Africa, despite its rich natural endowments, is a continent ravaged with poverty, disease, corruption and conflicts. For years, international aid and development agencies have tried to deal with these problems—with limited success. A predominantly animistic worldview holds sway over the minds of many Africans—a worldview that sees man as a victim of nature, of other people, or of fate. This mindset shifts responsibility for Africa's social ills to the spirit realm, leaving individuals little hope or motivation for working towards a better future.

Even though the church has experienced tremendous growth on the continent over the last two centuries, all too often the church is disengaged from the crying needs of the community—focusing primarily on spiritual concerns. Despite the fact that Christians are the majority in many African communities, poverty, disease, conflict and environmental degradation still abound. The church is often seen as irrelevant by non-believing community members. But the fact still remains that the church is God’s principally ordained agency for social and cultural transformation. It is perhaps the single most important indigenous, sustainable institution in any community, with members in virtually every sphere of society (the arts, business, governance, education, etc). This is particularly true of Africa where statistically almost 50% of the populations (about 400 million people) are Christians and where an estimated four million churches exist.

Yet for the church to effectively advance God’s intentions, its leadership needs fresh vision and insight. An understanding of African Traditional Religion is critical in understanding the problems of Africa societies today. Many governmental agencies, including development agencies, non-governmental organizations, multination- al and bilateral organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, have disregarded the prominent role of African Traditional Religion and have been adopting various economic and political strategies and policies to try to solve Africa’s problems. But Africa, with her enormous natural and human resources, continues to be regarded as the dark continent where there are wars, hunger and poverty. In the face of these needs, much of the work of the African church continues to be confined to the area of spiritual things, especially in the areas of deliverance from the powers of devils and witchcraft, healing and saving of souls for heaven—all akin to Traditional Africa Religion. However, the social and physical impact in terms of loving one another and the physical development of individuals and communities has rarely been seen. Large churches have been built and thousands of people go to church each Sunday but transformation of communities has not occurred. Even when people talk about the church, the discussion is typically related only to spiritual issues and all other events and everyday happenings are given spiritual meaning and importance only. This can be attributed to the overwhelming animistic perception in Africa where all natural events are viewed as ordered by the spirits, gods, and ancestors.

Traditional African religion is the indigenous religion of the African before the introduction of any other reli-

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Correlation between African Traditional Religions and the Problems of African Societies Today

Chris Ampadu

Africa, despite its rich natural endowments, is a continent ravaged with poverty, disease, corruption and conflicts. For years, international aid and development agencies have tried to deal with these problems—with limited success. A predominantly animistic worldview holds sway over the minds of many Africans—a worldview that sees man as a victim of nature, of other people, or of fate. This mindset shifts responsibility for Africa's social ills to the spirit realm, leaving individuals little hope or motivation for working towards a better future.

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Chris Ampadu is a WCIU doctoral student from Ghana, West Africa, who studied Sociology of Religion at the University of Ghana. He was a pastor of a Pentecostal church for 12 years and now works with Harvest Foundation to train pastors and church leaders across Africa in the area of wholistic ministry and biblical worldview.
gions on the continent. It is the aggregate of indigenous belief systems and practices which existed in Africa prior to the coming of Christianity and Islam and to which millions of Africans still adhere covertly or overtly. The term “traditional” is used to refer to the technique of cultural transmission, that is, oral tradition—stories, myths and proverbs—that are used in passing this religion from generation to generation. Beliefs are passed on to posterity through songs, folktales, dances, shrines, and festivals. African scholar K.A. Opoku explains that the term, “traditional” indicates a fundamentally indigenous value system that it has its own pattern, with its own historical inheritance and tradition from the past. “African traditional religion is practiced by millions of Africans in our time and it is therefore a contemporary reality which exists objectively and in fact. It connects the present with infinite time.” (Opoku 1978, 9)

This study is to help us to discover what traditional Africans actually believe and to see how these beliefs have inspired their cultures, molded their worldview, and impacted the general development of Africa in the area of hunger and poverty.

**Belief Systems**

In African Traditional Religion, certain beliefs run through most African societies even though the practices may be different in societies across the continent. A summary of some of their beliefs are summarized in the categories below.

**God**

In all traditional societies in Africa and in all languages, God is known everywhere as the omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent supreme being, and various ascriptions and names are accorded to him such as Onyame (the Supreme Being in Akan), Mawuga (The Great God in Ewe) or Oludumare (Almighty, Supreme, in the Yoruba language of Nigeria). He is considered above all beings and things and is considered the creator of all.

**Divinities**

The divinities stand next in relation to God in the hierarchy of powers. Akans recognize the existence of divinities or deities (abosom) as intermediaries between God and human beings and who also derive their powers essentially, from God. They are to serve the Supreme Being in the theocratic government of the world.

**Ancestral Spirits**

Belief in the spirits of the dead and in their influence over the living is found among all people. It is believed that the ancestors, even though dead, continue to live the same kind of life they led when they were on earth and as such they require food and drink to sustain them, even in their spiritual state of existence. Libation which is the pouring of water, food or drink to the ground is therefore used as a specialized means of communication with the ancestors. These ancestors are not worshipped but venerated.

**Spirits**

Spirits, according to African beliefs, are omnipresent since they are everywhere at the same time i.e. there is no area of the earth, no object or creature, which has not a spirit of its own or which cannot be inhabited by a spirit. So there are spirits of trees, stones, streams, lakes, the sea, rivers, animals, mountains and hills, forests and bushes, watercourses, birds and other natural objects. Good spirits are thought to bring rain, protection, and birth. Examples of bad spirits are witches, sasabonsam (wicked spirits living in the forests), or dwarfs who are thought to be spirits who have assumed human bodies and live in forests.

**Religious leaders**

Priests of the traditional religions are those who oversee the gods, the prophets, and diviners who do the consultations between man and the gods. They understand the language of the spirits and therefore can foretell future events and happenings. They are the rainmakers who can bring rain in times of draught, the sorcerers, witches and wizards who can cause, pain, diseases and even death to perceived enemies or competitors.

Additionally, the kings, queens and chiefs serve as custodians of the tradition of the people. They usually occupy the ‘stools’ or ‘skins’ of the ancestors and therefore are highly respected since they are the traditional rulers and leaders of the people. They are seen as ceremonial figures and are responsible for celebrating the rituals/festivals which maintain the proper relationship between the people, the ancestors, and the universe. They interpret the traditional laws, norms, and practices and receive complaints and petitions. They are seen as the symbols of the community health and prosperity and serve as representatives of the ancestors. They therefore provide a link between the living, the dead, and the spirits.
Wholistic Nature of African Traditional Religion

The African traditionalist is therefore influenced by several forces including God, the ancestors, the lesser gods, spirits and others like witches, sorcerers and magic. According to Opoku, “Religion therefore becomes the root of the African culture and it is the determining principle of the African life. … It is no exaggeration, therefore to say that in traditional Africa, religion is life and life, religion. Africans are engaged in religion in whatever they do—whether it be farming, fishing or hunting; or simply eating, drinking or traveling, Religion gives meaning and significance to their lives, both in this world and the next.” (Opoku 1978, 1)

The African Traditional Religion is very wholistic since it impacts every area of the African traditional life, whether in the city or village, in the office or in the farm, in the building of a structure or in marriage. Prof. Mbiti talking about the African religious heritage says, “Religion is part of the cultural heritage…. It has dominated the thinking of African people to such an extent that it has shaped their cultures, their social life, their political organizations and economic activities.” (Mbiti 1996, 10)

Consequences of Worldview

“Ideas have consequences” says Darrow Miller (Miller 2001, 34), and “as a man thinks, so is he” (Prov. 23: 7 KJV). These sayings reflect the truth that a person’s (or people’s) beliefs impact their attitudes, and their attitudes in turn, impact their behavior, which brings forth consequences (either positive or negative) in their lives. Worldview can be defined as “a set of assumptions held consciously or unconsciously in faith about the basic makeup of the world and how the world works.” (Miller 2001, 38)

African culture and tradition cannot be understood and appreciated without looking at the worldview reflected in the religious beliefs of the people. The worldview of a people not only informs what they see, but also it determines the type of societies and nations they build. African Traditional Religion is associated with fatalism, rooted in animism and ancestor veneration. According to Mbiti, animism is the system of belief and practices based on the idea that objects and natural phenomena are inhabited by spirits or souls. (Mbiti 1996, 18) Animists believe in multiple gods which are capricious and unpredictable. For the animist, drought, famine, poverty and hunger are caused by unseen irrational forces. For them the physical world is overshadowed by spiritual realities. To the animist, problems originate from outside, such as lack of rain for growing crops, and therefore to solve the problems of society, the gods, spirits and ancestors must be consulted and appeased.

In these societies, community problems can be traced from the outside rather than internally. For example, instead of a community attempting to find out the environmental practices and attitudes that cause diseases like typhoid, malaria, and cholera, they resort to consulting the gods and appeasing them to ameliorate their problems. They believe that when there is drought or famine the gods must be angry and that these gods are inattentive to the needs of man because of man’s disobedience to the norms and regulations of the gods. The same reasoning applies to infertility of women, famine, epidemics, disasters or any other unfortunate natural events.

In recommending solutions to the total development of African countries therefore, these worldview factors need to be considered. Otherwise, in spite of the best economic, political, and financial measures intended to help solve the numerous problems of Africa, not much will be gained. Instead of looking at the root causes of Africa problems, international donor agencies have typically looked only at the fruits of the problems. Africa’s problems include poverty, hunger, diseases, malnutrition, unemployment, HIV/AIDS, malaria, wars and others. If granting of money and offering various forms of assistance could solve these problems, Africa’s problems should have been solved by now. But instead, Africa’s problems are getting worse. There is the need therefore to look critically at the reason why so many resources have gone to Africa with relatively little impact on the economy or people of the continent. Policies and strategies and proposals that have worked so well in other parts of the world do not work in Africa. Why?

I think the problem lies in the belief systems of Africans since belief systems give birth to the culture of people and culture also determines the attitudes and behaviors of people which in turn determines the laws, education, economics, lifestyle, politics, environment, arts and family life of the people. The African story, or worldview, has been unable to transform our lives as individuals, communities, or nations. The traditional belief system is based on power, control, and fear of death rather than on love, service, and reverence of life.
Correlation between Worldview and Development
There seems to be a close relationship between the traditional African belief systems and the total development of the African continent. Animistic traditional religion believes in millions of gods that are capricious and unpredictable. The gods can be bribed, they can change their mind, and they are very discriminatory and very selfish. As a result, the priests, believers and people of the gods take after the likeness of these gods in their behavior. Some of the elements of this animistic worldview and their potential impact on societal development are described here.

Extended Family System
The traditional extended family system forms the basis of social and cultural life in African traditional religion. The broad network of kinship ties creates uncountable dependents who consistently drain resources such that investment in a viable venture becomes an impossible task for an individual since there are always many mouths to be fed and problems to take care.

Taboos
Traditional beliefs and practices with various taboos and prohibitions prevent production and development of efficient processes. Industrialization and agricultural progress are inhibited by taboos on the use of large tracts of land or forest considered to be sacred or inhabited by gods, dwarfs and other spiritual powers. Nutritional taboos undermine health, especially among women and children. Needed sources of protein are prohibited, such as fish that represent children of the gods and spirits. In some traditional societies pregnant women are not permitted to eat eggs and snails for the fear that their children would develop baldness, and experience copious and excretion of saliva in infancy etc. These taboos result in problems of anemia, vitamin deficiencies, and malnutrition which are injurious to the health and growth of women and the developing child.

Witchcraft
African traditional religionists believe that diseases, barrenness, and sudden deaths are all the works of witchcraft. Such people are not interested in scientific solutions or medical attention since they believe their problems are caused by witches who must be appeased. Due to these beliefs, promoting personal hygiene is a challenge and environmental conditions are a disaster. Preventable diseases like malaria have become the number one killer in Africa, but environmental considerations are generally not pursued due to the belief in witchcraft and magic. Valuable time and money are wasted on measures to counteract the activities of spiritual forces. The fear of witchcraft is so widespread that many people consistently live in fear. This dominant fear seriously inhibits progress and development in communities. Any attempt by persons in these traditional societies to lift oneself above others in terms of good education, business, or even an attempt to build oneself a house will attract the vindictiveness of some of these witches.

Political Mediocrity
In the political sphere, traditional religions have traditional rulers who hold all power and authority, assisted by family heads and a council of elders. The chiefs, who ascend to their positions by inheritance, derive their power and authority from the gods, ancestors and the spirits. Even though in modern times a few highly trained people and intellectuals are ascending to chieftaincy, a majority of them are illiterates and do not have the know how to be effective leaders. Some are oppressive authoritarian despots, and enemies of development.

Female Genital Mutilation
The practice of female genital mutilation or circumcision in northern Ghana and other parts of Africa is a grave health hazard to women. (Dolphyne 1991, 37) This traditional practice is geared towards controlling the sexual desires of women and discouraging infidelity in marriage. In this process the clitoris of the female is cut and in some cases, cow-dung or ashes are applied. There is the risk of death from excessive bleeding or infection from the unhygienic methods, and for some women life-long incontinency is the result. But many see female circumcision “as a necessary evil, particularly in those societies where it is a deeply rooted in tradition.” (Dolphyne 1991, 37)

Fatalism
The African worldview is deeply rooted in fatalism that says “we are what we are because we were made so and can do nothing about it.” This worldview produces a “dependency” mentality—always looking and waiting for solutions outside oneself and not taking responsibility to improve one’s circumstance or situation. Such a worldview surely will often lead to underdevelopment because people are not motivated to be creative
or innovative, and will not do much to help themselves unless somebody from the outside brings help.

Corruption
One of the causes of underdevelopment is corruption, and indeed Africa is plagued with so much corruption that nearly everybody is involved, including Christians. In some cases, it is actually seen as an abnormality when one disassociates oneself from accepting bribes. In Africa corruption often means getting a contract approved and then doing a job haphazardly because the very officers who are paid to inspect the work are also bribed. For me, this is deeply rooted in African worldview and beliefs since the African gods are thought to be capricious and can be “bribed” through the giving of various forms of sacrifices, offerings or appeasements. Through the giving of “drinks” or some form of sacrifice, these gods can be bribed to kill, spoil, or destroy life or property. Corruption is a problem deeply rooted in the capriciousness of the African gods with the direct result of underdevelopment.

Concept of Time
Another African worldview that leads to underdevelopment is the concept of time. This is also rooted in the animistic belief system in which the gods have no respect for time. When they are consulted much time is spent drumming, singing, dancing and incantations before the presence of the gods is recognized in the priests and prophets as they become possessed. This is also seen during festivals when people must drum for a long time before the gods will supposedly come. This worldview has been passed on to the people who do not regard and respect time. A time set at 8 o’clock in the morning might mean a person will show up at 9:00 or 10:00 or sometimes 12 o’clock. This attitude is surely related to underdevelopment because it means that people are paid for what they did not work for or their jobs just do not get done. Benedict Opoku-Mensah recognized this problem when writing in the Daily Graphic of Ghana on June 11, 2008, “The route to a nation’s success is hard work, determination, sacrifices, punctuality, and love for one’s country. Our poor attitude towards time is drawing our development as a nation backward.”

Technology
Animistic beliefs have a great impact on technological development. The African traditional worldview believes floods, earthquakes, drought, and other forms of natural disaster are the physical manifestation of irrational forces. Bad things happen when the gods are angry. With this in mind no attempt is made to find scientific and technological remedies. Instead, the solutions are perceived to lie in constant appeasement of the gods. These are the ingredients of underdevelopment; they are the yeast that helps to ferment poverty and the catalyst that speeds up the collapse of a nation.

Conclusion
In a nutshell, Africa’s problems arise from the roots of belief systems which are foundational in understanding poverty and hunger in the midst of abundance and plenty in terms of natural resources. For most agencies, including governments and even mission agencies, the causes of African problems have to do with the visible “fruit problems” that include poverty, hunger, deprivations, malaria, HIV/AIDS, wars, and general underdevelopment. Many measures, strategies, and billions of dollars have been poured into this continent by the West, and yet instead of improving the development of African countries, some are even getting worse. For most mission agencies and churches, the perceived solution lies with evangelism and discipling, which has been taking place for over two centuries, and yet, our problems persist. The majority of believers live in poverty and hunger and some are very corrupt, so that it appears as if Christ came only to save souls and not lives. The solution, in my opinion, can only be found through a critical examination of the roots of belief systems and the lies of the culture that have resulted in enslavement, bondage, and poverty instead of wholeness, dignity, and transformation.

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