

Chapter 4

African Culture

Africans like all other races have their own heritage of legal ideas, beliefs and social life. They are proud of their culture, and it is always inherited from generation to generation. Their life style is not the same as Christians, but they too believe in God. Though they don't pray to God directly, they believe that the world has its owner. The (owner) is a supernatural being. The body of law is probably a safer standard by which to gauge the moral view of people than that affected by their religious practices. This is also the case with the Africans, for their conduct is not influenced by a belief in future rewards and punishments, and their conception of moral duty is but lightly tinged by any religious motive.

The code of rules approved by a tribal tradition is the hereditary body of established conduct, that which has been observed, recognized, and enjoyed from time immemorial, and handed down by their forefathers.

The prescribed rule of conduct is not changed by any deliberate legislative enactment. A Chief may promulgate some local order, but in no case will this affect or over-rule the established body of law or custom. The recognized body of laws and customs of the people are carefully conserved. It is the duty of the chief to interpret and apply them, but not to change them by directive command. In general, the chief and members of his family always enjoy the privileges or liberties denied to the commoner. Certain privileges are also attached to the position of a headman or councillor referred to as an "Induna" and even the officer of diviner, though much of his social status may be directly attributed to the alleged powers with his person and the fears that such powers instilled in the community.

1. Laws concerning females

The female always a minor in the law, she is under the control of her father or his representative and after marriage she falls under the control of her husband. But the responsibility of her own conduct or acts does not cease entirely on her marriage.

2. *Spirituality*

The spiritual duties of the chief as head of the tribe, is to give direction with regards to sacrifices after consultation with the diviners or the direction received from a duty. The sacrifices, offered mainly to the ancestral spirits of the royal house are made by a tribal priest or Kinsman of the Chief. We must remember that a diviner is consulted on a multitude of personal, family and tribal questions, because of fear of the spiritual and magical forces, mainly of the evil intent.

Kinds of African beliefs

The influence exercised by the spirits of the dead over the physical world is very great among the Africans. The tribal spirits, that is the spirits of the dead chiefs have a wider range than the purely domestic ones. It is believed that the spirit of the dead or departed chiefs affect the whole community and may cause drought, famine, epidemics and floods, while the spirit of the departed ordinary man is limited to the activities of his family circle. Another type of belief is that of wizards and witches. They also have superhuman powers to harm the body, cause illness, death, infertility of men and fields, which may be the work of the malignant practicing witchcraft. Everything may be attributed to the action of either a spirit or a witch: very little is due to chance or accident or purely natural cause. “Letlalo la motho ga lebapolelwe fase” in Sotho.

The belief is that after death man continues to exist in spirit form. But no one knows where the abode of shade is. Only those who have married or who have set up a family, that is, those who have reached a definite social status, have spirits which enter the realm of shades, and as such, can affect the family for good or evil. Children and all those who, though adolescent, have not contracted marriage or borne offspring, do not necessarily become extinct, but have not final rites paid to them. As immature spirits they do not count as members of lures, but merely buzz about like flies. The ordinary spirit generally assumes the form of a snake and in that guise will visit its earthly abode without being harmed. Its appearance will necessitate a consultation with a diviner to ascertain the cause of such a visit. If anything should be amiss, steps are taken to quiet the spirit by rites or offerings.

Ceremony is the essence of the African society. It permeates all phases of life, in both private and public transactions. The giving or exchange of tokens is an important factor to which great value was attached, for it forms the great record of such transactions.

Public business was transacted at the whole village courtyard where men congregate to do their work to discuss family and other matters, receive visits and to gossip. Women and children are excluded from the courtyard, unless especially invited to attend. Men even have their food and beer at the courtyard apart from women and children.

It is in this courtyard where matters concerning the initiation schools will be decided. The chief will set a date together with his tribal authority. The date is normally chosen in winter months and all boys of the same age grouping will be taken to this bush school. Before leaving, usually the big kraal is built near the courtyard of the chief, and all men, that is the fathers of the boys and their children gather at this kraal for a night. Singing and dancing take place, until the next morning. Men and brothers, as they are usually called, especially those who are from this school, enjoy the whipping, and this is taken as a sign of manhood. Circumcision takes place early in the morning. Boys will stay there for two to three months. When they come home they are now called men and no longer boys. During this stage of their stay in the mountain school, women and children are not allowed to see them or go near the school. It is meant for men only and it is their secrets.

The same can be said of women, for they too grow girls to womanhood. They do go to this type of school, usually near the village. Men respect the place where women do their things. Other Africans like the Ndebeles and the Tsongas or Shangaans bring their daughters up at their homes rather than taking them to a bush. An outside room is chosen for this event and girls will stay there for a month or so without being seen by men and children. When they come back to the public, a goat, sheep or cattle is slaughtered for this wonderful day or ceremony.

It is only then that these children are called women. They are then ready to start

their own families. Boys as men are able to search for their partners, and if they succeed then the ceremony of wedding will be celebrated. The two extended families become friends. The groom's family will be expected to pay dowry or "Lobola" to the bride. This is usually paid in the form of cattle. The bride's family will set a fixed amount and that will be calculated in terms of cattle even if that is thousands of Rand. The advantage of this is to make the bride to stay in her new family and the smooth relationship between the two families.

Another thing that is important in African marriage is that men are really heads of the family. Their words are always final. The chief can marry as many wives as he wants. The tribal authority decides the queen amongst his wives. Usually it is announced when the king wants to marry the Queen mother. It is out of this marriage where the king's successor will be born.

This type of marriage, that is the chief does not practice polygamy only. Even his subjects, men of the village do practice polygamy. It is believed that man must not be asked, where he is from when coming late at home.

The Africans are very fond of music. Singing and dancing are forms of recreation to which they are much devoted. The Principal instrument is a drum, then follow many other instruments. Children have their own musical and dancing games, which are usually performed in the evening after eating.

Worship

Worship is the greatest African heritage. There are many forms of worship in the African community, family, and tribe. They worship their ancestral spirits and their deity. They observe the commands of their deity strictly and his promulgations are adhered to without questions. Homage and reverence are paid, of all things; they do not forget to thank him by gifts. He must be given cattle, corn, money, beer, etc.

Africans as mentioned above, believe mostly in the departed person or the ancestral. They believe that they are the one who knows the problems of this world best. In the case of a family they believe that the spirit of the departed parents still lives and it takes care of its family. But above that there is God who is controlling the world. So the

spirit of the dead is near God and is the one that pleads with God on their behalf. The form of worship is not direct to God but the name of the deceased is called and through him or her they are able to tell the living deity or god about their problems.

Usually blood of any animal is shed. That is in a yard where there is a place where an alter is built. Each time they remember to worship their ancestors, the head of the family will call all family members to kneel down before this alter. If it is just a minor thing only snuff and some African beer is used. The father will call all the names of the departed family members to have mercy on them who are still living. But if it is a big thing or ritual, then the blood of chickens, goat, lamb or cattle is sprinkled on an alter. When doing the celebrations, not only the family members are called, but even the extended families are called to the ritual ceremony. On the side of a chief, if there is drought, famine, floods or disaster that involves the community. The chief after consulting his guide or the diviner instruction is extended to the whole community to observe certain things. Maybe not going to field on Wednesdays. Coming together and worship as a nation at the royal court. Even to go to mountains or bush in searching for anything that can be associated with the problem. Usually it is believed that the land has been bewitched.

Having said that, that doesn't justify the actions taken by the missionaries particularly when African people were evangelized. It goes without saying that there are parts of the African heritage, which should be adopted as they are in the Christian community as a Christian heritage. When Africans greet their superiors or give praise to their god, they adopt a different mode of reference from that of the other races. To show their respect they always sit down when he speaks or when an elderly person speaks to them. They stand up when singing or giving praise to their God. In order not to make an African a stranger or foreigner in our Christian services, it would be well to adopt his accustomed manner in worshipping.

As it stands it is not that easy to decide or say which parts of the African heritage are or are not suitable for the Christian community. A theologian is greatly needed on this subject. But the theologian's visions must not lose sight of the living conditions of the African people. Knowing the African language or dialects does not qualify a theologian as knowing an African. I refer here to "Lobola" the customary law on dowry.

Two views prevail. Some see it purely as a buying and selling transaction which renders it unchristian. Others look at it from a different angle and consider it a safeguard of the matrimonial contract and family structure, especially at this delicate transition stage.