

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISM IN AFRICA: THE ENTANGLEMENT DEBATE

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Abstract

Seventh-day Adventism in Africa finds itself in a complex context of maintaining its identity within traditional African religious systems. This identity struggle is partly linked to the failure of early Adventist missionaries who brought the gospel to Africa without much knowledge of African traditions. Some missionaries believed that no religious heritage existed prior to their arrival in Africa. Such an approach to missionary activities created a setback in the process of contextualizing the Christian message in the African continent. This article reflects on the identity crisis in African Seventh-day Adventism today by analysing the belief systems of African Traditional Religion and how and why many Seventh-day Adventists in Africa still find themselves entangled in traditions long after their conversion to the Adventist faith. The article presents some recommendations on how the Seventh-day Adventist Church can address the identity crisis in the denomination in Africa.

Keywords: Seventh-day Adventism in Africa, African Traditional Religion, Adventist missionaries in Africa, contextualization

1. Introduction

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Africa is one of the Christian denominations that struggle to contain the influence of traditions and African Tra-

ditional Religion (ATR) on their members.¹ Africans who join Adventism often come from families devoted to traditional religious systems which the white missionaries literally combatted. African traditions permeate the psyche of Africans to the point that when they accept Christianity they are unable to relinquish their traditional beliefs for the adoption of the demands of their new found faith. They struggle to brazenly and absolutely conform to the tenets of their new faith.² Perhaps, what brought about this unfortunate development is not simply the attractive benefit that traditions offer, but the failure of the white missionaries to clearly define the point of divergence and convergence between African religious beliefs and Christian dogmas. When the missionaries came, they presumably concluded that Africans had nothing in the “religions” of their traditions upon which they could build the new faith. Nehemiah M. Nyaundi argues that “missionary misunderstanding of ATR viewed the religion as actually non-religion.”³ When Africans accepted Christianity, they soon woke up and found themselves within the strands of Christianity and African traditions.⁴ Converts to Christianity more often reverted “to the traditional ways of dealing with existential concerns.”⁵ Adventist missionaries, just like other Christian missionaries, “approached ATR from a common European attitude that viewed native religions as savage, heathen, satanic, and animistic, among other ne-

- 1 Important studies on African Traditional Religion (ATR) include: Jacob K. Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Afe Adogame, Ezra Chitando, and Bolaji Bateye, eds., *African Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa: Emerging Trends, Indigenous Spirituality and the Interface with Other World Religions, Essays in Honour of Jacob Kehinde Olupona* (London: Routledge, 2016); Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM, 1973); John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1969); John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970); John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1975).
- 2 Nehemiah M. Nyaundi, “Adventists and African Traditional Religion.” Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=5I81&highlight=Adventists|and|African|Traditional|Religion>.
- 3 Nyaundi, “Adventists and African,” <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=5I81&highlight=Adventists|and|African|Traditional|Religion>. ATR is an abbreviation for African traditional religions.
- 4 Nyaundi, “Adventists and African,” <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=5I81&highlight=Adventists|and|African|Traditional|Religion>. See also, Benjamin C. Ray, *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual and Community* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 3.
- 5 Nyaundi, “Adventists and African,” <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=5I81&highlight=Adventists|and|African|Traditional|Religion>.

gative terms.”⁶ In such circumstances, the converts to Christianity (Adventism) had no manual from where they could draw insights to creatively and effectively shun the attractions from African traditions. They nevertheless expressed their genuine attention to abide with the promises of Christianity and its benefits for human existence.

2. Major Aspects of African Traditional Religions

In the following pages, I will briefly discuss major aspects of ATRs (within the setting of Sub-Saharan Africa) and their belief systems. After this first section, I will examine how the Seventh-day Adventist Church, just like other Christian bodies in the African continent, finds herself in a difficult arithmetic dance as to how to maintain her identity in the midst of competing ideologies from traditions all assuring Africans of salvation here and now.

2.1 Nature of ATR

ATRs are a set of beliefs that cuts across ethnic religions and traditions. These beliefs are preserved through revered traditional practices which include festivals, rituals, and songs. The belief in a higher god does not nullify an allegiance to a lower god and other beings of exceptional traditional significance such as the ancestors. The ATRs compete among themselves in terms of beliefs, but seemingly do not necessarily contradict one another.⁷

While there are various types of African traditional religious beliefs, most of them can be termed animistic. Animism is a belief in spiritual beings that animate the material world. This belief encompasses the activities of mystical powers that influence human beings either by harming them or bringing to them good luck in day-to-day happenings.⁸ Sir Edward Burnett Tylor was the first scholar to survey animistic beliefs with his pioneering study *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Art and Customs* (1871). Generally, animism emphasises the worship of nature, ancestor, and belief in an afterlife. Thus, it can be argued that the

⁶ Nyaundi, “Adventists and African, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=5I-81&highlight=Adventists|and|African|Traditional|Religion>. See also, Nehemiah M. Nyaundi, “African Traditional Religion in Pluralistic Africa: A Case of Relevance, Resilience and Pragmatism,” in *Traditional African Religions in South African Law*, ed. Tom W. Bennett (Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 2011), 16.

⁷ See these valuable studies: Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*; Mbiti, *Concepts of God*; Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*.

⁸ See Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

various religious traditions of Africa are intrinsically linked by animistic beliefs. The belief in spirits and ancestors constitute the most important element of African religion. Gods are usually viewed as self-created; they are spirits that are worshipped by the people.⁹

Ancestor veneration may be considered as central to the worldview of African religious traditions. Ancestors are an integral part of everyday life, and some people even believe that they became powerful supernatural beings with equal powers to the self-created deities. Ancestors are believed to be spirits and therefore occupy a strategic position in the African psyche more than living human beings. They are invested with metaphysical and mysterious powers that give directions to people's lives. They are believed to possess the abilities to bestow either blessings or disease upon their living descendants.¹⁰

2.2 Traditional Medicine

Directly connected to Traditional African Religions is the concept of Traditional African Medicine.¹¹ It is simply understood as a healing method founded on the use of important components of traditional values which include herbal medicine, ecstatic healing, hydrotherapy, spinal manipulation, psychotherapy, and therapeutic occultism. Thus, African Traditional Medicine is divided into two major types: the physical and the metaphysical healings. The first usually benefits from plants, vegetable, animal, and mineral substances as means to administer healing. The second, the metaphysical, is based on some sorts of incantations and prayers with the associations of mysterious forces.¹²

2.3 Practice of Magic and Witchcraft

Another characteristic of ATRs is the practice of magic and witchcraft. These two phenomena constitute some mystical powers that are prevalent in African societies. Magic is based on a two-fold principle referred to as princi-

⁹ See Glenn S. Holland, *Gods in the Desert: Religions of the Ancient Near East* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

¹⁰ Olupona, *African Religions*, 20–38.

¹¹ Karen E. Flint, *Healing Traditions: African Medicine, Cultural Exchange, and Competition in South Africa, 1820–1948* (Scottsville, South Africa: University of Kwazulu Natal Press, 2008).

¹² Isaac Sindiga, Chacha Nyaigotti-Chacha and Mary P. Kanunah, eds., *Traditional Medicine in Africa* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1995).

ple of similarity and the principle of contagion.¹³ According to James Frazer, the principle of similarity is based on the concept of “like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause” while the principle of contagion is based on the idea “that things which have once been in contact with each other continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed.”¹⁴ The principle of the law of similarity and the law of contagion help the magician to produce effects he desires. From the first principle, “the magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it,” while from the second, the magician “infers that whatever he does to a material object will affect equally the person with whom the object was once in contact, whether it formed part of his body or not.”¹⁵ In the African context, the practitioner of the principle of similarity usually is an expert in African Traditional Medicine. He usually “prepares an effigy (image) with cotton wool, mud, wood, or with any other material.”¹⁶

The effigy is subsequently hurt with a knife, thorns, needles, dangerous chemicals, rope, or other weapons. In the end, whatever damage is done to the effigy is expected to harm the enemy whom the effigy represents. If the effigy is destroyed completely, then the life of the individual in question also comes to an end.¹⁷

The principle of contagion on the other hand presupposes that once there has been a contact between things or persons, they can continue to influence each other. According to Frazer, “the most familiar example of Contagious Magic is the magical sympathy which is supposed to exist between a man and any severed portion of his person, as his hair or nails; so that whoever gets possession of human hair or nails may work his will, at any distance, upon the person from whom they were cut.”¹⁸ The magician can also make use of the following items: clothing, footprints on the soil, urine, blood samples, and other related things related to a human body so as to produce an effect on an enemy.

Witchcraft is the invocation of supernatural power to harm people, control events, or cause misfortune to people. Witchcraft, involves the work of

¹³ James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion* (New York: Cosimo Classic, 2005), 11.

¹⁴ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 14.

¹⁵ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 14.

¹⁶ Philemon O. Amanze and J. A. Kayode Makinde, “Mystical Powers and How Some Africans Get Involved,” in *The Church, Culture, and Spirits: Adventism in Africa*, ed. Kwabena Donkor (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2011), 25.

¹⁷ Amanze and Makinde, “Mystical Powers,” 25.

¹⁸ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 34.

wicked individuals who meet at night, commune with the devil, indulge in cannibalism and perform evil acts referred to as black magic in contrast to white magic, which is used for good result such as protection against evil forces, misfortune through the use of charms, amulets, incantations, and cuts in the body among other elements.¹⁹ Thus, magic and witchcraft are both concerned with the intent of producing effects on people through the use of supernatural forces.²⁰

2.4 The Supreme God

ATRs are best described as complex, because they are centred on religious traditions and beliefs of the Africans. Some African Religions have a clear idea of a creator. The Yoruba, for instance, do have a concept of a supreme being, called Olorun or Olodumare. This is the creator of the universe. He is invested with special power by the various deities (Orisa) to create the world and sustain it including those who live in it. The Mouyang in Cameroon do also have a concept of a supreme being who is called Melefit, and is a self-created god with unimaginable omnipotence and omniscience to care for those who worship him and protect them from the misfortune of life.²¹

African cosmologies are characteristic of African spirituality. It is assumed that beliefs and practices inform every facet of human life; as such, religion and mundane life are in a symbiotic relationship. For instance, misfortune is not solely a function of one's inability to achieve one's goal, but also a corollary of a discrepancy between one's social life and the fulfilment of the demands of the ancestors.²²

2.5 ATR and the Abrahamic Religions

Adherents to ATRs in sub-Saharan Africa have been in decline since the coming of Islam and that of Christianity in the early 18th and the beginning

¹⁹ Jacob Olupona, interview by Anthony Chiorazzi, October 6, 2015 at Harvard University, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2015/10/the-spirituality-of-africa/>.

²⁰ For an in-depth discussion on the concept of black magic see Jared L. Miller, "Practice and Perception of Black Magic among the Hittites," *AoF* 37 (2010), 167–85; Happy Baglari, "The Magic Art of Witchcraft and Black Magic," *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications* 5 (2015): 8–13.

²¹ Masfa Jean, "An elder among the Mouyangs in Baka," interview by the author, April 2022.

²² Olupona, *African Religions*, 1–20.

of twentieth century. Islam and Christianity draw their adherents from the ATRs. However, as of today, there are over 100 million adherents of African Traditional Religions in Sub-Saharan Africa alone.²³ Seemingly, the two Abrahamic religions, Islam and Christianity, appear to attract the minds of Africans. While this observation is true, especially viewed from the angle of daily converts to Islam and Christianity, the adherents of these new religions combine in everyday life the practices of ATRs with that of Abrahamic religions to determine their means of survival in the society.²⁴ Thus, Islam and Christianity are accommodated within the context of African culture and belief systems.

The religious demography of Africa shows a close competition between the two Abrahamic religions, as noted earlier. Christianity and Islam, each representing about 40 percent of the African population, are the two largest religions on the continent. ATRs, even though they are extant in almost all of the sub-Saharan Africa, they are mostly very strong in the central and western parts of the continent.²⁵ Countries such as Benin, Togo, and Gabon record large numbers of devotees to African religious traditions.²⁶ Christianity is dominant in the south, while Islam is dominant in the north.

The bottom line then is that Africans who still wholly practice African indigenous religions are only about 10 percent of the African population, a fraction of what it used to be only a century ago, when indigenous religions dominated most of the continent. I should add that without claiming to be full members of indigenous traditions, there are many professed Christians and Muslims who participate in one form or another of indigenous religious rituals and practices. That testifies to the enduring power of indigenous religion and its ability to domesticate Christianity and Islam in modern Africa.²⁷

²³ J. Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African Church History* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2009).

²⁴ Elijah Obinna, "‘Life Is Superior to Wealth?’: Indigenous Healers in African Community, Amasiri, Nigeria," in *African Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa: Emerging Trends, Indigenous Spirituality and the Interface with Other World Religions, Essay in Honour of Jacob Kehinde Olupona*, ed. Afe Adogame, Ezra Chitando, and Bolaji Bateye (London: Routledge, 2016), 135–48.

²⁵ Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa*, 253–60.

²⁶ Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa*, 254–55.

²⁷ Olupona, interview by Anthony Chiorazzi, interview by Anthony Chiorazzi, October 6, 2015 at Harvard University, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2015/10/the-spirituality-of-africa/>.

2.6 ATR and the African Diaspora

ATRs are also spreading around the world. Some developed countries in Western Europe and North America witness the presence of African diaspora religions. The Haitian voodoo, the Yoruba and the Zulu religions have fast spread across the globe.²⁸ African religions have been resilient in the face of exponential growth of Christianity and Islam among Africans in the African continent, as well as in the diaspora because there is sense of beauty in African traditional religious systems that attract the devotees. Africans who have travelled abroad are able to seek spiritual care from healers, charms, talismans, and from men and women who make use of traditional medicine to do more exploit in securing a good fortune.²⁹

Thus, ATRs are now globally seeking to accommodate other religious beliefs from world religions. This is because, apparently, there is no contradiction between African spirituality and other faiths, as long as the devotee is able to secure basic needs to respond to the existential needs. This is one of the reasons why there is a greater sense of revival and rapid global spread of African religions in spite of scientific exploration that questions their promises rooted in supernaturalism. Even among Africans in the western world one is still able to observe that ritual sacrifices and witchcraft beliefs are rampant.

3. Influence of African Traditional Religions on Seventh-day Adventism in Africa

After conversion to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Africans coming from families devoted to African traditional religious systems find themselves still within a system of attraction to their former religious beliefs. Practices from African religions continue to be observable among the converts to the Adventist faith. In most cases, these practices seek to meet existential needs such as protection against witches, invisible enemies, diseases, and the desire for food security. Although there has not been a systematic study that analysed all the attractions from ATRs and their influence on converts to the Adventist faith, there have been several recent significant studies that looked at specific practices. One of the most important studies is the

²⁸ Mambo C. Taan, *Haitian Vodou: An Introduction to Haiti's Indigenous Spiritual Tradition* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn, 2012).

²⁹ Olupona, interview by Anthony Chiorazzi, interview by Anthony Chiorazzi, October 6, 2015 at Harvard University, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2015/10/the-spirituality-of-africa/>.

work edited by Kwabena Donkor titled *The Church, Culture and Spirits: Adventism in Africa* (2011). This is a clear and in-depth study that seeks to respond to a specific problem in African Adventism—the challenge of spiritualistic manifestations such as ancestor worship, witchcraft, divinations, magic, and the rampant influence of practitioners of traditional medicine. This study is a product of collective efforts among the three divisions, namely the West-Central Africa Division, the East-Central Africa Division, and the Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division of Seventh-day Adventists, major hierarchical structures of Seventh-day Adventism’s leadership in Africa, with a two-fold objective. First, the church sought to provide “an Adventist biblical response to these spiritualistic phenomena.” Second, the church sought to formulate practical “guidelines that would assist the church in dealing with spiritualistic manifestation within the African culture.”³⁰ It was during the same timeframe that a set of guidelines was voted in each of the three divisions in Africa as a way to provide a collective response to a cultural phenomenon. One document that is especially significant to be noted is “Spiritualism and the Adventist Church in Africa: Guidelines and Recommendations.”³¹ This document provides the church with a global response to some of the most challenging issues that threaten her identity, especially within the context of African Adventism.

Several other parallel studies provided further insights into understanding and suggesting adequate response to specific practices in the African religions that influence the faith of Adventists in Africa. Most of these studies have been published in two prominent journals: *Asia-Africa Journal of Mission and Ministry* and *The Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*. Among the most relevant papers one can refer to are the following series of publications in 2017: “What Attracts People to Occult and Witchcraft Practices?” by Pardon Mwansa; “The Cosmology of Witchcraft in the African Context: Implications for Mission and Theology,” by Samuel Lumwe; “Witchcraft Accusations: Destroying Family, Community, and Church,” by Boubakar Sanou; and also two important publications by Kelvin Onongha in 2007 and 2012 respectively “African Pentecostalism and Its Relationship to Witchcraft Beliefs and Accusations: Biblical Responses to a Pernicious Problem Confronting the Adventist Church in Africa,” and “The Missiological Dilemma of

³⁰ Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, preface to *The Church, Culture, and Spirits: Adventism in Africa*, ed. Kwabena Donkor (Hagerstown, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2011), ix.

³¹ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, “Spiritualism and the Adventist Church in Africa: Guidelines and Recommendations,” in *The Church, Culture, and Spirits: Adventism in Africa*, ed. Kwabena Donkor (Hagerstown, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2011), 227–39.

Sorcery and Divination to African Christianity.”³² These materials explain ways in which African evil practices such as witchcraft, divination and magic present serious threats to the advancement and maturity of Adventist faith in Africa.

Onongha noted in 2007 that “sorcery and divination present a serious challenge to Christian missions in the African continent.”³³ Onongha outlines three major reasons behind the practice of such spiritualistic manifestations. The first reason is connected to “the niche they fill.” The second one is linked to the “function they perform.” The third reason is related to “the worldview yearnings they satisfy in the lives and experiences of the people.”³⁴ These reasons are attractive to African Christians, including Seventh-day Adventists. Onongha gives an account of a story of a church whose members invited a witchdoctor to perform the rituals of divination to settle a case of sorcery. He writes:

At a pastoral retreat a few years ago, a couple shared the story of a harrowing experience in their ministry. They told how the minister’s wife had been accused of practicing witchcraft. Elders in the area hired the services of a local witchdoctor to confirm their allegations. Fortunately, the witchdoctor absolved the pastor’s wife, but indicted some of the conspirators. However, the minister eventually lost his position in that district and it took several years of pain and anguish before the issue could finally be laid to rest.³⁵

A story of this kind popularizes the patronage of witchdoctors and the practice of divination in African collective mind, and consequently in Christianity.

³² Pardon Mwansa, “What Attracts People to Occult and Witchcraft Practices?” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 13 (2017): 14–19; Samuel Lumwe, “The Cosmology of Witchcraft in the African Context: Implications for Mission and Theology,” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 13 (2017): 83–94; Christopher R. Mwashinga, “Relationship between Social and Economic Status and Witchcraft in Africa,” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 13 (2017): 23–32; Boubakar Sanou, “Witchcraft Accusations: Destroying Family, Community, and Church,” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* (2017): 33–45; Kelvin Onongha, “The Missiological Dilemma of Sorcery and Divination to African Christianity,” *Asia-Africa Journal of Mission and Ministry* 7 (2012): 47–57; Kelvin Onongha, “African Pentecostalism and Its Relationship to Witchcraft Beliefs and Accusations: Biblical Responses to a Pernicious Problem Confronting the Adventist Church in Africa,” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 13 (2017): 45–54.

³³ Onongha, “The Missiological Dilemma,” 47.

³⁴ Onongha, “The Missiological Dilemma,” 47.

³⁵ Onongha, “The Missiological Dilemma,” 48.

Onongha further tells another story where a witchdoctor was invited to a divine church service to make incantations and divination for the identification of witches in Nigeria.³⁶ Similarly, Samuel Lumwe, in his “Cosmology of Witchcraft,” gives a narrative of three events that were linked to the practice of witchcraft in his community in Kenya. His accounts point to the reality of witchcraft and the fatal nature of the attack of witches. Witches eat human flesh; they kill even their close relations to satisfy their desire for human meat.³⁷ They can also cause misfortune in business and school progress. Their actions could also lead to barrenness, miscarriage, and lack of employment. Witches are invested with mystical powers to cause harm. Mitchell argues that a witch “is believed to have an inherent power to harm other people.”³⁸ Unfortunately, Christian communities seem to contain a large number of witches in their midst. Cases similar to the ones highlighted by Onongha and Lumwe are frequent in several African Christian communities.

Sanou also notes that in Africa, it is “widely believed that all forms of misfortune, such as crop failures, poor spending, barrenness, addiction, sicknesses, accidents, and death, are caused by witchcraft.”³⁹ I remember a case where an entire village was forbidden to attend worship on Sabbath morning in Baka, a village in Northern Cameroon. The village was accused of hiding witches who damaged the reputation of the church they attend. Although there was an attempt to solve the issue without calling upon a witchdoctor, several church members abandoned the faith and joined their earlier traditions by securing protective mystical devices against the attacks of invisible enemies.⁴⁰

Beliefs in sorcery, divination, magic, and witchcraft have damaging impact on the Adventist communities. After the conversion of some Africans to Adventism, they still feel they are “entitled” to some sense of protection obtained within their traditions. Pardon Mwansa argues that people are attracted to witchcraft because by so doing, they would find answers to human needs such as the need not to die but to live, the protection against enemies, the desire to be loved, and meeting daily physical needs such as

³⁶ Onongha, “The Missiological Dilemma,” 48.

³⁷ Lumwe, “The Cosmology of Witchcraft,” 89–90.

³⁸ Cameron R. Mitchell, *African Primal Religions* (Niles, IL: Argus Communications, 1977), 67.

³⁹ Sanou, “Witchcraft Accusations,” 34.

⁴⁰ Personal Experience of the author in the village of Baka, in the Sub-division of Tokombere in Far North Region of Cameroon.

food security.⁴¹ Because Africans believe in the existence of spiritual beings who have potentiality to influence the course of their lives, their outlook and experiences in life are therefore hugely shaped by such beliefs.⁴² John S. Mbiti noted that “belief in the function and dangers of bad magic, sorcery and witchcraft is deeply rooted in African life, and in spite of modern education and religions like Christianity and Islam, it is very difficult to eradicate this belief.”⁴³

4. An Adventist Response to Practices Derived from African Traditions

Adventist scholars from Africa as well as established missiologists in the Seventh-day Adventist Church have made several suggestions and recommendations as to how the denomination should respond to the practices rooted in African traditions and religious systems.

The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in cooperation with the three divisions of Seventh-day Adventist Church in Africa was able to come up with some sorts of official responses to some of the practices of ATRs that are detrimental to the Adventist faith. A helpful document as providing an official response appears as an appendix in the book, *The Church, Culture and Spirits*, already referred to, and which was published by the Biblical Research Institute of Seventh-day Adventists. These guidelines are divided into five sections: 1) Guidelines in the case of demonic possession, 2) Guidelines as reactions to the practice of ancestors’ veneration, 3) Guidelines as responses to witchcraft, magic, and sorcery, 4) Guidelines in the case of traditional healing, and 5) Guidelines as response to the practice of rites of passage. They provide helpful recommendations on how to confront the African religious beliefs that counteract the Adventist faith.

The recommendations are somehow analysed in the book *The Church, Culture and Spirits*. This volume is a significant scholarly contribution to the issues of spiritualistic manifestations in Adventism in Africa. Diverse scholars from the three divisions in Africa have examined how the church should be pragmatic and provided biblical substitutes to the practices of ATRs. Although the intention of the authors was to provide pragmatic responses to the challenge posed by belief in the spirit world, the twelve-chapter book

⁴¹ Mwansa, “What Attracts People,” 18.

⁴² John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religions*, 2nd ed. (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1991), 81.

⁴³ Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religions*, 165.

essentially focused on the admittance of the existence of the spirit world and spiritualistic manifestations in Africa. Nonetheless, virtually all the chapters contain practical suggestions and recommendations on how the church could help members who are entangled in the struggles with spiritualistic manifestations. These guidelines centre on the role of prayer and fasting, developing faith in the power of God, and inculcating appropriate doctrinal teachings in church members. Illustrating this observation are chapters by Lameck Miyayo, Mkombe Canaan, Vida Mensah and Nathaniel Walemba, which are based on their personal reflections and experiences.

The most significant chapters that provide detailed responses are the ones by Kwabena Donkor and Sampson M. Nwaomah. While Nwaomah acknowledges the importance of anointing as a practice rooted in biblical teachings, he mostly provided a critique of the use of oil for anointing subjects totally different from the biblical experience. He summarized his views by arguing that “the biblical motif of anointing with oil for healing is a very popular practice in African Christianity.” But he noted that the practice of anointing in certain circles in Nigerian Christian population “portrays gross perversion” of the biblical models.⁴⁴

Donkor, in his notable chapter, “Ancestor Worship, Biblical Anthropology, and Spiritualistic Manifestations in Africa” discusses not only the pervasive influence of African worldviews? shaped by the belief in ancestors, but also examines theological and practical Adventist responses to African traditions. After presenting biblical foundational arguments in favor of the origins of humanity, the composition of humans, the destiny of humans, the state of the dead, among other themes, he proposed theologically how Seventh-day Adventists should respond to the challenge of ancestor worship. He presents a three-dimensional approach as adequate responses. The first he termed “the response of withdrawal.” It simply means, “the refusal to allow one’s life to be defined in any shape or form by the cult. It is a withdrawal from ideologies and practices that hitherto defined and shaped one’s life, but, which by the virtue of Christ’s death, have been denied that function.”⁴⁵ This first response appeals to believers to abandon their fears as they seek protection in Christ Jesus. The cult of ancestors should therefore be replaced with the teaching of the kingdom of God and God’s family.

⁴⁴ Sampson M. Nwaomah, “Anointing With Oil in African Christianity: An Evaluation of Contemporary Practices,” in *The Church, Culture and Spirits: Adventism in Africa*, ed. Kwabena Donkor (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2011), 190.

⁴⁵ Kwabena Donkor, “Ancestor Worship, Biblical Anthropology, and Spiritualistic Manifestations in Africa,” in *The Church, Culture and Spirits: Adventism in Africa*, ed.

The second theological response provided by Donkor is the response of defence. Seventh-day Adventists must recognize that they live in a setting of a cosmic conflict in which the reality of spiritual powers should not be contested. The Bible affirms that human beings fight against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, and not against flesh and blood (Eph 6:10–18). The Christian is to hold to the spiritual practices listed in this text. These are the following: the truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation in Christ, the reading of the word of God and the belief in God's promises of protection, security, love and care, and the belief in the power of prayer.

The third response to ancestor worship suggested by Donkor is the response of offense. He argues that "the response of offense foresees situations in which the Christian deliberately engages the powers."⁴⁶ In a situation where a member is confronted with the worship of ancestors, an offensive response can be duly recognized as to uphold the biblical and Christian worldview. The three theological responses to the worship of ancestors as highlighted here are significant and can be used by Adventists in Africa.

Added to the responses contained in *The Church, Culture and Spirits*, other scholars such as Onongha, Sanou, Bauer, and Lumwe in their various publications came up with suggestions from missiological perspectives. All of them agree that the process of nurturing Seventh-day Adventists in Africa requires an in-depth understanding of the African worldview.⁴⁷ A clear understanding of the African worldview leads to what Sanou refers to as a balanced approach to the truth in Christianity.⁴⁸ The fact that most converts to Adventism in Africa come from ATRs or have family members who are devoted adherents to practices of ATR, their interpretation of the Christian message is informed or shaped by the ATR worldview. In this regard, it is expected that at the point of conversion to the Adventist faith, a readjustment to a Christian worldview should be visible.⁴⁹ It is noteworthy that the

Kwabena Donkor (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2011), 87.

⁴⁶ Donkor, "Ancestor Worship," 88.

⁴⁷ Onongha, "The Missiological Dilemma," 47–60; Sanou, "Witchcraft Accusations," 33–44; Bruce Bauer, "A Response to Dual Allegiance," *Evangelical Mission Quarterly* 44 (2008): 340–47; Lumwe, "The Cosmology of Witchcraft," 83–97.

⁴⁸ Boubakar Sanou, "Truth, Allegiance, and Power Dimensions in Christian Discipleship: From a Language of Priority to a Balanced Approach," *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* 9 (2013): 45–56.

⁴⁹ Bruce L. Bauer, "Conversion and Worldview Transformation among Postmoderns," in *Revisiting Postmodernism: An Old Debate on a New Era*, ed. Bruce L. Bauer and Kleber O. Gonçalves (Berrien Springs, MI: Department of World Mission, Andrews University, 2013), 85.

change of worldview must be exhibited through the demonstration of God's power to heal the sick, the blind, the leper, to cast out demons just as in the Apostolic era, and to perform miracles through visible acts.

The converts to the new faith long to testify with visible demonstration that the Christian God is indeed powerful to confront the spirits, to protect against the power of sorcerers, and provide daily food for His children.⁵⁰ Because we believe in the reality of the Great Controversy, there should be a steady and systematic discussion on witchcraft and the power of God to conquer evil powers in training programs both for church leaders, seminarians, and church members. Onongha suggests other practical steps which are:

To seek to understand the function these practices fulfil in the worldview and logic system of the people. (2) A contextual analysis of the religion, culture and society of the people in order to discover functional substitutes to replace those unbiblical practices with biblically appropriate ones. (3) The development of various theologies necessary to respond to these challenges; such as theologies of dynamism, divination, discernment, communalism, reconciliation, suffering and evil, and the cross. These theologies should then be taught and applied to respond to the needs and fears of the people. (4) Rather than regard education and civilization as the means by which such practices shall be brought to cease, this challenge must be viewed in the context of the Great Controversy between Christ and Satan which shall continue until the second coming of Christ. (5) The role and power of prayer in personal and corporate life needs to be emphasized especially among such people whose worldview already acknowledges the potency and efficacy of this vital spiritual tool. (6) Narrative theology, which recognizes the value of understanding the people's myths, proverbs, wisdom, and poetry, as well as the heuristic nature of scriptural narratives, should receive greater emphasis among African cultures.⁵¹

The Great Controversy doctrine and its place in responding to the problem of suffering is another way to solve the deadlock of discontinuity between ATR and new converts to Adventism. Religious scholars, theologians and missiologists, and historians should develop an appropriate theology that provides better explanations for human suffering from the perspective of Scriptures—a theology more convincing than that of ATR which views

⁵⁰ Bauer, "A Response to Dual Allegiance," 342.

⁵¹ Onongha, "The Missiological Dilemma," 57.

spirits (deities), ancestors, witches and witchdoctors as agents offering solutions to the problem of suffering and evil. Adventist pastors should more than ever before, demonstrate the healing power invested in their ministry just like in the days of the Apostles. The display of supernatural power by Adventist pastors could solve the problem of being attracted to miracle workers who popularize the African traditional religious systems. This sort of power was instrumental in transforming the early pagan societies into centres of Christian evangelisms. Ephesus, Athens, Colossae and many other pagan cities were transformed into cities of Christian influence in this way.⁵² Onongha is right when he argues that “the time has come to act, for the Adventist Church in Africa to lead the way in applying and demonstrating a theology that is contextually developed, which responds to the twin challenges of intransigent witchcraft beliefs, and the warped, syncretistic methodologies of African Pentecostalism.”⁵³

5. Biblical Functional Substitutes to African Traditional Practices: A Proposal Based on the Role of 28 Adventist Fundamental Beliefs

The contextualization of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Africa can be meaningfully integrated if the fundamental beliefs are not only explained but contextualized.⁵⁴ Even though these beliefs are not creeds, they represent Adventist thought and expression of the interpretation of the Scriptures in the context of its identity. These beliefs are usually grouped into six.

The first grouping is under the category of the doctrine of God, which comprises among other important doctrines, the teachings on the sovereignty of God in Creation, His sovereign government in the universe with divine uncommunicable attributes such as His eternity, infinity, immensity, omnipotence, immutability and omniscience. Also in this group is the doctrine of the Godhead, underlying the belief in the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Bible states: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1 NIV). This understanding of God with attributes expressing His closeness and accessibility to human

⁵² Daniel Berchie, “Miracle-Working among African Seventh-day Adventists: Biblical Phenomenon?” *Asia-Africa Journal of Mission and Ministry* 4 (2011): 3–25.

⁵³ Onongha, “African Pentecostalism,” 53.

⁵⁴ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines*, 2nd ed. (Silver Springs, MI: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005).

beings is a solution to issues of members who think that God is far removed from His children, and that He can only be sought through mediums that can communicate with supernaturalism. God has not left the world to the spirits. He is in control of the lives of His children of all races on earth. A clear understanding of the doctrine of God provides a solution to syncretism and double allegiance in African Adventism.⁵⁵

Second, the doctrine of humanity, which focuses on the creation of man by God in His image, is crucial to the African context. “So, God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27 NIV). God who created man did not intend to see man suffer. Troubles and sufferings did not originate from God; rather, from the evil plans of an angel of light, Lucifer, who became Satan. God has empowered human beings not to fear the devil and the demons. Human beings have to call upon Him, the Creator, for their existence in the midst of demons who seek to destroy lives and instigate panics on behalf of Satan. Man was created a sinless being in a sinless world before the Fall. It was because the devil tempted him and led him to sin that death and sufferings came upon the world. All sufferings and depravity are linked to the work of Satan. There will be a day when Jesus will put an end to the existence of wicked people who, through their actions, follow the devil and the demons to cause sufferings to Africans. Seventh-day Adventism should therefore emphasize the right concept of humanity.⁵⁶ A clear explanation of the doctrine of humanity is the solution to the problem of man’s struggles with sins and wickedness in Africa.

Third, there is the doctrine of salvation. This is fundamental to counteract the worship of ancestors in Africa. The atoning death of Jesus Christ, a blameless Lamb of God, is sufficient for the redemption of humanity. One must teach that, “salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12 NIV). The *juju* (spiritual belief system incorporating amulets and spells), *maraboutage* (an action to bewitch) and fetishes are not important to God’s children. These practices are evil and counterfeits God’s original power destined to those who accept Him. Christ also is concerned for the wellbeing of those who pray to Him, and that one day, He is coming to take His faithful servants to paradise, a place where all sufferings will end and diseases will disappear. Salvation through Christ is by grace alone, through faith in His blood. *Juju* practices, magic, fetishes cannot offer even temporary salvation. Human beings are therefore justified by grace and not by works.

⁵⁵ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Believe*, 11–77.

⁵⁶ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Believe*, 79–111.

The fourth is the doctrine of the church. The entrance into Seventh-day Adventism, which marks the beginning of a new life in Christ by baptism, leads to a regeneration, or the new birth. The believer is sanctified not by works, but by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Man is sanctified by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as he endeavours to serve God in the church. The church is of Christ. It is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (Eph 2:20 NIV). The believers are protected by Christ who won victory over Satan, the originator of evil.

The fifth is the doctrine of Christian living. It is the highlight of the fact that devilish practices, rituals, cultural practices against the Bible are not heavenward. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17 ESV). The Bible provides further reference in Col 3:5-8 (ESV):

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.

Those who accept to join the Seventh-day Adventist Church choose to be citizens of heaven even though they are still in the world. Their lives become a light to the world. Thus, struggles against the practices of ATR should be viewed within their understanding of their own Christian identity. While they live in the world, yet they are protected by heavenly angels because they are also citizens of heaven.

The sixth is the doctrine of restoration. The current human suffering will go away. All those who go through pains, troubles, and distresses and remain faithful to God will be glorified at their resurrection, when Jesus Christ returns. Christ "will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev 21:4 NIV). The wicked will be judged and punished for the sufferings they imposed on God's people. There is for now, no world where our souls go after death. Once one dies, he/she is laid in the tombs. He/she knows nothing of what could be going on in the world. But at the return of Christ, the righteous person who died in Christ will live eternally with Him. All griefs imposed by evil spirits will end.

Among the 28 fundamental beliefs, one that is expressive of the reality of the battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil is the doctrine of the Great Controversy. This doctrine explains why the whole world is

involved in a war between the agents of the devil (demons, witchcrafts, divinations, etc.) and the angels of God who protect believers in Christ. The forces of evil in African worldview have plausible explanation in the doctrine of cosmic conflict.

All humanity is now involved in a great controversy between Christ and Satan regarding the character of God, His law, and His sovereignty over the universe. This conflict originated in heaven when a created being, endowed with freedom of choice, in self-exaltation became Satan, God's adversary, and led into rebellion a portion of the angels. He introduced the spirit of rebellion into this world when he led Adam and Eve into sin. This human sin resulted in the distortion of the image of God in humanity, the disordering of the created world, and its eventual devastation at the time of the global flood, as presented in the historical account of Gen 1–11. Observed by the whole creation, this world became the arena of the universal conflict, out of which the God of love will ultimately be vindicated.⁵⁷

The world is now an arena of a conflict that involves everyone, including the believers in Christ. Answers to hard existential questions such as related to death, food and protection can be better examined within the framework of this battle. Thousands of evil angels who work for Satan use various mediums including African magic and sorceries to impose infortune on Africans. The Christian God has, however, promised to assist His people. "Christ sends the Holy Spirit and the loyal angels to guide, protect, and sustain them in the way of salvation."⁵⁸

The belief in the Great Controversy is complemented by the doctrine of the heavenly sanctuary. Its meaning within the African context is highly rewarding. This doctrine redefines the African worldview by reshaping it from a biblical perspective. The concept of a 'high priest' is not that new to Africans. In their communities, they meet and appreciate the work of local priests who stand as mediums through which they can repulse the evil to befall them. Their magical incantations, local priests are believed to have considerable power to influence the course of events in human societies. From this traditional understanding of priestly ministry, one is able to draw the attention of the African mind to the heavenly priesthood.

There is a sanctuary in heaven, the true tabernacle that the Lord set up and not humans. In it Christ ministers on our behalf, making available to believers the benefits of His atoning sacrifice offered once for all on the cross. At His ascension, He was inaugurated as our great High Priest and,

⁵⁷ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Believe*, 113–20.

⁵⁸ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Believe*, 113.

began His intercessory ministry, which was typified by the work of the high priest in the holy place of the earthly sanctuary.⁵⁹

For African Adventists, Christ is their Priest and Advocate mediating on behalf of His people before His Father. Therefore, there is no need of other mediums through which we can reach God. Prayers offered to God through Jesus go directly to Him. African Adventists can come to Him in prayer to seek divine protection from evil forces, to repel the activities of demons and ask for daily forgiveness of sin. In the Heavenly Sanctuary, Jesus vindicates His followers in saving them from danger and snares of the evil eye. Jesus promises that those who remain loyal to the ministry of His priesthood shall receive the Kingdom of God (Lev 16; Num 14:34; Ezek 4:6; Dan 7:9–27; 8:13, 14; 9:24–27; Heb 1:3; 2:16, 17; 4:14–16; 8:1–5; 9:11–28; 10:19–22; Rev 8:3–5; 11:19; 14:6, 7; 20:12; 14:12; 22:11, 12).

Closely related to the Priestly ministry of Christ is the belief in His return on earth. Unlike a local African priest who is a mortal being, the Christian Priest is the Saviour of the World. He will come to save His people from sufferings and death. And when “He returns, the righteous dead will be resurrected, and together with the righteous living will be glorified and taken to heaven, but the unrighteous will die.”⁶⁰ Jesus, the Christian Priest will grant eternal life to African Christians. They will live with Him in a New Jerusalem “in which righteousness dwells,” and “a perfect environment for everlasting life, love, joy, and learning in His presence.” In this new place, “suffering and death will have passed away. The great controversy will be ended, and sin will be no more. All things, animate and inanimate, will declare that God is love; and He shall reign forever.”⁶¹

The interpretations of the 28 fundamental beliefs provide biblical substitutes to issues that threaten the identity of the Seventh-day Adventist church in Africa. The Bible, if carefully studied, contains sufficient substitutes to counteract odd practices in African cultures that are against biblical principles and Adventist teachings. The church must therefore educate members on the right understanding of these fundamental beliefs.

6. Conclusion

This article examined the complex interweavement of ATRs with African Adventism. Practical issues borne from the interactions of Adventism

⁵⁹ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Believe*, 347.

⁶⁰ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Believe*, 371.

⁶¹ General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Believe*, 417.

with the African culture thus need continuous investigation. One should seek to understand why and how Seventh-day Adventists in Africa have faced challenges, as well as the advantage the cultural milieu offered them in terms of immense gospel mission opportunities. The ongoing tensions between African Adventism and ATRs necessitate the development of more comprehensive and pragmatic guidelines by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Africa. Also, scholars' reflections and suggestions should equally receive attention.

Through an investigation of the Adventists' past in Africa, one would be able to reflect on Adventism's self-identity in the midst of influx of cultures, including the western culture through which Adventist missionaries brought the Adventist message to Africans.