

Have Africans Ever Been 'Non-Believers'?

Since the coming of the colonialists to Africa, Africans have had to bear with the label of being non-believers. Those who colonized and oppressed the indigenous people of the continent, saw it fit to label the aboriginals even as kaffirs. While this label has been used for a long time to refer to Africans, an important question is whether it befits them. This paper then addresses this matter as it attempts to prove whether this is the case or not. Ideas have been solicited from works that comment on the use of this term and those that reveal the religious nature of Africans. An attempt is also made to define the concept of kaffir, for a clear understanding of its meaning and origin.

Mqhayi (1981, 64) records: *Izizwe zixelelana ukuba uXhosa ubengenalo unqulo ebukumkanini bakhe* (Nations tell one another that Xhosa had no religion in his kingdom). Religion is an important aspect of life among human beings. Without it, humans would lead a life of chaos and, possibly, barbarism. This idea is alluded to by Mtumane (1992, 7), who views religion as “a controlling influence”, and adds that “the Xhosa people were believed (by other nations) to be leading a chaotic and barbaric life with

no controlling influence”. The designation kaffir, which was used by the Europeans to refer to Africans is proof that these people were thought of as having no religion by the Europeans. The term was a derogative way of referring to Africans by the Europeans (Landau, 2011, 86). It generally means an unbeliever or someone without a religion. According to the *Online Etymology Dictionary* (2010, 1), the term is derived “from the Arabic *kafir*” meaning “unbeliever, infidel,” and “impious wretch” and has “a literal sense of “one who does not admit the blessings of God””. The dictionary further states that it is used as an “equivalent of “heathen” to refer to Bantus in South Africa ...” In their use of this noun, the Europeans viewed Africans as unbelievers or heathens who led a life of barbarism.

The above position by the Europeans and, probably, other nations, was unfortunate and can be emphatically disputed. For instance, in the words of Mqhayi (1975, 81):

*Kuyazeka kuye wonke ubani ukuba amaXhosa ngabanquli
boMenzi, uNdikhoyo, uQamata ophilileyo.*

(It is known to everyone that amaXhosa are worshippers of the Creator, the Omnipresent, and a living God.)

AmaXhosa, in this instance, are considered to represent the other nations of Africa as well. The above assertion by Mqhayi emphasises that not only do Africans have a religion, but that they are worshippers of God as well. God is a Being who is believed to be the creator of the universe. Rooney (1999, 800) regards Him as the “Supreme Being” who is “believed to in monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Muslim, and Christianity, to be the all-powerful and all-knowing creator of the universe, worshiped as the only god.” The phrase “such as Judaism, Muslims, and Christianity” suggests that these are not the only religions in which God is worshiped. In fact, God is referred to by different names in different languages. Just in South Africa, the English-speaking people refer to Him as God. The Afrikaans speaking people refer to Him as God. Among the isiNdebele speaking people, He is Zimu. Among the Sesotho, Sepedi and Setswana speaking people, He is Modimo. AmaXhosa call Him uMdali, uMenzi, uNdikhoyo and uQamata. Even among different religions, God is referred to by different names. The Muslims, for instance, refer to Him as Allah.

The presence of titles referring to God in the languages of the African people is also proof that these people have a religion that has God as the Supreme Being (Mqhayi, 1981, 64, Hodgson, 1982, 101). Rukuni (2007,

143) further emphasises this point, when he states: "... our ancestors always knew that there is one God". This is confirmed by the presence of names referring to God in the different African languages. In this regard, in the languages of Angola, God is referred to as Kalunga, Nzambi and Suku. In Uganda He is referred to as Akju, Jok, Katanda, Kubumba, Ori, Rugaba and Weri (Mbiti, 1989, 42). Mbiti (1989, 40) avers that the belief in God "is a very ancient belief in African religious belief". About amaXhosa, Mqhayi (1981, 23) reports:

Ngemihla yakudala, mini kwavel' iintaba kwabek' umntu wamnye wokuphath' abanye. Kwathiwa ke loo mntu ngumntu wegazi. Kwathiwa loo mntu yinkonyana yohlanga, kwathiwa loo mntu makathotyelwe luluntu; Aze athi yen' athobele uQamata.

(In ancient days, when mountains appeared, one person was instated to rule over others. That person was proclaimed of royal blood, that person was designated the calf of the nation, it was proclaimed that he be obeyed by humanity. And he, in turn, to obey God.)

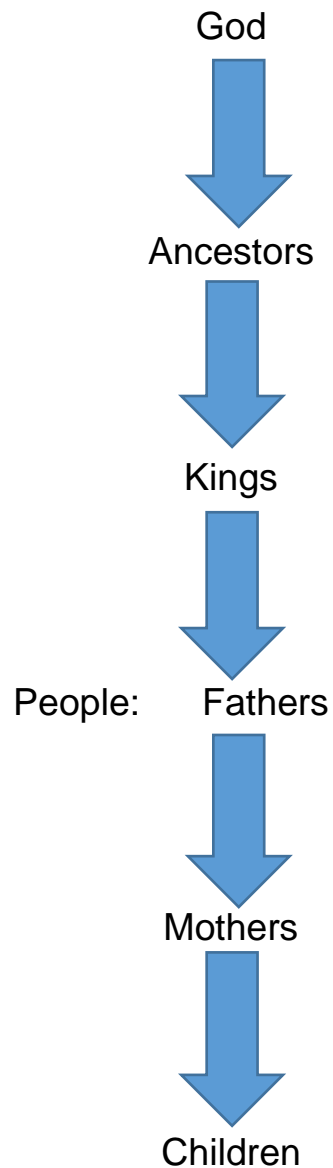
The person introduced as having "to rule over others", who is also "of royal blood", and "the calf of the nation", to be obeyed by humanity and him to

obey God; is a king or chief among Africans. Note should be taken that this person (king or chief) is said to have been instated during the time of the appearance of mountains. The appearance of mountains is generally taken to be part of the creation of the earth. This statement then signifies that in the worldview of the Africans, kings and chiefs were instituted at creation. Yes, this could be an exaggeration that is used to emphasize the period when Africans have had a religion that includes God as the Supreme Being. If, around the appearing of the mountains, these beings were ordered to obey God, that means Africans have always believed God to have been in existence even before creation. The above citation reveals the order of authority among Africans where people obey the king or chief and the latter obeys God. The highest position is that of God, followed by that of kings and chiefs and then ordinary people. This may be represented in a pyramid as follows:



God's ranking highest in this pyramid illustrates that he is considered the Highest Force. He is regarded as the final point of reference and appeal when disorders occur (Qangule, 1979, 68). As the chief occupies the level between God and people, he is considered as obeying God directly and people obey God through him.

Qangule (1979, 67) provides a more detailed pyramid of authority as follows:



Qangule adds the level of ancestors between God and kings (chiefs). Kings then do not come immediately below God but below the ancestors. Qangule also categorizes people into fathers, mothers, and children. The ancestors then, who are situated closest to God, are believed to act as mediators between Him and those living this side of eternity (Qangule, 1979: 68), according to their categories. It is understood that putting

mothers under fathers could be debatable. However, as the paper is not necessarily about gender issues, but the religious position of Africans, that point would be better addressed in another study.

In traditional African culture, people are believed to approach God through the ancestors. This is what Mbiti (1989: 62) implies as he says:

People feel themselves very small in the sight of God. In approaching him they sometimes need the help of someone else ... For this reason, African peoples make use of helpers in approaching God, although they also approach him directly.

The helpers mentioned in this extract are ancestors in the religion of the traditional Africans, Christ in Christianity, and Mohamed in the Muslim religion.

The time when Africans started knowing about and worshiping God is provided by Hodgson (1982, 66), in the following comment about amaXhosa:

Long long ago the Xhosa worshipped Qamata. His name was in their tongues even during the time of Tshiwo (late 17th century) and even before then Qamata was worshipped by them. They did this before the races arrived ...

The phrase “Long long ago” estimates the period from whence Africans began to worship God. The phrase does not indicate a specific time. This suggests that it is not known and cannot be traced when these people started having this worship. It is like the situation with the account of the bible that “In the beginning God created ...” (Genesis, 1:1) and, in the same vein, it is not specifically indicated when the beginning was. It is assumed that it is a time that runs back indefinitely. The period when Africans began to worship God may also be regarded as running back indefinitely. This idea is strengthened by the mention of “the time of Tshiwo ... and even before then. They did this before the races came ...” Note should be taken that the time of Tshiwo is estimated to have been during the 17th century and it is also stated that, even before then amaXhosa, for instance, worshiped Qamata already. From the above discussion it may safely be argued that since their existence, these people had a religion and belief that always involved the worship God. In this sense, they were never kaffirs, if one considers the above definition of the word.

The phrase “Before the races arrived ...” refers to the coming of the Europeans and other nations to Africa. If Africans worshiped God before the arrival of these races, that puts under question the popular view that it is the westerners who introduced God to Africans. What they might have introduced is the manner of worshiping God, that was probably different from that of the aboriginals. Otherwise, worshiping God has always been part of the life of Africans.

Africans have a tendency of associating with God any natural phenomenon they do not have answers for. For instance, in some traditional African communities, thunderstorms are associated with Him. When there are thunderstorms, some traditional Africans always sit in reverence, as they believe that God might be passing by or trying to communicate something to them. When lightning strikes an object, that is always considered as *ukufeketha* or *ukudlala kweNkosi* (the Lord becoming sporty), demonstrating that God wants something from human beings. Hence a ritual involving the cleansing of the members of the entire village for a week or so, followed by a day of celebrations, often gets conducted. At this instance, it is believed that God has come Himself and not sent any medium. The celebrations demonstrate the belief that God has been appeased.

Also, in some traditional African communities, people are known of avoiding pointing an object that is towards the sky, with an open and straightened finger. They always do so with a bent finger. The belief is that pointing towards the sky with an open finger, is tantamount to poking God, whose residence is believed to be in that direction. Pointing up with a bent finger then is to avoid poking Him and to show respect as well.

Before the coming of the missionaries from the west, Africans had their own way of understanding and interacting with God. Some people erroneously refer to Africans as worshippers of ancestors, instead of worshipping God. This is an error because, as illustrated earlier, ancestors occupy the position of being intercessors between human beings and God. This is in the same manner as other religions also have intercessors between God and human beings.

God is generally associated with kindness, justice, benevolence, and all other positive attributes. Those who labeled Africans as Kaffirs do not seem to have demonstrated these attributes towards Africans. Instead, they are the ones who oppressed the latter and barbarically dispossessed them of their land. On the other hand, Africans never left their land to rob

other nations of their possessions. Instead, they persevered the atrocities committed by others on them. When comparing those who viewed Africans as kaffirs and Africans, the former seems to be the ones who demonstrate characteristics of being kaffirs. They killed innocent Africans brutally. An example of this is how King Hintsa of amaXhosa was slain, as revealed by Oaks (1995: 106). Mtumane (2006) also reveals this brutality in the poem entitled 'Intloko KaHintsa'. The Europeans' labelling Africans as kaffirs then, is more like pointing at the Africans with one finger, while three fingers are pointing back at them. If being kaffirs would be categorized, the Europeans, based on their actions towards Africans, would be more of Kaffirs than Africans.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the suitability of the titles 'kaffirs', 'non-believers', and 'heathens' for Africans. From the discussion, it was and is still an error and misnomer to refer to Africans by these titles. Africans did and still do not deserve to be referred to as non-believers, heathens, and kaffirs. Instead, it could be suggested for those who saw it fit to label them in this manner, to check, based on their treatment of Africans, how far these labels are from themselves.

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