows that some pastors in rebellion will refuse postings to another church. Over the years some pastors leave and form their own ministry.

**Complaining:** Moses' experience with Israel was that of persistent expression of dissatisfaction of food, water and security. When he married an Ethiopian woman, Aaron and Miriam seriously criticized him and questioned God's exclusive dealing with him (Num. 12:1-3). In complaining they will always blame Moses and God for bringing them to a place that they and their children and wives might perish. These were

difficult moments for Moses. In fact it was during one of these complaints that Moses was not able to conduct himself well before the Lord consequently he was debarred from entering the Promise Land.

Difficult people always complain about many things in the institution and organization they belong to. They complain about the actions and goals of the leader, logistics and conditions of service. When my Assistant National Superintendent conducted the first communion service his assistant pastor criticized him for allowing the congregation to stand rather than kneeling before the altar. The complaint was so bitter that the Local Board of Administration had to intervene.

**Conspiracy (Num. 16:1-3):** As Moses continued to be a powerful leader Korah and other 250 leaders in the congregation conspired against Moses who was making himself very powerful claiming that he alone was not holy. God forestalled the conspiracy.

Conspiracy is the use of tactics by people to remove leaders from their position. Many have succeeded in doing so. Such people meet in secret locations scheming how to overthrow their leader.

Moses was known as one of the most successful leaders in Bible history. In the midst of his success were these challenges exhibited by his people whom he laid his life by confronting Pharaoh despite his poor track record in Egypt. What was the secret behind Moses' success? As a successful leader he adopted the following skills which can be adopted by leaders today. To understand the skills to lead difficult people, is first to discover the character of the leader.

**Character of the leader:** Moses was able to succeed in his career as a leader because of who he was, he was faithful (Num. 12:7), loved his

people and defended their course (Ex2:11-12), he was humble (Num. 12:3), selfless and logical (Num. 14:11-19) and respected (Ex. 33:8-10). To be a successful leader particularly so to deal with difficult people, a leader must be able demonstrate these qualities.

**Confidence building:** Some people are difficult because they cannot endure life threatening situations such as lack of food, water and insecurity. This was the situation Israel was exposed to. They were traveling through a wilderness to a land that was already occupied by giants. In the midst of this insecurity and uncertainty Israel became a rebellious nation. In the midst of insecurity and uncertainty Moses instilled confidence in the people. He constantly told the people not to be afraid but rather to have confidence in the Lord who is able to deliver and provide their needs. When Israel was in despair, Moses was there to inspire them to have confidence in the Lord. This was reechoed by Joshua when Israel a giant nation saw themselves as grasshoppers before the giants of Canaan.

The leader must endeavor to build confidence in the life of those he is leading

When people become difficult because of fear of any nature, the leader must endeavor to build confidence in the life of those he is leading. A leader is a person who has a goal to achieve together with the people he leads. When the people are in despair the leader should help the people to turn the obstacle into bread (Num. 14:9).

**Consultation and not confrontation:** Each time Moses was confronted by his people he will hardly confront them but rather he consults God for his direction and guidance. When Moses, for



example, was confronted by Israel for putting a sword on the servants of Pharaoh, he never confronted them but rather went back to God and explained to him his disappointment; God gave his directions (Ex. 6:1-8). Moses knew who gave him the mandate; when he encountered a problem he went to that person. Moses had powerful consultation and listening skills.

As a leader do not always confront difficult people. When they rise up against you, go to the appropriate authorities and seek their advice. The Church for example is structured in such a way that we have respective boards that are the highest governing bodies. When you have a problem with any of your subjects, go to the respective board to help you address the situation. Do not attempt to personalize organizational issues, you will miss the mark.

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**Intercession** (Num. 14:11-20): People can sometimes be difficult to higher authorities. In the case of Israel they were difficult towards God whom they accused on several occasion of bringing them to perish in the wilderness where there were no graves. In response God always threatened to wipe them off and make Moses into a great nation. Moses in logical argument with God always succeeded in averting God's wrath against them, *'then the Lord said I have pardon, according to your word'* (v20).

While I was serving as the National Secretary between 2005 and 2009 I mediated between some pastors and the then National Superintendent on crucial matters. Sometimes I had to risk my position for the good of these pastors. I was doing this to build a better relationship between these pastors and their leader. Today many

pastors are still in the ministry because of my intervention. Prayer is a key word. Be on your knees for difficult people to be transformed by the Lord.

**Conversation (Nu. 16:1-40).** When Korah and the 120 leaders of the congregation of Israel rebelled against Moses and Aaron, Moses generated a conversation between Korah and himself to ensure that they present themselves before the Lord so that He will make his final judgment on this matter. Moses never fought for himself but waited on the Lord.

As a leader, do not ever confront difficult people, they will succeed in distracting you from your goal. Where the atmosphere is favorable engage them in dialogue sessions and open the eyes of their mind to the truth. Sometimes people are difficult because of ignorance; dialogue session will open their minds and redirect them to the general goal of the institution.

**Castigation:** When Israel deliberately broke the covenant at Mount Sinai (Ex. 32:1-6), God resolved to destroy them all (Ex. 32:10). Though Moses interceded on their behalf, yet he meted out punishment against them by allowing 300 people to be killed on that day. Moses became intolerant to the rebellious attitude of Korah and his men and hence allowed God to take disciplinary action against them. God was ever determined to punish Israel for their sins; He ensured that all the spies who gave the bad report about the land of Canaan died immediately and those who took part in the rebellion died subsequently.

Castigating difficult people is a necessary tool for leaders (but as a last option when the entire above mentioned are explored and failed). This can range from rebuke to termination of service. *The Discipline of the Wesleyan Church of Sierra Leone* makes provision for punishing difficult

people including pastors, workers and members of the Church. This helps to preserve the integrity of the Church and the Christian faith.

### CONCLUSION

Leadership is challenging for all leaders. The greatest challenge comes from the nature of people being led. Difficult people pose a big challenge to any leadership; they exhibit the

following behavior patterns: not recognizing and accepting the authority of the leader, complaining, rebellion, and conspiracy. Moses had to endure such people and succeeded in his leadership by adopting skills such as confidence building, consultation, conversation, intercession and castigation. I pray that God's grace will be sufficient for all in leadership positions to be able to endure and succeed.



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