

# **AFRICAN CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE**

## **Themes and Embedded Beliefs**

Compiled and Edited by  
Michael C. Kirwen

MIAS  BOOKS

**Nairobi, Kenya**

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# **AFRICAN CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE**

## **Themes and Embedded Beliefs**

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The Maryknoll Institute of African Studies (MIAS) is a post-graduate Institute offering courses and programs on-site in Nairobi. The Institute is academically affiliated to Saint Mary's University, MN/USA and Tangaza College, Nairobi, Kenya. Through Saint Mary's University, the Institute offers a Master of Arts (MA) in African Studies and a Master of African Studies (MAS), a professionally focused degree. Through Tangaza College, a constituent college of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, it offers a joint Tangaza College/Saint Mary's University Certificate in African Studies and a Tangaza College Diploma in African Studies. The Institute's courses are of a participatory type in which students do one hour of professional-quality field research for every hour of class. Courses are offered on both a twelve week Semester basis and a three week Immersion basis. The field research is facilitated by Kenyan university graduates, trained as field assistants, who work with students on a one-to-one basis. Students are required to write a paper for each course in which they show their ability to integrate field research data with the material of the class lectures and bibliographic readings.

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# DEDICATION

To the memory of the late Professors Katama Mkangi of  
United States International University-Kenya,  
Osaga Odak and Odera Oruka of University of Nairobi  
and Cuthbert Omari of University of Dar Es Salaam.  
Their wisdom and knowledge of African culture  
were an inspiration to the content of this book.

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**PROLOGUE**

African Cultural Knowledge is a magnificent effort at a pedagogical facilitation of a serious and, if you like, a realistic engagement with the anthropological complexities and psychological intricacies of the colorful tapestry of the African culture. In seeking and actually succeeding in plumbing the sub-structural depths of the cultural life of the African societies, it brings to the surface a sharp and bewildering outline of the foundational substance, spiritual underpinnings and commonalities of the African cultural experience and practices. It is a masterpiece of archaeology of cultural phenomena that ends up producing a grammar of culture. It achieves this by exploring, with extraordinary insight, the mystifying superstructures of the African cultural life and by articulating a theoretical narrative that enjoys a near-universal application across ethnic, racial and social delimitations.

The fifteen-theme structure of cultural knowledge suggests, in reductionist manner, how culture can be studied, understood and appreciated in its phenomenological relationship with its essential character. It illuminates the ambiguous relativism of cultural expressions and practices as variously captured in philosophical and sociological texts and traditions. The result is a unique contribution to the methodology of and practical engagement with African cultural reality. In this particular way it breaks new ground in its field.

Prof. Edward Oyugi  
Department of Psychology  
Kenyatta University,  
Nairobi, Kenya, November 2005

## FOREWORD

### THE MAJOR IMPLICATIONS OF THIS BOOK REGARDING CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

The African cultural themes presented in this book are located in the very structure of the unconscious, the vast neural network of the mind and memory that interprets experiences and promotes behavior in an automatic mode. The material of this book presents cultural knowledge as an ensemble of fifteen foundational themes. Awareness of these themes allows persons to understand their pervasiveness in their cultural lives, to own and possess them as adults, to be freed from their manipulations, and to teach them systematically.

The hypothesis is that the **theme** of each chapter will resonate and have meaning in all African cultures. Thus, it is the shared cultural knowledge that is the fundamental source of the cosmic and spiritual unity of more than half a billion African people.

The explanation of the themes can also be read as an expression of the beliefs of African spirituality, that is, its underpinning symbols, lived values and ideas, objectified and expressed in a written medium. Also by way of comparison, these beliefs coincide with the underpinning lived values, ideals and beliefs of many spiritualities worldwide, including those of Christianity and Islam.

The delineation of culture into universal themes is not unique to the Maryknoll Institute of African Studies (MIAS). Universals have been part of the conceptual framework of anthropology for many years. Brown (1991) in the third chapter of his book *Human Universals*, discusses the contribution of scholars such as E.B. Tylor (1891), L. Kroeber (1917), Clark Wissler (1923), Franz Boas (1963), and George Stocking (1968), all wrote extensively on the status, role and function of universals, ranging from extreme cultural relativism to monolithic cultural unity.

Furthermore, Brown (1991) describes culture as divisible into “traits” (single items) and “complexes” (more or less integrated collections of traits) (p.40). The “traits” are referred to in MIAS as **domains** (activities), while the “complexes” are the **themes** (values, symbols and ideas). Moreover, as demonstrated by responses from non-African MIAS participants, the fifteen-theme model is not exclusive to African cultures but can be applied to other cultures worldwide. This makes the MIAS cultural model **universal**, a term defined by Brown (1991) as a trait or complex present in all individuals, . . . all societies, all cultures, or all languages – provided that the trait or complex is not too obviously anatomical or physiological or too remote from the higher mental functions (p. 42). Indeed, the fifteen-theme structure of cultural knowledge can be understood

as a paradigm of the very nature of human cultures, and as an explanation of socio-cultural integration and development.

The analysis of the field research data into thematic structures follows closely the model presented by Spradley (1980) in his book *Participant Observation* -- the MIAS text book for teaching professional field research techniques and analysis of data.

In this book MIAS presents a new methodology for cultural studies by means of which one can systematically explain, demonstrate and teach African cultural knowledge in a holistic way. This method enables students to see the interrelation of the various themes and how they furnish a comprehensive and consistent interpretation and response to the daily flow of one's cultural life.

Prof. Michael C. Kirwen, PhD, MM

Director: MIAS

Associate Dean: Saint Mary's Un/Mn.

Nairobi, Kenya, November 2005

## PREFACE

Since 1989, the MIAS staff and lecturers have presented and discussed the various themes of African cultural knowledge, but did so in a piecemeal manner, without seeing their inner connection or recognizing that together they comprise the basic structure of African cultural knowledge. It is as if they were walking among the trees i.e., the themes but unable to see the forest i.e., the interconnection that creates and sustains the themes. As editing of the material on the fifteen themes from students' worksheets progressed, it dawned on the editors that they had come upon a major breakthrough in understanding the very structure of African cultural knowledge in a comprehensive way. As a result, there is now a holistic understanding and explanation of how African cultural knowledge promotes behavior and interprets the experiences of the ordinary African person from birth to death and beyond. Furthermore, this knowledge, through the fifteen-theme structure presented in this book can now be taught systematically and comprehensively.

As far as is known, the pinpointing of fifteen foundational themes of cultural knowledge is something no other program does or has done. This approach, therefore, represents a major advance in the field of cultural studies. **African cultural knowledge as presented in this publication is the case study** for this type of thematic analysis.

The issue of there being fifteen themes is not set in stone, as other cultures might have extra themes, or a theme like adulthood and elderhood could be presented as two separate themes. Moreover, the material of this book could be organized following a different model or paradigm. However, foundational themes, like grammatical structures of languages, are always limited in number. Indeed, just as speech is possible because of shared grammatical structures that automatically give meaning to sounds according to their pitch and order, so also cultural communication and interaction is possible because of shared internalized thematic structures that automatically create the "normal" interpretation of experiences and patterns of behavior. Cultural themes therefore are actively present in the subconscious minds of members of a culture, and are accessed as needed just like internalized language structures.

The challenges for both African and non-African students when reading this book is to contextualize the themes within their own cultural knowledge and activities. For **African students** the process entails recognizing and understanding the themes as the roots and foundation of the cultural knowledge which is theirs by reason of birth. For **non-African students** the process is to apply these themes to their own cultural knowledge, seeing the African expression of these themes as the stepping stones to understanding and appreciating the way their own cultures are structured, made holistic, and underpinned by similar themes.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Sincere gratitude is expressed to the faculty, students and field research assistants of the Maryknoll Institute of African Studies who made this book a reality through their written responses to the themes forming the fifteen chapters of this book.

Gratitude is also expressed to Missio Munich and the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers for funds that enabled this work to be published.



## INTRODUCTION

Based on field research data collected and analyzed over the past seventeen years, the Maryknoll Institute of African Studies has categorized cultural knowledge into fifteen themes and thirty-five domains\*. The themes are the major values, symbols and ideas that bring wholeness and coherence to a culture. The themes explain the nature of life, the nature of creation, the nature of evil, etc. Underneath and within these themes are thirty-five cultural domains, that is, specific activities, rituals, attitudes and happenings that make up the ordinary events in the lives of human beings, from birth to death and beyond.

Themes and domains can be imagined as a thirty-five room mansion with the themes being the foundations, doors, archways, roofs, etc. and the domains being the rooms e.g., the room of marriage, of sickness, of initiation into adulthood, of birth, of political leadership, etc. In an African context, the imagery is that of a rural homestead with thirty-five grass-roofed houses. The themes are the hedge around the homestead, the main gate, the grass roofs, mud walls, the doors, kraals, etc. whereas each grass-roofed house represents one of the cultural events in the life of an individual such as marriage, birth, adolescence, mourning, work, sacrifice, etc. Or the themes can also be imagined as a fifteen piece orchestra playing constantly but subconsciously in one's mind and memory.

MIAS, a post-graduate program, specializes in transforming participants into articulate adults of African cultural knowledge. To facilitate this, each class day, **one** cultural theme and **two** domains are presented. Students are asked to reflect on and briefly write out their meanings within their personal lives and that of the cultures from which they come. The data on the cultural themes presented in the book has been collated from worksheets written between January and August, 2003. The data therefore, are the spontaneous writings of field assistants and students, all of whom are university graduates, the majority being Africans. The ethnic identity of African respondents and the nationality of foreign respondents is indicated in order to illustrate the point that these cultural patterns are shared across ethnic boundaries not only in Africa but elsewhere throughout the world. The responses of the Africans are clear evidence that African cultural knowledge is still the dominant paradigm that directs the lives of ordinary African people, interprets their experiences and creates their artifacts.

The book is divided into fifteen chapters, one for each foundational theme. It begins with the theme *Creator God* (Chapter 1). The arrangement of the chapters is such that spiritual themes come first followed by foundational themes of human community and its preservation, and finally themes undermining the welfare of human communities ending in death. Note that the total number of responses (**R**) listed in the categories is often greater than the total number of respondents (**N**). This is because many of the respondents included several different categories in their responses.

\* There is an intention to publish a book based on the Domains and following the same format.



CHAPTER I  
**Theme: CREATOR GOD**



A West African stool in which the Creator God, symbolized by the sun and moon, is supporting all that exists.

## CREATOR GOD

### Introduction

All humanity stands in awe and reverence when contemplating both the vastness and intricacies of the world in which humanity finds itself. The questions that are inescapable are: where did this world come from, who made it and where is it going?

### God in Africa

For the more than 500 million Africans South of the Sahara there is only one answer, namely, a creator God who is pure spirit, the source of all life and reality. To deny the existence of the creator God is seen by Africans to be an untenable position. Anyone taking an atheistic position is seen to be not only immature but spiritually without wisdom.

### God Elsewhere

In other cultures the question of creation has many and varied answers ranging from a principle of novelty (a prime mover), a creator God (Christianity and Islam), an unanswerable question (Buddhism and agnosticism) to outright denial (atheism). However every living mature person will have some kind of an answer to the meaning of the cosmos, relationships and the transcendent.

## QUESTION

**In terms of African cultural knowledge, what is your understanding of the theme of CREATOR GOD? N = 58 [39 Africans, 19 non-Africans]**

### RESPONSES COLLATED BY FOUR CATEGORIES

[Note that the italicized words in each category illustrate the major ideas and beliefs regarding God's nature and humanity's interaction with God.]

1. *Attributes of God* R=143
2. *How God is Known* R=31
3. *The Responsibilities of Humanity towards God* R=13
4. *How God is Approached* R=18

### AFRICAN RESPONDENTS N = 39

#### Attributes of God (R = 95)

God is a *creator*, as God is seen as the source of all that exists both living and non-living (24), God is a *supernatural being* and a *controller*; God is *higher than any other beings* that exist on earth and in heaven (15), God is a *provider* of resources to all in need in form of land, livestock and children (12), God is *omnipresent* because God is present everywhere and in everything that exists

(11), God is **omnipotent** as God is all-powerful and also a vital force (11), God is **pure spirit** therefore invisible to the naked eye and is neither man nor woman (4), God is **beyond comprehension**, as no one can **understand God** nor the **unexplainable phenomena** that God causes, thus there are **no images of God** in Africa (4), God is a **sustainer** as God prolongs life through lineages and maintains all that is living through forces of nature like light and air (4), **protector** as God takes care of cosmic justice and defends the people (3), has **ownership** of everything on earth and beyond (3), God is **eternal** as God has no beginning nor ending (2), God is **all-knowing**, for God knows all that happens to us (2).

### **How God is Known (R=23)**

God is known by  **blessings** to people through provisions of food, the birth of a child and rewards (8), through **punishments** meted out in form of calamities such as famine, drought, barrenness, floods and lack of sons (7), by **manifestation** in the wonders of creation such as fertility of families, rainfall, abundant food, produce, and livestock (4), by **names** given to God such as *Ngai* for the Agikuyu connoting one who apportions, *Nyakalaga* for the Luo meaning one who is everywhere, *Obong'o* a Luo word denoting the only one and *Amusaba* meaning the Maker in Teso language (4).

### **The Responsibilities of Humanity towards God (R=13)**

It is the responsibility of man to **revere** and **respect** God (3), to **continue God's** work of **creation** through reproduction (2), man is **not to call upon God unnecessarily**, lest it brings out God's wrath (2), to **fear** God (2), **not to question** God (1), to **obey** God without failure (1), to live a **God centered life** (1), **not to say bad things about God** (1).

### **How God is Approached (R=16)**

God is approached through **worship and prayer** at any time and place (6), by going to God's **sacred dwelling** places found in mountains, trees and lakes (5), **sacrifices, offerings** and **rituals** as means of appeasing God when God is discontented with us (4), through **intermediaries** such as ancestors (1).

## **NON-AFRICAN RESPONDENTS N=19**

[The respondents answered according to both their own cultures and their understanding of African culture.]

### **Attributes of God (R = 48)**

God is **omnipresent** as God is everywhere (12), God is **creator** as God is the source of life (11), God is the **sustainer** of life through light and air and the continuation of the lineage (5), God is **beyond comprehension** thus the reason

there is no image depicting possible interpretation (5), God is *pure spirit* (5), God is *omnipotent* as God is all-powerful (4), God is a *Unifier* as God unites all of creation (2), God is a *caregiver* and takes care of all creation (2), God is a *protector* (1), God is *immortal* (1).

### **How God is Known (R=8)**

God is known by *manifestation* through wonders of creation such as the sun, moon, harvest, rain and fertility of families (5), God is experienced through *nature*, and *key moments of life* such as fertility, transformation and transition in life (2), through *names* given to God e.g., in the Cameroon country God is known as a question "Who Is This?" (1).

### **How God is Approached (R=2)**

God is approached through *worship and prayer* (1), through *intermediaries* such as spirits, diviners, Jesus and the Bible (1).

## SUMMARY

### Beliefs expressed regarding the nature of Creator God

**God is:** the *creator, a supernatural being, provider, controller, protector, owner of everything, all knowing and eternal*. God is a *unifier, caregiver, omnipresent, omnipotent, a pure spirit, sustainer, immortal and beyond comprehension*.

**God is Known by:** *blessings to people, punishment meted out, key moments of life, manifestation* through nature and the *names* given to God.

**Human Being's Responsibilities towards God:** *revering, respecting, obeying, and fearing God*. They are to continue *God's work of creation through reproduction*, live a *God-centered life, not to question nor call upon God unnecessarily*.

**God is Approached through:** *worship and prayer, sacrifices, offerings, rituals, intermediaries*, and by going to God's *sacred dwelling places*.

### RESPONSES FROM WORKSHEETS

*[Note that the Creator God is pure spirit, the supreme non-human Being who is the ultimate source and controller of all aspects of life. Furthermore, note that these ideas are shared across African ethnic boundaries.]*

- **In terms of African cultural knowledge, what is your understanding of the theme of CREATOR GOD?**

#### AFRICAN RESPONDENTS N = 39

*[There were ten ethnic groups of Africa represented: Luo (14), Agikuyu (9), Abaluyia (4), Akamba (3), Abagusii (2), Aembu (2), Teso (2), Kipsigis (1), Akan (1), and Bemba (1). The respondents were university graduates; eight women and thirty-one men.]*

- Creator is a power from above and it is a must that we keep on praying and uphold the creator on the highest level. You are not allowed to say bad things about the creator. (Abaluyia)
- Creator God means God is the originator of all that exists. God made or created the world and all the living beings in it. God is the provider, protector and originator of everything. (Akan)
- My understanding of the theme of creator God in terms of African cultural knowledge is that God is a supreme being who ought to be feared and respected. God is viewed as the provider and the cause of all phenomena over those that cannot be explained factually. (Luo)
- God is life and life is God. There is no way you can separate these two. Whatever you do determines your life presently and thereafter. (Abagusii)
- God is the giver of life, the protector, and the almighty. God is said to be all-powerful and all-present like light and air. God is experienced in the wonders of creation, the fertility of families, the harvest, and the livestock. (Luo)
- God is the one provider, present everywhere and the one who brought and brings all into being. (Luo)
- Creator God is the provider, sustainer and the maintainer of life. He is everywhere at all times and expects us to obey him without failure. He is all-powerful, invisible, neither man nor woman. He is a spirit that watches over all of us. (Agikuyu)
- Creator God is depicted as the creator of all things in existence according to African cultural knowledge. Since most African societies were patriarchal, He is depicted as the creator of man, and later created a woman. In Aembu culture, God created the man and then gave him a wife, whom He cautioned not to ask where she had come from. (Aembu)

- God is perceived to be the origin of life. He is the arch-elder, the source of life and vital force. (Aembu)
- God is supreme. He is the creator and sustainer of life. Nothing happens to us that He does not allow. When He is pleased with us, things go well. The birth of a child is a sign that God wishes to bless the couple. This is why prayers are made to Him at all times. (Abaluyia)
- In African culture it was believed that God existed. This can be manifested in the way Africans were notoriously religious, offering sacrifices to appease God and living lives that were generally centered on God. The theme creator God means that the origin of all things including knowledge and attitudes can be traced back to God who is our maker. (Luo)
- The creator is everywhere (*Nyakalaga*) and the only one (*Obong'o*). (Luo)
- In African cultural knowledge there are a number of gods, for example the harvest god, the god of the underworld and so on. However the chief God is the creator God, and this whole collectivity of gods is seen as a "government" with different gods having different "ministries." However these gods are not visible to the human being but know all and see all as they live in heavens. (Teso)
- God the creator is supreme and the one whom the Iteso call *Amusaba* (Maker). The only one who can make. He is worshipped, respected and feared. He cannot be mentioned anyhow. He is always referred to as mighty and no one can do without him. He is always with us at home, in the garden, at school, and when traveling etc. He listens. (Teso)
- God blesses people through many actions that we see e.g., rain, food harvest, etc. and He can equally curse them through droughts, barrenness, daughters and no sons, floods, etc. God is the overall creator through whom ancestors bless or curse us. God has to be worshipped and appeased in case He is angry, and He is revered in the society. (Abagusii)
- The creator God is founder and giver of life, the sustainer of life and reality. In Akamba He is referred to as *Ngai Mumbi*, *Mwatuangi*, which basically means the creator, sustainer and almighty and He is all present in the whole life. (Akamba)
- In our Kalenjin community, which is further narrowed to Kipsigis, the theme creator God mainly applies to a supernatural being who controls everything and a provider of things like rain. This Being is worshipped by the community and in case of a calamity, people gather in one place, normally a holy place such as a mountain. This should have olive trees. This is where they present their sacrifice to this supernatural being that was only imagined but not seen. (Kipsigis)
- According to African culture, the creator God is a supernatural being who has power over every creature. He possesses super natural power over every

creature here on earth and in heaven. He is a supernatural being and is omnipresent i.e., He exists everywhere. (Agikuyu)

- My understanding of the theme of creator God is that God is creator of the universe and the author of life. Africans believe that God is not only a creator but also a provider and protector hence the different names given to Him. In my own tribe, God is called *Kabumba* which means supreme being, almighty, creator of all things that are seen such as rivers, human life, animals, trees, the sky, moon, and sun just to mention a few. (Bemba)
- In the hierarchy of supernatural beings, God is the highest being. He is creator of the universe. (Luo)
- Creator God among the Agikuyu culture is the father and provider for all the Agikuyu people. He gave them *Githaka* i.e., land around Mount Kenya. The name of God *Ngai* is from the root *Mugai* i.e., He who apportions resources to those in need. So, God, *Ngai*, is the one who apportions natural resources, animals (domestic) and fertile soil to his children. (Agikuyu)
- God, whose name denotes one who spreads like Lake Victoria, is beyond comprehension. He gives life to people and has a listening ear for all. God is love but can be judgmental. People living immorally are already condemned. (Luo)
- According to my cultural knowledge, God is the one who brings rainfall and has all the power to give and get. (Akamba)
- God is source of life and this is experienced in the mystery of creation. God is spirit and we are all continuing with God's creative act of creation. (Luo)
- In my culture, men and women believe God was at the mountain, which was considered a very high point. Later they changed and believed He lived at a tree called *Mugumo*. It was believed that if one went around the tree several times your problems would be solved. The tree is still respected today, and if it fell down due to rains, a ritual has to be performed before it is removed from there (even if it has blocked the road). God was the most powerful of all the supernatural beings for them. (Agikuyu)
- The theme creator God in African culture is in everything: their daily lives, and even in activities, in the harvests, the rains and in the new born. All the things that they do have a base and a meaning in God. The presence of God is felt everywhere and all the time. All things on earth belong to Him. When annoyed He brings drought, famine and even diseases. Rituals are performed to please God and the ancestors. (Luo)
- I understand God as a giver of life, a provider and preserver of human life. God continues the process of creation every time we see a child born or when we see plants sprout. (Abaluyia)
- The supreme creator or *Jachwech* in Luo and it is He who punishes, rewards and exonerates. He is [unique] *Obong'o* and all over *Nyakalaga*. (Luo)

- The theme creator God refers to God as the core of all creation. Nothing happens that He does not know or have control of. He is represented in nature through the sun, rain, wind, harvests and water forms, etc. For this reason, one does not need to pray at a formal time; invoking God while at work, etc. is seen as praying, since He is all over. However, being Holy, His name is not to be taken in vain by being called out without any reason or it will bring out His wrath. (Luo)
- God is everywhere, in everything, and He controls all activities. He is the author of life and the giver of everything. (Luo)
- Creator God is the source of all the things. Literally, the creator God is giver of all things from rain to life. All forms of good things are viewed as blessings from creator God and all evils/calamities are viewed as discontentment from God (the creator). (Akamba)
- God is regarded as the creator and maker of everything in life. His dwelling place was regarded as a Holy place usually in the mountain. People usually appease God so that evil things do not happen to them. (Agikuyu)
- God is the source of life. The theme underpins all other domains in African culture. God rewards and punishes the people depending on their way of life. The theme of creator God makes religion so profound in its diverse beliefs and practices. (Agikuyu)
- The owner of all that is and the provider for all that is. He is the super provider and controller of the universe. He takes care of cosmic justice. (Luo)
- God is the source of life. (Luo)
- From my cultural background, God is owner of the universe, the Supreme Being and the giver i.e., *Mugai*. (Agikuyu)
- He is an all-knowing and omnipotent God, who manifests Himself in different ways. He is transcendent and has to be approached with respect. He has a reason for creating all that exists on earth. He is the source of all that is to be found on earth, except for evil, which is the consequence of man's failure. (Abaluyia)
- In Agikuyu, creator is *Mumbi*. Therefore, in all creation, God is the author of life. (Agikuyu)
- God is omnipresent, lives eternally and He is present or lives on higher grounds-peak of Mount Kenya where no one can reach. God created our first ancestors and gave them livestock and land. All children and things are gifts from God. He gives according to His will. (Agikuyu)

**NON-AFRICAN RESPONDENTS N = 19**  
*[The respondents answered both according to their own cultures and their understanding of African culture.]*

*[There were six non-African countries represented: America (11), Norway (4), Spain (1), Poland (1), Ireland (1), and Indonesia (1). The respondents were university graduates, twelve women and seven men.]*

- Perhaps my assistant said it best; “God is everywhere in Africa” as we stood in *Uchumi* and I commented on praise music sounding over the P.A. system. It is critical to understand that God is the “source and foundation of life and reality.” It is important to know God as “light and air”-- substances that sustain life and growth. (American)
- Creator God is the one who brought the world into being and maintains it. Creator God does not have an image depicting possible interpretation. Africans do not deny God, to do that is to deny one’s existence. Creator God cannot be limited to words but instead appreciated and immortalized through creation. (American)
- I understand that God is very much present in an African’s thoughts, actions, etc. on a daily if not moment-by-moment basis. But I also get the sense that God is removed, that is, the ancestors take a more active/pivotal role in one’s daily life, and that the supreme being is somehow ‘secondary.’ (American)
- In terms of African cultural knowledge, my understanding of the theme creator God is as the source and foundation of all life and reality. (Indonesian)
- I understand the creator God to be absolutely foundational and central to African cultural knowledge. All life and reality flows from God. Thus God is all pervasive, all present and inextricably part of all experience. God is particularly experienced in the cycles and vitality of the natural world, and in the key moments of life and death, decay and renewal, fertility, transition and transformation. (American)
- God is present everywhere in the African culture. The wonders of nature are all signs of His presence. It is not possible to think, to live or to love without relating it to God. God is spirit that is why there are no images of God in African culture. (Spaniard)
- The theme of creator God in African cultural knowledge is very important. We can find it in the African story in the [African] religion. (Norwegian)
- God is said to be all-powerful and all-present like light and air. God is experienced in the wonders of creation, the sun and moon, the harvests, the rain, fertility of families and livestock. (Norwegian)

- From what I can understand, creator God is an omni-present being who can only be experienced through His creation, including other people. Since the African spirit world is so prevalent, I believe that this influences and supports their connection to the Holy Spirit. This supports the idea that the Holy Spirit is always with us. (American)
- Creator God brings life from death and re-creates the world with every birth. Each birth carries on ancestral lives and traits created by God. Names are symbolic of the ancestors living in the newly born. The creator God initiates the process by which humanity carries on with ancient traits throughout eternity. (American)
- God is giver and sustainer of life and as such all beings depend on Him. For the African, God cannot be expressed in an image. In Cameroon, God is called “who is this?” a question not a noun. God is a vital force present in all creation. My question: is God a personal God to the Africans? (American)
- Creator God is present in all of creation--uniting all of creation. There is a sense of unity in all of life and no dualism. God is pure spirit and enters all aspects of life at all times and all places, so there is no need to set special times and places for prayer and worship--sense and presence of God is profound and brings a unity of spirit with all of life. (American)
- God the creator is the one who creates everything, sustains everything and takes care of all. (Polish)
- God is pure spirit. God is known through the wonders of creation like the sun and the moon. God is the source of all life and is seen in the fertility of families, in the growth of crops and the protection of each one, the wonders of new life in all its forms. (American)
- I have seen a great deal of symbiosis with creation, and a dependence upon all of creation together for survival. (American)
- God has created everything. His spirit is present in all of His creation. (Norwegian)
- From the history written what I understand is that the Creator started everything and this is explained in several different aspects. (Norwegian)
- God is transcendent and all-powerful. God is known by many through intermediaries such as spirits or diviners or Jesus Christ and the Bible. (American)
- Creator God is a life giving power. Like the sun giving light, creator God is giving life to everything alive on earth. He started it all and is still taking care. (Irish)

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### **EDITOR'S REFLECTIONS**

Missionaries in Africa towards the end of the nineteenth century assumed that Africans did not have a concept of a monotheistic creator God. Many of the earlier writings indicate their concern that Africans were polytheistic rather than monotheistic, a theory that was later disapproved. From time immemorial, Africans have conceived of God as one Supreme non-human being who is the creator of all. However, Africans preferred to address their problems to beings such as ancestors who are closer to them. In some of the traditions it is said that small human problems should be solved by ancestors. God should only be approached in case of a major problem.

For Africans, God should be approached in reverence as the source of all life and reality. Moreover, it should be recognized that there are major differences between the God of Christianity and the God of African religion.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Where would you place God's abode in this earthly world?
2. Do the ancestors act as intermediaries between God and people in your community?
3. Is the God of Africa involved in human affairs like the God of Christianity?
4. What is your personal understanding of the idea of a creator God?

### **AFRICAN ILLUSTRATION**

#### **GOD'S PRESENCE AND POWER**

A Burundian Catholic seminarian on his visits home would say prayers with his mother and siblings, while his father looked on. This puzzled him, and in a book he wrote:

One day I was so bold as to ask him why he didn't join us for evening prayers. Actually, when mother gathered us to pray before meals or before going to bed, my father said nothing. He remained in his place. Seated. He watched us, we the children, and mother, his wife. It remained an enigma to me. That is why I questioned him. "My son, you are under delusion. You think we have to use formulas in order to pray to Imana our God. When I contemplate the work Imana has accomplished in my house I have no need to tell him about it. Before him I keep silence, and I offer him in silence the house over which he had made me head." (Kayoya, M.(1973) *My Father's Footprints: A Search for Values*. Nairobi: East African Publishing House, p. 35)

### RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Mbiti, J.S. (1975). *Concepts of God in Africa*. Southampton: The Camelot Press Ltd.
- Olupona, J.K. (Ed.) (1991). Major Issues in the Study of African Traditional Religion. In *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*. (pp. 25-23). New York: Paragon House.
- Paris, P.J. (1995). *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse*. (pp. 27-33). Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

### NON-AFRICAN ILLUSTRATION

#### THE CHRISTIAN BELIEF IN GOD AS TRIUNE AS EXPRESSED IN THE NICENE CREED

We believe in one God,  
the father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
Of all that is seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only son of God,  
Eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God . . .

For us men and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven:  
by the power of the Holy Spirit  
he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man . . .

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.  
With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified . . .