

# Editorial: Spirituality and Wellbeing in Africana Contexts

**Chammah J. Kaunda**

**ORCID iD:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6879-6330>

## Introduction

Internationally, numerous scholars argue that religion/spirituality has critical implications for human wellbeing (Agorastos *et al.* 2014; Idler 2014; Koenig 2012; Koenig *et al.* 2012; Yehyaand Dutta 2010). Research has shown, that the same is true with regard to Africa (Sabuni 2007; Manda 2008; Dube 2009; Sovran 2013; Manguvo & Mafuvadze 2015; Kasenene 2000). Across Africa, religion/spirituality remains a factor that influences and shapes the wellbeing of many Africans. Religion occupies a central position in the personal and social lives of many Africans. As such, it functions with a framework for interpretation and formulation of ideas that inform daily interactions with other people and the world (Kasenene 2000; Manda 2008). But the role of religion in Africa has not always been constructive and clear-cut. Affirmatively, religion has contributed to the struggle against colonialism, for national independence, for fostering and support of modern democracies, and the establishing of independent nation states. Negatively, religion(s) has, at times, and in some contexts, also contributed to endorsing and perpetuating postcolonial autocratic life-denying tendencies among politicians, patrimonial autocratic and oligarchic systems, and the denial of human rights, for a wide variety of minority groups, not aligned with the hegemonic power structures and it has also contributed to spread of infectious diseases such Ebola as was the case in West Africa (Manguvo & Mafuvadze 2015). The question is whether and how religions and religious formations in Africa have intentionally positioned themselves as forces for wellbeing, safety and security, or, for ill? How have they engaged the individual, as well as social challenges that African people face? How do they function for the continuous improvement of the quality of life and wellbeing of people? OR: if they do not

function in this way, what roles do they play in society in general, but also specifically, and practically? Acknowledging that there have been some valuable research focusing on particular contexts, there is inadequate scholarly literature, which specifically explores the interplay between religion/spirituality and wellbeing, or its opposites.

## **Background**

Scholars have argued that in Africa, religion/spirituality in all its various manifestations is a seminal, ingrained, aspect of life, identity construction, social practice and reality construction and interpretation. They argue that religion/ spirituality should not be regarded as separate from the totality of human life in Africa. For all intents and purposes, it saturates the lives and cultures of most African people. Concomitantly, religion/spirituality and its related practices, are perceived as a social and humanistic resource for African cultural, moral-ethical, political and economic functioning, but also development and advancement. This perception of religion/ spirituality, is usually endorsed by views from John Mbiti (1969), who, described Africans as ‘notoriously religious’; Fabien Boulaga (1984), who embedded all of African life – ‘self-transcendence, nature, earth, sex, anything that moves’ – in religion; Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar (2004), who argued that ‘it is largely through religious ideas that Africans think about the world today, and that religious ideas provide them with a means of becoming social and political actors’; and, more recently, Trinitapoli and Weinreb (2012), that Africa is ‘the world’s most religious continent’. That this form of essentializing, if not erroneous idealisation, of the importance of religion/ spirituality, or of a broad-based religious world view, for Africans, is obviously contentious.

Given the myriad of challenges and struggles some Africans face on a daily basis in all spheres of life, in all the sociocultural, -political, and -economic dimensions, and societal levels of a rapidly – if also very unequally – modernising continent, we need to move beyond the simplistic and idealistic understandings of the significance of religion/ spirituality in Africa. Moreover, the scholarly homogenising assumptions, common generalisations, and generic intellectual simplifications about African life and culture, not only obfuscate and befuddle very complex issues, as these differ from context to context, and country to country. They also mask a lack of the equal recognition of the wide

diversity of African people, as well as religions and spiritualities on the continent, and their dynamism, fluid functioning, and impacts.

Against the background of these primary misconceptions, African social life should rather be fully recognised and studied with regard to its complexities, its fluid and experimental practices, and the inherent, and often tacit contestations of power and privilege, as these are present in its numerous sociocultural contradictions embedded in the articulations of the person and community; religion and the secular; health and disease; and democracy and un-democratic hegemony; as these grow, and at times collide. This means there is a need to ask about Africa's experiential questions. In this context, it is important to better delineate the significance of religion and spirituality for African life and culture, and if not, how this is the case. Finally, can one distinguish between the nature and impact of religion and spirituality that add to the wellbeing of people, in specific contexts, and that which is to their disadvantage, and detriment? And, what do African people regard as the religion or spirituality that serve them and their wellbeing, and what not?

Amongst others, this Special Issue of *Alternation* seeks to clarify these key issues, as briefly outlined above, with a primary focus on the ways in which religion/ spirituality contribute to wellbeing as understood by Africans themselves in various contexts – local, national and continental or, cosmically/ environmentally. By explicating the concepts and researching the nuances of the wide variety of relationships between religion/ spirituality and wellbeing in Africa, from indigenous African perspectives, this issue is critical addition to the discourse and knowledge production on this very important interdisciplinary area. It has also opened up more possibilities and directions for future research, and research-led teaching and learning. This special issue is developed around four overarching themes in which various contributions are best understood together.

## **Religio-Spiritual Heritage and Wellbeing**

In the first part, contributors interrogate the tension between African religious/spiritual epistemology and contemporary human search for wholeness. **Stephen Morgan** and **Beatrice Okyere-Manu**, open this section with their article, 'The Belief and Veneration of Ancestors in Akan Traditional Thought: Finding Values for Human Wellbeing', in which they argue that the belief and practice of ancestor veneration is embedded in African moral search

for wellbeing. They stress that such Akan ancestral traditions are embedded in the quest for peaceful coexistence underpinned on the moral principle of responsibility which requires radical solidarity and mutual obligation within the community of life.

The above argument resonates with **Yusuf Luxman**, Chammah J. **Kaunda** and **Roderick Hewitt**, who propose, ‘Decolonizing Penal Substitution Theory of Atonement in Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) in the Violent Context of Jos, Nigeria’. They argue that the retributive element embedded within the church’s understanding and practice of the Penal Substitution Theory negates peaceful co-existence in pluralistic societies such as Nigeria. Inculturation is used as analytical tool for decolonising Penal Substitution Theory in dialogue with Pyem people’s philosophy of forgiving-love. This qualitative research demonstrates that the Pyem religio-cultural experience is embedded in its religio-cultural notion of *Ngwakin Darsai Daal* (the male that reconciles) that presupposes humanity as the backdrop of forgiving-love. They conclude by calling for intentional conversations between the Gospel and African cultures in which religious practitioners are engaged in order to stimulate practical creation of new culturally informed theologies of reconciliation and peaceful co-existence.

On a similar argument, **Emmanuel Ofuasia** in ‘On Religious Intolerance in Yorùbá Society: An Exploration of the Pluriverse Alternative’, considers the Yorùbá religions of Nigeria being unfairly implicated in religious conflict. He argues the contemporary religious conflict in Nigeria was engendered by two warring religions - Christianity and Islam which have also upset the serenity and spiritual equilibrium of Yorùbá people. Ofuasia contends that the solution to religious conflict in Nigeria cannot be found only Christianity or Islam but in dialogue with African religio-cultural heritage. Thus, he proposes Òrìṣà philosophy in Yorùbá religio-spirituality as a paradigm for resolution and peaceful coexistence of the imported religious traditions which now exert strong influence in Yorùbá society.

## **Religious Marriages, Gender and Wellbeing**

The second part, is introduced by **Sindile Ngubane-Mokiwa**, who raises an auto-ethnographic question of her ‘Marriage Journey: Could Misinterpretation of Religious Script Lead to Misguided Spirituality?’ Ngubane-Mokiwa describes and analyses her personal experiences as a Muslim married woman

in order to expose how basic tenets of Islamic religion impacts on her marital life. She resists that it is not Islam as a religion that negates experiencing the fullness of life in marriage, but patriarchal informed hermeneutics to which its sacred texts are subjected. Ngubane-Mokiwa's analysis of her story demonstrates that despite Islamic religion's embedded values that can promote women's human rights and gender justice, the patriarchal structures, cultural conditioning and androcentric hermeneutics at work in the interpretation of the sacred text tend to reinforce and perpetuate power relations and subjection of women and children to life-denying experiences.

**Martin Mujinga's** 'The Interface of Zezuru Marriage Custom with Modernity: An Analysis' argues that even though marriage is central to the Shona people of Zimbabwe, the five ethnic groups that make up the Shona tribe all view marriage differently. One of these ethnicities is the Zezuru, who regard marriage as a unifier of families. The communities involved in a marriage share their very existence in that reality, and they become one people. The centrality of marriage among the Zezuru is experienced through the continuous coming together of people through this rite. However, recent developments show that some valued, traditional Zezuru marriage practices have failed to stand the test of modernity, and others are gravitating towards extinction. The question that begs an answer concerns how the interface of Zezuru marriage customs and modernity impacted this ethnic group. The empirical research collected data through unstructured interviews with 20 randomly selected males and females from different age groups and ethnicities. The sample included bridegrooms, brides and traditional leaders. The article argues that the effects of acculturation and modernisation have given the Zezuru people a modernised understanding of marriage, and that this has beneficial and adverse challenges, on culture, with adverse challenges being more pronounced.

Marriage, for the Ndebele of Matetsi in Zimbabwe, is a spiritual practice, and they believe it is ordained by God and the ancestors. The process of marriage among the people of Matetsi is conducted according to patriarchal spiritual systems, which require a woman to be introduced to her husband's ancestors through certain rituals. In her, 'Until He Releases Me from His Ancestors: An African Spirituality Pastoral Response to Wife Abuse' **Sinenhlanhla S. Chisale's** article explores the traditional marriage rituals of the Ndebele of Matetsi that connect the bride to her husband's ancestors, and the role this practice plays in the way a wife makes decisions in the context of abuse. Written from the perspective of African feminist cultural hermeneutics,

this paper seeks to explain how marriage rituals that connect a bride to her husband's ancestors imprison her in the context of abuse, and obliges her to remain married to her husband through 'thick and thin'. In addition, the paper offers a pastoral response that addresses the African spiritual nature of marriage in the context of abuse of women, with particular reference to the Ndebele of Matetsi, and suggests pastoral interventions in an attempt to liberate wives who are imprisoned by these rituals. This was an empirical study that followed a qualitative participant observation approach, which allowed the researcher to observe the customs and practices of the traditional marriage process in Matetsi, which she participated in, in her marriage process as a young woman.

Another interesting study is done by **Zamambo Mkhize** among Zulu polygamous marriages in KwaZulu-Natal. In the study, 'A Feminist Perspective on Religion in Polygynous Families in KwaZulu-Natal', Mkhize argues that polygamy studies have largely overlooked the role of religion in how women in such contexts forge their identities. Through qualitative research, Mkhize interviewed ten female adults with formal education who were raised in polygynous families and questioned how religion influenced their gendered identity. She discovered that religion was an important factor for the participants, and some of them found comfort in their religion whilst other women found confirmation of what it means to be a good woman.

This, however, is in sharp contrast to the experiences of single women in Zimbabwean Pentecostalism. In her study, "Handisi Mvana" (I am not a disgraced but honourable single lady): Pentecostalism, Tradition and Re-imagining Singlehood in Zimbabwe', **Kudzai Biri** examines the traditional perception of *mvana* (a woman divorced or become pregnant out of wedlock without possibility of marrying the man). She unveils how Shona traditional discourse has been uncritically adopted by some Pentecostal churches and entrenched in their beliefs and practices. Consequently, the traditions of stigmatising and stereotyping single women are perpetuated in Pentecostal circles to their discredit as movements of liberation and emancipation for all.

## Christianity and Contemporary Issues

The final part explores engagements between and the implications of such engagements. The contributions in this section demonstrate that Christianity plays an ambivalent role in its engagements with social issues in

Africa. This **Molly Manyonganise** observes of Zimbabwean Pentecostalism in her ‘Commoditising Health? Of Guesthouses and Spiritual/ Faith Healing in Zimbabwe’s New Pentecostal Movements’. She noted that while traditionally Pentecostal churches laid hands on the sick, there has been a new phenomenon where the sick have to visit guesthouses if they want to have a one on one encounter with the faith healer. Manyonganise explores this practice from a qualitative approach to find out whether ‘visit guesthouse’ practice could be a vehicle for commoditization and commercialization of healing and health among Zimbabwean faith-healers. She noted how such practices are promoting neo-capitalism tendencies that sideline the poor who cannot afford to buy faith-based or secular healthcare.

In their, ‘The Perceptions of Faith-based Healing among Public Health Practitioners and Pentecostal-Charismatic Believers in the Eastern Cape Province’, **Nelly Sharpley** and **Chammah J. Kaunda**, analyse the perceptions of public health practitioners and a Pentecostal-Charismatic community of faith-based healing in Eastern Cape. Data was collected through qualitative techniques, which included observations, questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The qualitative data was analyzed using an interpretive approach. The findings demonstrate a conflict between public health practitioners and Pentecostal-Charismatic believers on the issue of faith-based healing. While the public health practitioners argue for the medical model, which is a reductionist approach to health problems, Pentecostal-Charismatic believers argue for a purely religious model, which is another reductionist approach to health challenges in Eastern Cape. This article argues, as a way of bridging the knowledge gap, for a more systematic transformation of public health by acknowledging the role of faith in people’s lives and consequently reconceptualizes relationships between faith and health problems in the province.

**Nelly Mwale** and **Joseph Chita** in their research on ‘The Catholic Church and Epidemics: Safeguarding People’s Wellbeing in the Advent of the 2017/ 2018 Cholera Outbreak in Zambia’, argue that Cholera outbreak in Zambia sparked religious conversations on the role of the Church during outbreaks of infectious diseases. A descriptive case study design was employed to collect data through interviews, document reviews and observations, Mwale and Chita stress that Cholera was not only a public health issue but also a social justice issue which demanded a prophetic voice of the Church to call for lasting interventions. They concluded that the action of the Catholic Church was influenced by social teachings, which inevitably resulted in partnership with

the state to restore national wellbeing. This suggests that there is a strong interplay between religion and public health.

From an ecumenical economic perspective, **Roderick Hewitt's**, 'Transformative Ecumenical Economic Justice: Implications for the Church's Witness within the Southern African Context', argues for an ecumenical action that can urgently bring about fundamental changes in global policies and structures that affect the economy of African nations. He argues that the church has an ecumenical missional calling with implications for emancipatory economic justice. He calls for the church in Southern Africa to adopt a missional praxis for economic transformation to authenticate their witness through making economic justice a matter of faith confession. The context of struggle for the fullness of life suggests rethinking many of the theologies inherited from missionaries.

If there is any critical observation emerging from all the contributions to this special issue, it is that there is no stable, singular or linear narrative or trajectory that can accurately explain various developments taking place in contemporary African societies, not least concerning their 'Spirituality and Wellbeing in Africana Contexts'.

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Chammah J. Kaunda

United Graduate School of Theology

Yonsei University

South Korea

카운다참마주텍스(전임교원/연합신학대학원)

[ckaunda@yonsei.ac.kr](mailto:ckaunda@yonsei.ac.kr)