

5. KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF SYSTEMS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

*Bertus Haverkort, David Millar and Cosmas Gonesse
Compas, the Netherlands, CECIK, Ghana and AZTREC, Zimbabwe*

This chapter explores the indigenous knowledge, practices and belief systems in sub-Saharan Africa, with special reference to agriculture. Despite obvious differences between the regions and ethnic groups on this vast continent, one can identify common elements in traditional cosmologies of its peoples: their religions, worldviews, relationships to land and nature, their notion of time, respect for elders and ancestors, leadership, and ethnic organisations. In contemporary Africa, traditional knowledge and values still are an important driving force in peoples' decisions making, which can be seen as a point of articulation for development activities.

The authors of this chapter have worked many years in community based development work in different parts of Africa. As is the case with many professionals, we started our activities with programmes to increase agricultural production. Gradually, our attention was drawn to environmental issues and the use of local knowledge and resources, opening our eyes to the relevance of indigenous knowledge. We learned that indigenous knowledge is more than a compilation of traditional practices, and started to explore the cultural dimension of it. We soon found that in our quest to gain a better understanding about these aspects, our dialogues with traditional leaders and communities were enriched, and the effect of our work with them was enhanced beyond compare.

Africa's past and present

The first anatomically modern human emerged in the southern part of Africa. The first African people hunted a wide range of animals, and learned the use of fire to control vegetation. During the last glacial period Africa was not covered with ice, but, as much of the earth's water reserve was frozen, it endured drought. Evidence exists that around 9,000 years ago, sorghum, millet, rice, yam, oil palm, as well as cattle were domesticated, while barley was introduced from western Asia. The first domestication took place in the territory between the Sahara and the equator. The spread of farming and herding south of the equator was a long and gradual process, impeded by the dense forests and parasites, especially the tse-tse fly.

The introduction of iron tools made way for the development of sophisticated settlements in West Africa and the construction of monumental centres such as Great Zimbabwe. Bantu speaking people moved from west Africa to east and southern Africa, claiming more fertile regions and integrating or displacing earlier occupants. From the 8th century onwards Arab trading penetrated sub-Saharan Africa, bringing oil, lamps, pottery and cowry shells in exchange for ivory, ebony, gold, as well as slaves. Islam spread and impressive mosques were built in Djenné and Timbuktu (Mali). Several kingdoms with important cultures emerged: Ghana, Benin and Akan. The Portuguese were the first

Europeans who got involved in (slave) trade, bringing Christianity with them. In the 19th century the Portuguese lost their monopoly and the British, French, Belgians and Germans colonised and christianised the continent, except Ethiopia. These colonies lasted till around the second part of the 20th century, when the independent nation states were formed.

Sub-saharan Africa today. It is obvious that there are many different cultures, and many differences within cultures in sub-Saharan Africa. Historic developments, demographic and ecological differences, as well as economic opportunities, colonial impact and religious missionary activities, to mention but a few factors, have resulted in a diversity of lifestyles, professional practices, values, religions and knowledge systems. Africa has a diversity of ecosystems, ranging from extensive mountain areas, savannah and dry land areas, to lowlands, coastal plains and tropical forests. Nomadic peoples often compete for land and water resources with sedentary peoples. The urban population is increasing and a considerable number of large cities exist. Traditional religions have common elements, but there is also a great variation in rituals, traditional institutions and leadership structures. They are often combined with, or have been replaced by Christianity or Islam. As a result, a great number of different religious denominations can be observed.

Yet, sub-Saharan Africa has a lot in common, as its peoples have known a great number of migrations across the continent. Although there are more than a thousand ethnic groups, many of them have similar origins or historic relationships. The population has a predominantly rural background, and even today agriculture remains to be the main occupation. Many African soils are aged and tend to be quite poor, which, combined with a harsh climate, makes agriculture a difficult and low productive activity.

The colonial past has had a strong impact on the indigenous cultures and peoples, limiting their capacity to solve their own problems and develop technologies and skills that serve their own needs. Colonisation left the continent with a low level of literacy, few educated people, and with poor physical and institutional infrastructure. The most productive agricultural lands, forestry and mineral resources have been, and often still are, exploited by entrepreneurs with a colonial background. Most of the present nations, those that exist less than 50 years, still reflect major aspects of the colonial system rather than the pre-colonial indigenous systems of governance. The same holds for the legal system and the education system. The religions of the colonisers and missionaries over the past centuries, though they introduced alien concepts and rituals, have not been able to suppress the value attached to ancestors, funerals, and a host of other traditional practices. Most health practices in rural Africa today are based on traditional healers and knowledge, using a wide range of herbs and rituals.

Africa is changing fast and there exists a mix of dominantly traditional, dominantly modern and more hybrid subcultures. Some aspects of indigenous knowledge are expressed openly, whilst other aspects are secretive and hidden from outsiders. This chapter describes the elements of the past, which still play an important role in the values and decision-making processes of African rural peoples, and somehow also in the modernised African mind. Obviously, the degree and relevance vary per location, ethnic group and person. Many studies about African worldviews and indigenous knowledge either stress

the positive aspects, or strive to show the limitations and negative aspects. The first written anthropological studies on Africa often included biases and Eurocentric prejudices, which, in part, have been corrected later. Romanticising indigenous knowledge, however, is not a good basis for endogenous development either. Phenomena such as taboos against planting trees, gross inequalities between men and women, land use practices that have detrimental ecological effects, and misuse of their position and knowledge by local leaders, are aspects which need to be observed and brought into the intercultural dialogue.

African technical knowledge and practices

Most of the attention of development professionals to indigenous knowledge has a technical focus. Here, we give a brief summary of the literature on African indigenous technical knowledge divided into three sub themes: soil and water management, crops and trees, and animal production.

Soil and water management. One of the common characteristics of the sub-Saharan African cultures is the perception that the earth is associated with the concept of the mother, or womb. It is often considered to be a deity, the property of the Gods, and the founders of a clan or tribe who were the first settlers in the area. Traditional functionaries, such as the earth priests, exercise spiritual control over the land. A wealth of information exists about agricultural traditional knowledge, especially on soil classification and practices of soil and water management. Mulching, use of water pockets in plant holes, soil and water conservation, traditional erosion control, and irrigation are all examples of effective traditional practices.

Experiences on how traditional African soil and water conservation concepts can be matched with participatory approaches are accumulating. They are resulting in increased understanding of farmer livelihoods, and more and more programmes today put farmers in the centre of their activities [Reij and Waters-Bayer, 2001]. However, many of these programmes hardly address the African worldviews, beliefs systems and the traditional systems of land tenure on which these practices are based. In the development literature reviewed for this chapter, a general lack of information about the spiritual dimension of soil and water has been observed. Traditional functionaries, such as the earth priests, the spirit media and rainmakers, who are traditionally consulted for issues related to land and water management by rural people, are hardly involved in rural development projects. In practice, the divide between anthropologists and development workers with a technical focus is quite deep.

Crops and trees. The literature on traditional African management of crops and trees reveals that the subjects most frequently dealt with are sacred groves, agro-forestry, plant breeding, and crop cultivation. Again, the literature gives more information about the biophysical aspects of traditional use of trees and crops, than about the cultural and spiritual dimensions, with exception of the studies on sacred groves. Several studies stress the importance of sacred groves in relation to the efforts of the rural people to appease the spirits related to rainmaking, good crops or health. Traditional spiritual leaders play an

important role in the management of these important patches of high biodiversity. Several authors also indicate [Fairhead, 1993; Millar, 1999] that sacred groves can be an important starting point for development and rehabilitation of savannah areas, forests and wetlands.

Indigenous agro-forestry is widespread and several systems are described in literature. Farmers know the qualities of trees, what they can be used for, and the possibilities and limitations of combining trees with crops. Some tree species have a spiritual significance, which is reflected in taboos and rituals associated with them. Many studies on the traditional cultivation practices of crops, including traditional food crops and wild plants, can be found.

Livestock keeping. Livestock systems in Africa are extremely complex. In a broad sense we can distinguish between two major livestock systems, which are the extremes of a continuum: livestock systems associated with settled farmers and pastoral husbandry systems. The role of animals in the spiritual life of African rural people is quite unique and has been the subject of several studies. Literature describes beliefs and practices related to livestock on aspects like feeding, breeding, animal health, small stock and wild animals.

Literature also shows the immense changes that African livestock productions systems are undergoing currently, especially the pastoral systems, due to modernisation, population growth and government policies. It is necessary to look at indigenous knowledge related to livestock in the context of the culture of the people involved. In many ethno-veterinary and animal husbandry studies, this aspect has been overlooked, focusing mainly on the use of medicinal plants for curing diseases. There is much potential in activities that combine ethno-veterinary aspects with village based animal health care. There is an imbalance in the extent to which the different animal species are studied, and the use and importance of the species in rural peoples' lives. For example, most literature on fowl deals with chicken, though many families use a combination of species including guinea fowls, ducks, turkeys and pigeons.

The role of women related to livestock is subject to many changes. In some cases they become more involved in livestock, in others less; the effect on their social position and status also shows a wide variation. In the last decades there has been a decline in 'conventional' livestock projects, due to disappointing results, especially the range development projects, and the projects based on the import of exogenous breeds. Meanwhile, the number of participatory projects, for example on ethno-veterinary medicine and village-based animal health care, has increased. There is a sharp decline in the number of traditional breeds in Africa, which are adapted to the local culture, ecological circumstances and social structures. It is necessary to look at these breeds, taking into account not only the conventional productive role of livestock (like meat, milk and traction) but also the importance of manure, the role of livestock as a factor in risk-management, transport and in social and cultural life.

Indigenous knowledge and development. During the colonial period and after, the main models of formal agricultural development and health care efforts have been based on the introduction of western technologies, not to complement, but to substitute traditional practices. Emeagwali [1997] states that one of the major effects of colonialism was

the subordination of science and education to the logic of the colonial production systems and class structures. Science and development ceased to emanate from the womb of African civilisation, indigenous problem solving and experimentation. The colonial system was exploitative, geared towards export of a surplus from the continent. Also after independence, the focus of research, education, extension and services to agriculture and health professionals continued on the basis of knowledge transfer from the west to Africa. In recent decades, the efforts to introduce the green revolution, cash crops and to train farmers to become entrepreneurs have not resulted in the expected outcome. This is mainly due to the fact that they were not rooted in African knowledge systems, and did not take into account the specific ecological and socio-economic conditions.

In sub-Saharan Africa, various blends between completely western and completely traditional practices exist. This is more true for health than for agriculture. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that up to 80% of the people in Africa use traditional medicine as a major source of health care. People go for modern health services or high-input agricultural technologies when they can afford it. Most people opt for combining both systems, however, or limit themselves to the traditional practices.

African worldviews and belief systems

Traditional sub-Saharan African ways of thinking and reasoning differ in many respects from the dominant international approach. Despite generations of western influence, the decisions about agriculture, health and nature management are still heavily based on the concepts of African traditions. Nowadays, thinking amongst Africans ranges from traditional to modern, but in many cases both systems of thinking can be observed parallel to each other. Traditional worldviews and traditional leaders play an important role.

Religions. According to Reverend Mbiti [1969], Kenyan professor in comparative religion, existence for Africans is a religious phenomenon; man is a deeply religious being living in a religious universe. Mbiti points out five categories that are consistently mentioned in the various African religious practices: God as the ultimate explanation of the genesis and sustenance of man and all things; spirits, made up of superhuman beings and spirits of ancestors; man, including human beings alive and those not yet born; animals and plants or the remainders of biological life; and phenomena and objects without biological life.

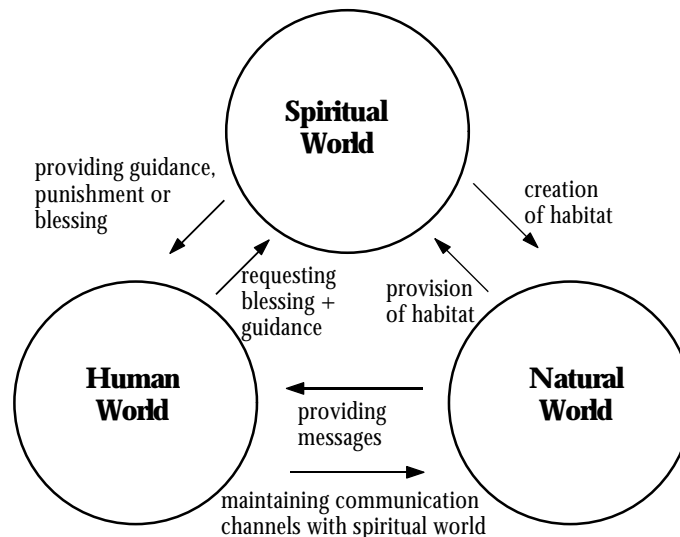
In addition to these five categories, a vital force, power or energy permeates the whole universe. For the Africans, every plant, animal and natural phenomenon is a carrier of the divine. God is the source and the ultimate controller of these vital forces, and the spirits have access to some of them. Selected human beings, such as medicine men, witches, priests and rainmakers, have the knowledge and ability to tap, manipulate and use these forces. Some use it for the good and others for the ill of their communities. In order to appease the gods, people have to perform rituals and make sacrifices. There are numerous rituals such as those for the fertility of humans, crops and animals; for birth, initiation, marriage and death; for rainmaking, planting and harvesting [Mbiti, 1969].

Cosmovisions. Religious and philosophical concepts have their place within traditional worldviews. Cosmovision, to a large extent, dictates the way land, water, plants and animals are to be used, how decisions are taken, problems are solved, experimentation takes place and how rural people organise themselves [Haverkort and Hiemstra, 1999].

Obviously Christianity, Islam and western education have influenced the cosmovision of the Africans especially those with formal education.

For the Shona, the human world, the natural world and the spiritual world are linked. The natural world provides the habitat for the spirits and sends messages from the spiritual world to the human world. The spiritual world provides guidance, punishment and blessing to the human world. People therefore have to relate to both the natural and the spiritual world.

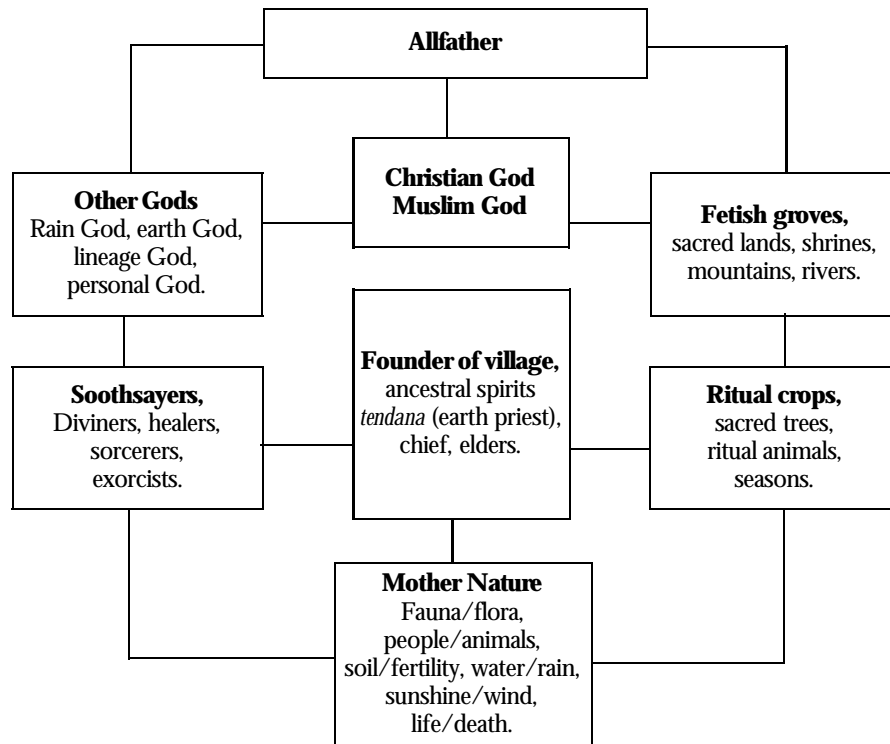
Box 5a Shona cosmovision in Zimbabwe



Also for the traditional people in northern Ghana the spiritual world (Gods, spirits, ancestors), the human world (including spiritual and political leaders), and the natural world (sacred groves, ritual crops and animals, food items and cash crops) are interrelated. Often a hierarchy between divine beings, spiritual beings, men and women, and natural forces is indicated (see box 5b). These cosmovisions give rise to several rituals in which elders, priests, soothsayers and spiritual leaders play a prominent role.

From these examples of traditional cosmovisions in two countries as far apart as Ghana and Zimbabwe, it becomes clear that in the general traditional African worldview, land, water, animals and plants are not just a production factor with economic significance. They have their place within the sanctity of nature. Moreover, certain places have a special spiritual significance and are used as locations for rituals and sacrifices, for example

Box 5b Cosmvision of Boosi in Ghana



sacred groves, shrines, mountains and rivers [Millar, 1999; Gonese, 1999]. Fig trees and baobabs are often treated as sacred trees. The sun, moon and stars feature in myths and beliefs. Certain animal species have a spiritual significance too. Cattle, sheep, goats and chicken are often used for sacrifices and other religious purposes. Snakes, lizards, chameleons and certain birds are considered to be messengers of the spiritual world.

Eurocentric bias. The way Africans think and reason has been the subject of several studies. The first studies on this subject were carried out by anthropologists in the colonial period and reflect the Eurocentric bias characteristic of that era. These reflections often made distinctions in terms such as savage and civilised, prelogic and logic, oral and written, magic and scientific, and perception and conception. The anthropologist Levy-Bruhl [1910], for example, concluded that African reasoning was essentially 'prelogic'. *"They do not have a logical character in the western sense. The law of non-contradiction and reasoning about applicability of certain general principles, that form part and parcel of western philosophy since Aristotle, is not adhered to. Yet, they may see things of which we are unconscious."*

Levi-Strauss [1966] concluded that scientific thought is based on concepts, while mythical thought is based on perceptions. Scientific and mythical thought is not unique to any given culture, and can therefore not exclusively be attributed to western or African cultures. Although the position of Levi Strauss has been completely rejected by modern anthropologists, Eurocentric prejudices have not stopped to exist in the minds of many non-Africans. Biakolo [1998] notes that the low state of African scientific and technological knowledge is due to the African mentality, which is supposed to be mystical, illogical and incapable of scientific pursuit. It is pointed out that the state of technology in Africa is proof of this, contrary to the situation in several Asian countries, which have been able to overcome the colonial experience and underdevelopment. Thus, for Africa to develop it is argued that it must abandon the oral, magical, prelogical past and gradually assimilate the written, logical, scientific culture of the West.

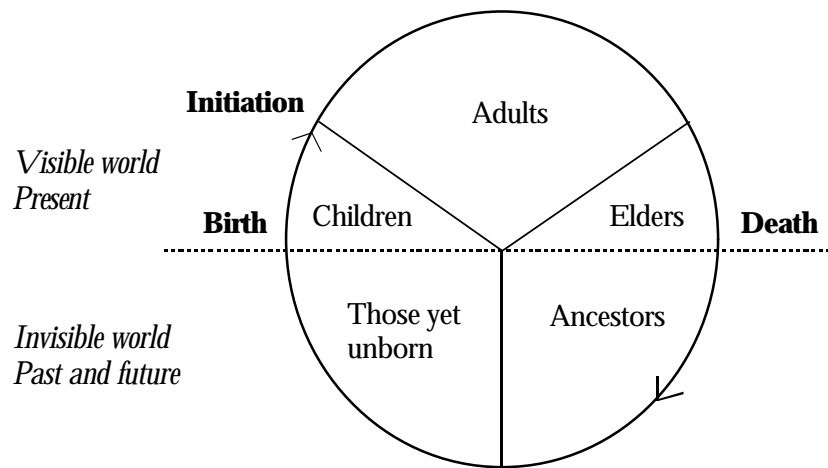
The fashionable pessimism about material and societal development in Africa seems to be related to the sustained western doctrine of superiority, rather than to a serious reflection of history. It provides no understanding of the past nor of the present. It has been used in great measure to colonise and exploit Africa, but provides no key to the knowledge about this continent. On the contrary, it merely repeats the outdated myth of Africa as the 'white man's burden'. This frustration is widely felt in Africa. During a workshop on African knowledge systems, one participant stated: "*They have taken our land, our mineral resources and forests, our language, our laws and jurisdiction, our religions and our system of governance and leadership. And then they blame us that we do not develop in accordance with their criteria!*"

Religious diversity and innovations. Though the Christian church has often condemned the traditional religions, and tried to prohibit the combination of Christian practices and traditional rituals, their presence has added to the diversity of cosmovision practices. In many cases a duality in cosmovisions can therefore be observed: the same people or person observe both western and African visions. According to van Beek and Blakeley [1994], there is great variability and flexibility in the different African religions. Divination techniques move widely across the borders, cults spread from region to region, magical techniques are borrowed. Even at the local village level, this results in multiple options for the individual, which co-exist without conflict. The oral transmission and the non-dogmatic character of indigenous religions enhance this plurality and the absence of conflicts. This is also in line with the idea that religion is not an abstract theoretical reflection on beliefs, but one that implies action. Religion means performing or doing something: consulting a diviner, offering a sacrifice, praying, talking about a problem, enthroning a chief, falling into a trance, making magic and dancing at a funeral. Indigenous African religions often also are a means to an end. They aim at health, fertility, rain, protection, and harmony in relations. Religion is thus part of a survival strategy and serves practical ends, immediate or remote, social or individual.

Time concept

Past, present and future. According to Mbiti [1969], the linear concept of time in western thought, with an indefinite past, a present and an infinite future, is practically unknown in African traditional thinking. For Africans, time has two dimensions: a long past and a present. In the African languages, terms and verbs that refer to the future are practically absent because events that lie in it have not taken place and cannot therefore constitute time. At best they are in potential time, not actual time. Time moves from the present to the past. Events move from the present into the past, the ocean of time in which everything becomes absorbed into a reality, that is neither after nor before.

Box 5c An African (circular) concept of time



Mbiti's analysis has encountered considerable criticism. Opata [1998] explores the idea of future in the Igbo worldview. He concludes that at each critical point of existential action, the person must ensure that everything is well in the spiritual world related to the intended action. This is why at the beginning of the planting season, before a marriage, burials, initiations, child naming ceremonies, or title taking ceremonies, there is always much concern to learn whether the action may imply potential dangers, and if so, how these can be averted. According to Opata, prayers are petitional in nature, and are said in order to avert the fulfilment of these events lined up for one in future time.

Destiny. In this context, the African notion of a human being is important. Swanson [1980] studied the belief system of the Gourma in Burkina Faso, and found that in their cosmivision each person enters life with certain basic possessions, that qualify and define him or her as human. They are: the ancestral soul, the personal soul, the guiding spirit, the physical body, a God consciousness, and a destiny. The notion of destiny has great implications for development. This notion of destiny is in contrast to the western concept, in

which the future can be influenced by special human efforts and nature can be controlled by human intervention.

In the Gourma cosmovision everything a person receives, good or bad, is part of destiny; success and failure in agriculture or health are interpreted as the result of one's personal destiny. Especially when a failure is encountered for the second or third time, it is interpreted as the result of metaphysical reasoning, and not from direct material causes. Swanson describes experiences of failure in rabbit keeping and tree planting programmes. The interpretation of the farmers was "*rabbits are not for me, they are not part of my destiny*". A similar destiny is ascribed to land, when the failure in fruit tree planting was explained by "*my land did not like this particular tree*". Van der Breemer [1984] found that the Aouan in Ivory Coast have a taboo on rice cultivation with the explanation: "*Our soil does not like rice*".

Artistic expressions

Proverbs. Gyekye [1996] has compiled more than 150 proverbs and explained their meaning. These proverbs represent different values related to religion, immortality, survival, brotherhood, communal and individual values, morality, responsibility, marriage and family life, work ethic, chieftaincy, aesthetic values, knowledge and wisdom, human rights and ancestors. Gyekye argues that by listening to the proverbs, and trying to understand their deeper meaning, much can be learned about the values and motivation of the people that use them.

Colours and numbers. Colours and numbers have religious meanings in many traditional cosmovisions. A number of peoples have black and white as their sacred colour, and black and white animals are used for ritual sacrifice. Bartle [1983] describes the Akan cosmovision and mentions three colours: red the sign of danger, black the sign of power and white the sign of purity. Black clothes are worn at funerals, but contrary to its meaning in western societies, this colour does not indicate sadness. It is the recognition of the changes in life: death, reincarnation and ancestral power, stool power, history, tradition and memories. The colours red, white and black are frequently used in African sculptures, paintings and architecture. Tribes like the Abaluyia, Baganda, Watumbatu and Gofa only use white animals for their religious rites [Mbiti, 1969]. In northern Ghana the colours of the fowl determine their use in sacrifices [Millar, 1999].

Numbers can have a religious meaning too. As documented by Mbiti [1969] counting people and livestock is forbidden in many African societies, partly for fear that misfortune would befall those who are numbered, partly because people are not individuals but corporate members of a society that cannot be defined numerically. For the Nandi, the number 'four' seems to be sacred. The number 'six' is sacred to the Shona and Jie, who sacrifice six animals. The Akamba and Vugusu have taboos attached to number 'seven'. The number 'nine' is sacred for the Baganda and all their gifts, sacrifices and sacred vessels must number nine or its multiples.

African art. African art and artefacts such as masks, clothes, music, body painting, architecture and sculptures have often emerged in the function of religion, rites and rituals, and

are undoubtedly expressions of African emotions and identity. These expressions of art have reached high levels of aesthetics and can be divided into different styles and techniques. During colonial times many masks and sculptures were taken to the capitals of the colonisers, and many of these pieces are now exhibited in prestigious museums. Internationally reputed artists like Picasso, Moore and Giacometti have found great inspiration in African sculptures and paintings. Music such as jazz, blues and reggae also find their roots in Africa.

Wilkinson [1998] states that *“at the risk of generalisation and oversimplification of the complexities of the continent, African society - being communitarian and collective instead of embracing individualism - builds itself around the community and extended family. Hence, acts of individual creation, which can be found in western cultures, in Africa are replaced by co-operative ventures between the maker and the client. Since the client often dictates the look and even the shape of the work, the maker assumes the status of what to western eyes is considered to be that of an artisan rather than of an artist”*.

Angela Fisher has produced a few beautiful books with many photos from African wall painting, body painting and ceremonies. These books leave no doubt about the high artistic value of African culture, while also pointing at the erosion taking place in these traditions. African Americans feel proud and moved to discover the tremendous beauty and power of their African roots (International Herald Tribune, 26 October 1999). What is often not observed by the contemporary art analysts is the spiritual function and symbolic messages expressed in these pieces of art. Music has the function of strengthening rituals and helping people to get in a trance, thus enabling them to communicate with ancestral spirits. Mural paintings may contain messages about the social identity or the spiritual status of the inhabitants of a building, while sculptures and masks are frequently used to represent a spirit, or to strengthen the effect of a ritual. Among the Mijikenda of East



Sirigu women (Ghana) are famous for their artistic wall decorations. The motives used here refer to cattle (top) and broken calabash (bottom).

Africa, the mediation role of sculpture is most noticeable in the natural process of sickness and death. Sickness is often associated with spirit possession and its cure may require elaborate exorcism, in which a sculpture plays a crucial role [Orchardson-Mazrui, 1993]. In Ghana idols are often considered to be the real spirit - and not just a representation - and supernatural powers are ascribed to them, with whom humorous relationships can be established

Cultural erosion and revival. Many of the traditional artistic expressions are subject to erosion. Traditional architecture, wall painting and sculpture are being replaced by modern practices, in which the cultural and spiritual values are marginalized. The number of museums in Africa is quite limited, and their exhibitions can often not be compared with those in Europe. Many African artists live outside the continent, adjusting their expression to suit potential buyers. At the same time, one can observe some significant artistic innovations. For example, Zimbabwean villagers have started to make stone sculptures for the western buyers, the unique architecture in Djenné, Mali, is being restored, and a number of African musicians have developed their own styles and international reputation.

Traditional leadership

Most traditional communities have a variety of traditional leaders, specialists and spirit mediums, who play an important role in village life. Below we describe the different spiritual specialists, according to Mbiti [1969].

Medicine (wo)man, healers, herbalists (or sometimes called witch doctors) are present in almost all villages and towns in Africa. They can be men or women, have undergone formal or informal training, and are influential. Their professional quality may vary, but they are expected to be trustworthy, morally upright, friendly, willing to serve, able to discern peoples' needs and be reasonable in their charges. They are to be concerned with sickness, disease, misfortune, which in African societies, are often attributed to negative action such as witchcraft or magic, of one person against another. The medicine (wo)man, therefore, has to find the cause of the disease, find out who the criminal is, diagnose the nature of the disease, apply the right treatment, and supply means to prevent the misfortune from occurring again. Thus the healers apply both physical and spiritual, or psychological, treatments.

Rainmakers are engaged in the art of rainmaking or rain stopping. The entire livelihood of people, either farmers or pastoralists, depends on good rains. The seasons control the rhythm of community life, and in many societies the change of the seasons is marked by ritual activities. There are rites to mark occasions like the onset of the rains, the first planting, the first fruits, the harvest, the beginning of the hunting season. Rainmaking is one such a rite, and rainmakers are amongst the most important spiritual leaders. Their work is not only to 'make' rain, but also to 'stop' rain when too much comes at a certain time, or when it is not welcome at a given moment. Rainmakers are well versed in weather matters, and may spend long periods acquiring their knowledge: learn from other rainmakers,

observing the sky, study the habits of trees, insects, animals, study astronomy and use common sense. Rain is a deeply religious theme, and those who 'deal' in it should be of high religious calibre. Rainmakers not only solicit physical rain, but also symbolise man's contact with the blessing of time and eternity.

Kings, queens and rulers do not exist in every African society. These rulers are not simply political heads, they are also the mystical and religious guides, the divine symbol of their people's health and welfare. The weakening of the office of traditional rulers is leading to tensions between their supporters and African politicians, who think in terms of nationhood rather than in terms of local kingdoms.

Priests, soothsayers and religious founders. The priest is the chief intermediary between the divine and the human. Just as the king is the political symbol of God's presence, the priest is the religious symbol of God amongst his people. His or her duties are mainly religious, but as Africans do not disassociate religion from other spheres of life, he or she may also have other functions. Earthpriests play an important role in land tenure. They are considered the sons of the earth God, and regulate the ownership, tenure and use of land. They perform important roles in rituals related to soil fertility [Millar, 1999]. Soothsayers and diviners are persons with special skills to interpret the messages of the divine world. They can read the signs given through animals, or objects, and are often consulted by earthpriests.

Mbiti [1969] states that, to his knowledge, there is no African society that does not hold beliefs in some type of mystical power. There is mystical power in words, especially those of a senior person. Words of parents can cause good fortune, curse, success, peace, sorrows or blessing, especially when spoken in situations of crisis. The words of a medicine man work through the medicine he gives to his patients. Curses and blessings are considered extremely potent, and many African people consult experts to counteract evil effects or to obtain powerfully charged objects, like charms and medicine. Magic can be either good or evil. Good magic is used by medicine men, diviners and rainmakers, and combined with their knowledge and skills for the welfare of the community. Evil magic is used to harm human beings or their property. Sorcerers, or evil magicians, are believed to send flies, bats, birds, animals, spirits and magical objects to achieve their goals. Experiences of misfortune are often blamed on the misuse of mystical power. The subject of mystical power has religious as well as social, psychological and economic dimensions.

Traditional organisation and governments

Although Africa at present consists of nation states, the traditional organisation of its peoples is mainly based on ethnic lines. African social relations are often tribal, involving communal resource management patterns and group decision making [Izugbara, 1999], though a system of indirect rule was introduced in many places during the colonial period. Tengan [1991] gives a description of the people's perception of this process for the Sisala in northern Ghana. 'Indirect rule' meant the institution of chiefs in stateless societies, in combination with district and provincial councils directly responsible to the cen-

tral administration. This whole implied a major transformation of the political scene. Villages, which had been relatively autonomous, suddenly found themselves part of an extensive nation with a structured government. In most cases this process was not comprehensible to the villagers. The government imposed taxes, initiated forced labour for the construction of roads, and drafted young men to the army. Hence the government was identified with forced levies, forced labour and forced conscription. The chiefs who had to enforce these laws were considered part of the government, and regarded as harsh people in contrast to the more humane traditional rulers.

The independence of Ghana did not bring about any drastic changes in this system, as far as the Sisala were concerned. The Ghanaian government took over and granted constitutional backing to much of the political machinery set up by the British [Tengan, 1991]. For Zimbabwe, AZTREC has reported that the war of liberalisation was not fought just to replace colonial regimes but to revive, restore and resuscitate an African system of governance. Yet, in many cases African politicians took over the governments, and actually consolidated what the colonialists had imported into the African continent.

Government is identified with the execution of law through the police force and the levy of taxes, and is disliked for both. Tengan [1991] reported that the Sissala subsistence farmers in Ghana have the idea that the literate and the government workers serve an impersonal entity, with an inexhaustible source of money.

In their view, the government can never run out of money; it only needs to print more. Hence, government employees who have access to this wealth should not suffer any want, and, since government cash belongs to no person, it is not really immoral to 'chop' or steal some of it. The nation state has thus become an anonymous body, which attracts corruption, and it is common in Africa to talk about the 'national cake' from which everyone can take a slice. Those who try to be honest are seen as abnormal or foolish.



It is important to resist both romanticizing and rejecting traditional practices. Hamar woman, Ethiopia, preparing ritual coffee for an initiation ceremony.

The role of traditional leaders. Traditional authorities, and the traditionally ascribed social obligations, do not suffer the same fate, however. When an offence takes place, it is considered criminal, and there is no such thing as a 'tribal cake'. This tribal loyalty transcends even national boundaries, as national borders have been established irrespective of ethnic lines of division. This makes national leadership often more problematic than traditional leadership, as the latter is more easily identifiable and seen as part

of people's cultural identity.

At the same time, the role of traditional leaders in Africa is often debated within the context of endogenous development. Good and bad examples exist of their influence on the well being of the people. An example of the latter is put forward by Sheila Oparaocha in the *Compas Magazine* no. 4 (March 2001), as a reaction from readers: "...*More criticism could be included on the role of traditional leaders in Africa. For example, throughout the African continent, leaders are being criticised for their role in spreading HIV/AIDS and victimising young girls and women. Traditional leaders in various countries advocate sex with virgins as a cure for AIDS, or are proponents of cleansing rituals of widows through sexual intercourse with a male relative of the deceased. These kind of traditional practices need to be critically looked at....*"

Conclusions

In this chapter, the diverse and complex sub-Saharan African belief system and world vision is presented. It has been indicated that many differences exist between African and western concepts of matter, nature, religion, time, art, agriculture, nature conservation, local governance, community leadership, and decision making. Contacts with non-African cultures have certainly brought about intercultural exchanges and substitutions. But, in many respects, the traditional belief systems still form the roots and branches of the knowledge systems of rural people in Africa.

During the last decades there has been a renewed interest in African indigenous knowledge. This is partly due to the influences of African culture on some European scholars and cultures, and partly due to a new positioning of Africans themselves. This renewed interest, however, is more concentrated on technologies rather than on systems, structures, and processes. It often has the intention of validating traditional technologies from a western scientific perspective. As local knowledge and values still form the main driving force for rural people's decisions on land use, food production, community management, health practices, religious practices, teaching, learning and experimenting, these should be seen as the main point of articulation for development activities. Programmes for health, agriculture, and the management of natural resources, should and can be built on African religious concepts, institutions and practices.



Strengthening traditional cultures implies supporting the internal dialogue. Baganda woman, Uganda, combines traditional and modern elements in her clothing.

Endogenous development. It is becoming increasingly clear that for most traditional Africans, adoption of a new technology does not imply abandoning what they have been already doing or believing. Adoption means, therefore, doing both things side by side. For the African it is a question of survival in a diverse and risk-prone environment. Strategies for modernisation, by means of stimulating introduction of new innovations from outside, could be replaced by strategies of endogenous development, 'development from within'. Outsiders can build up relationships with traditional leaders and discuss the possibilities of experimenting with forms of agriculture, health, or management of natural resources, according to the interest to the population in a given community. Rural appraisal exercises can include co-operation of spiritual leaders, and take notice of the worldview and religious concepts of the people involved. On-farm experiments and tree planting activities can be successfully planned together with the traditional leaders, and rituals can be held to initiate these activities and to discuss the traditional criteria to be used in evaluating the outcomes.

For this, the field workers need to establish a relationship with the community based on respect. And, in this process, awareness is required to resist two temptations: the temptation to condemn and reject local knowledge and practices, and the temptation to justify and idealise them. Hountondji [2001], a philosopher from Benin, rightly emphasises the need for an internal debate within traditional cultures in order to develop new alternatives for negative traditional, as well as modernisation practices. He states: "*It is not enough to develop a new reading of the past, a new comprehension of tradition. Once it has been recognised that tradition is plural, the practical question is how to promote the internal debate inside our cultures in such a way, that it may itself develop the best possible new alternatives. We need to rebuild the traditional cultures with elements provided by debate.*"

Since 1998, two African Compass partners, CECIK in northern Ghana and AZTREC in Zimbabwe, are systematically building up experiences with endogenous development. They have consciously chosen to predispose themselves to learning from the traditional systems, and to question and redefine their professionalism, which until now had been western-biased. They also seek co-operation with other organisations and persons in Africa in order to exchange experiences. The ENEDA (Enhancing Endogenous Development in Africa) Network is now spreading the approach in East Africa, Southern Africa and West Africa.