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## Tribute to John S. Mbiti

Joseph G. Healey, MM  
*Maryknoll Society – Nairobi*

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Note from the editors: The essay below is a slightly revised version of the essay of the same title that appears in *Proverbium* 37 (2020). We want to thank the editor of *Proverbium*, Fr. Joseph Healey, for permission to publish the essay in the JSE.

**Tribute to John S. Mbiti (30 November, 1931 — 6 October, 2019)**

Joseph G. Healey, MM  
Maryknoll Society – Nairobi

We continue to mourn John S. Mbiti, the Kenyan professor, author and theologian who died in Switzerland on 6 October, 2019 at the age of 87. He was one of the founders of our African Proverbs Project and the African Proverbs Working Group. He was one of cornerstones of our African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Website. A “Search” on our website reveals 32 references/hits.

<https://afriprov.org/?s=Mbiti>

He was the leading scholar/researcher of, and writer on, Akamba Stories, Proverbs and Sayings. He provided the important “African Proverb of the Month” for October, 2000:

Mbiti yi mwana ndiisaa ikamina. (Akamba) Fisi mwenye mtoto hali na kumaliza chakula. (Swahili) The hyena with a cub does not eat up (consume) all the available food. (English)

<https://afriprov.org/oct2000>

He stated:

Proverbs are a rich source of African Religion and Philosophy. They contain and point to a deep spirituality, as well as theological and philosophical insights. In this case they form a bridge between traditional African religiosity and biblical teaching... African oral theology is a living reality. We must come to terms with it. We must acknowledge its role in the total life of the church. It is the most articulate expression of theological creativity in Africa. This form of theology gives the church a certain measure of theological selfhood and independence.

An Anglican priest and Canon, he taught Theology and Religion for many years at Makerere University in Uganda. Mbiti’s seminal book, *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969) has had a great influence on African Theology and African theologians. We can thank John Mbiti for many theological insights including the expression “the living dead,” how African time looks backward, etc. He tried to shape and re-awaken African Religion that many young people have ignored or are not well informed about.

John Mbiti is now one of our revered ancestors in Christ, one of our living dead. May he rest in peace.

Here are some tributes to Marehemu John Mbiti by his friends and colleagues:

### **1. Jesse K. Mugambi (Kenya): Introduction**

Professor John Samuel Mbiti bid us goodbye on 6 October 2019 in Switzerland. He is one of the very rare record-breakers in academia. The total number of words in his books and papers run into millions, not thousands. His titles are many:— at least twenty-five. . . His roles were many: Academic; Adviser; Anthropologist; Artist; Author; Counselor; Diplomat; Ecumenist; Exegete; Interpreter; Linguist; Mediator; Mentor; Missiologist; Parent; Pastor; Pathfinder; Planner; Poet; Preacher; Priest; Professor; Promoter; Teacher; Theologian; Translator . . . His books cover a wide range of themes: Christology; Ethics; Exegesis; Fiction; Folklore; Hermeneutics; Mediation; Poetry; Translation; Worldviews! It is difficult to summarize in a few words the depth and breadth of such a great scholar as John Mbiti. He was proficient in nine languages, and published in at least three of them: English; German; French; Greek; Hebrew; Kamba; Swahili . . . It is difficult for one person to describe in a few words the personality and contribution of such a person as John Mbiti. In this reflection I summarize my encounter with him, and his impact on me.

*A Personal Appreciation.* I first heard of John S. Mbiti in 1966-67, when I was a student in a two-year teacher-training course at Machakos College in Eastern Kenya. That college, as all the rest in Kenya, had a majority of expatriate tutors, some from Britain and the rest from the USA. The few Kenyan tutors on the staff were keen on introducing the students to African authors who at that time were few. By then Professor John S. Mbiti had already published his book, *Akamba Stories* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966). My tutors encouraged me and other students to read John S. Mbiti's works. At that time I was compiling the first draft of my manuscript of poems, and writing a research project on St. Paul, based on Romans 13. My favorite subjects were English and Religion. Thus I read Mbiti's book of stories and at this early stage of my academic and professional career. I recall observing the economy of language that Mbiti employed in both poetry and prose. Writing could be fun, I thought. Later, I read his *Poems of Nature and Faith*, which I found equally profound. John S. Mbiti, among other African authors, became one of my mentors in authorship, long before I met him in person.

In 1968 I entered Kenyatta College, Nairobi, for a one-year upgrading teacher-training course in Religious Education and English that would qualify us to teach in High School. Ronald Dain, our head tutor there, was a voracious reader— keen to expose his students to all the books that he considered important. We learned from him that Professor John S. Mbiti was at that time Head of the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy at Makerere University College, Uganda, which was a Constituent College of the University of East Africa. The Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy at Makerere was the only place in East Africa where these two disciplines could be “secularly” studied. In addition to the teacher-training course at Kenyatta College, some of us simultaneously enrolled for the University of East Africa Certificate in Theology, which was examined and certified by the department headed by Professor Mbiti at Makerere University College. By that time Mbiti had already begun compiling the *Occasional Research Papers*. Several volumes were typed, mimeographed and bound in multiple copies for circulation to universities in Africa and abroad. Most of the authors of these ‘Occasional Papers’

were students at Makerere. The best of the Papers written by students at Kenyatta College were also included in the *Occasional Research Papers*.

In addition to this series, Professor Mbiti served as Editor of the Journal then sponsored by the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy, called *Dini na Mila*. The most acclaimed research papers by both staff and students would be published in this journal. I was thrilled to learn that my Research Paper at Kenyatta College had been selected for publication in *Dini na Mila* Vol. V, No. 1 of 1971. Professor John Mbiti wrote to me making important and constructively critical comments on my paper "Traditional Religion of the Embu People." It was delightful to receive typed critical comments from such an important scholar as John S. Mbiti. The same paper was retyped, mimeographed and circulated to many institutions between 1969 and 1971. This was my first research paper to be published and severally cited.

Early in 1969 Professor Mbiti was invited to address the Annual General Meeting of the Christian Churches Educational Association (CCEA) at the All Saints Cathedral, Nairobi. His well-attended lecture focused on the importance, and necessity of including African Religions and Philosophy within the Christian Religious Education curriculum. Most missionaries were skeptical about this proposal, but a few of them were willing to take Professor Mbiti at his word. As part of his address Professor Mbiti announced the publication of his new book, *African Religions and Philosophy*. The entire school curriculum in Kenya was at that time under review, after publication of the Kenya Education Act of 1968. As one of the few Kenyans involved in this curriculum revision, I became an admirer of Professor Mbiti's work, which provided the essential frame of reference for all of us involved in promoting the African cultural and religious heritage in the revised curriculum.

After teaching for a short while at Chania High School, Thika, I spent one academic year (1969-70) at the Westhill College of Education, Birmingham, England. Westhill was one of the Selly Oak Colleges, where Professor Mbiti had taught a decade earlier (1959-60). While in the UK I spent several weeks at the CMS Archives in London. My time in the UK was a very important part of my training. I spent much time in the Cadbury Central Library at Selly Oak, Birmingham reading very widely as time permitted. Upon my return to Kenya from Britain in 1970 I was posted as a tutor in Religious Education at Kagumo Teacher Training College, Nyeri. The Education Act (1968) was already in force, and we were expected to avoid indoctrination in class at the same time that we trained teachers to impart examinable knowledge and skills. In addition to teaching I was also appointed the Lay Chaplain of the College. In that capacity I was able to impart much of what I had learned, especially from the work of Professor John Mbiti. By then several other African writers had become widely known, including Ngugi wa Thiong'o of Kenya, Okot p'Bitek of Uganda and Chinua Achebe of Nigeria. Of all these, John S. Mbiti was the most appealing, because of the thoroughness with which he conducted his research and presented it in publications.

Late in 1971 I was admitted as a mature student for an undergraduate course in Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Nairobi. This department had just been launched in the 1970-71 academic year. Thus I was in the first cohort of alumni in our Department, which had the retired Anglican Bishop Stephen Neill as Founding Chairman. Most members of the teaching

*Tribute to John S. Mbiti*

staff were expatriates— from Britain, Germany, Ireland and the USA. Only two members of the teaching staff were Kenyan. Prejudice against the African cultural and religious heritage was almost unbearable. Fortunately, my class consisted of mainly mature students, who had been teachers and tutors prior to enrolment. We could therefore afford to challenge our lecturers on points about which we thought they were mistaken.

I recall one morning when Professor (Bishop) Stephen Neill came to deliver another of his eloquent lectures on Comparative Religion. He quickly drew a Religious Map of the World, in which he showed the continents and assigned major religions— one for each continent. Protestantism was assigned to Europe and North America. Catholicism was assigned to South America; Islam to the Middle East. Hinduism was assigned to India; Buddhism, to South East Asia. Confucianism was assigned to China and Marxism was assigned to Eurasia. According to Neill, the Religious Map of the World was complete. As classmates we looked at each other, and whispered among ourselves: Has the learned Professor (Bishop) not forgotten something? Most of us had personal copies of Professor Mbiti's book, *African Religions and Philosophy*. And we took Prof. John S. Mbiti very seriously. In whispers we nominated the oldest classmate kindly to request Professor (Bishop) Neill to explain the omission. The conversation was as follows:

‘Excuse us, Professor Sir, it seems that your Religion World Map is incomplete!’

‘No! No! My Religious Map of the World is complete!’

‘Excuse us, Professor Sir, we do not see Africa on your map!’

‘That is correct, dear students! There is no African religion!’

‘But excuse us, Professor (Bishop), Sir, Professor Mbiti has written much about it.’

‘Listen to me! There is no African Religion!’ we were told.

We listened as ordered, but of course we did not take him seriously.

That morning was one of the turning points in my academic career. We were not convinced that our Professor (Bishop) had even bothered to read Professor Mbiti's books. I promised myself to read more, research more and publish more, so that there could be more scholarly evidence to document the African cultural and religious heritage. By then, Professor Mbiti had published more of his important scholarly works: *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969); *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970) and *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971). During my undergraduate period I wrote a paper titled “The African Experience of God.” It was originally drafted as an assignment submitted to one of those expatriate lecturers, who wanted the African students to explain the difference (if any) between the “African experience of God” and any other “experiences.” The thrust of my argument was that this was an improper formulation of the question. The assignment presupposed that “God” was a “constant” term. The problem was not the “experience” but the definition of “God.” This paper was later published in *Africa Thought and Practice*, Vol. V, No. 1, 1974, edited by Professor Odera Orika. Professor Kwasi Wiredu, another of my mentors, favorably commented on my paper. He was at that time teaching at the University of Ghana. It was in that paper that I first commented in writing on my own impression of Professor Mbiti's works.

Early in June, 1973 I had the privilege of attending the first exploratory meeting between African and African-American Christian Theologians, convened at the Union Theological Seminary,

New York, with Professor James H. Cone as the host. At that time Professor John S. Mbiti was winding up his Sabbatical Year at Union Theological Seminary. There were seven African theologians: John S. Mbiti (Kenyan – Makerere University); Kwesi Dickson (Ghanaian – University of Ghana); Christian Gaba (Ghanaian – University of Cape Coast); Fashole Luke (Sierra Leonean – Fourah Bay College, Free Town); Desmond Tutu (South African – Theological Education Fund, London); Gabriel Setiloane (South African); and Jesse N.K. Mugambi (Kenyan – University of Nairobi). Among the African theologians in that meeting, I was the youngest.

At the planning stage it had been agreed that there would be 12 African American theologians as hosts and counterparts. Among these were: James H. Cone, Gayraud Wilmore, Preston Williams, Herbert Brown, Charles Long, J. Deortis Roberts, John Bennett, Shelby Rooks, Willis Logan and George B. Thomas. It was a memorable experience for me to be part of this distinguished gathering, of which Professor Mbiti and other distinguished African and African-American scholars were present, including a prospective Archbishop and Nobel Prize Laureate, Desmond Tutu. Earlier, in 1972 the Joint Religious Education Panel in Kenya had elected me to co-author a textbook for one of the courses in preparation for the East African Certificate of Education. The book was published as *The African Religious Heritage* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1976). John S. Mbiti's book *African Religions and Philosophy* was one of our valuable resources as we prepared our manuscript. Later Professor Mbiti published an abridged version under the title *Introduction to African Religion* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1976). He also published *The Prayers of African Religion* (London: SPCK, 1975). Thus my academic and professional formation is nurtured through the mentorship of Professor John Samuel Mbiti, even though he was not a direct supervisor, lecturer or professor.

On completion of my undergraduate studies I was admitted for enrolment in a Master of Arts course through research at the University of Nairobi. I chose to conduct research on Perspectives of Christianity in East Africa with particular reference to African writers. One of the writers I selected for analysis was Professor John S. Mbiti. He kindly agreed to read through an early draft of my manuscript. During the WCC Fifth Assembly at Nairobi in November 1975, Professor Mbiti gave me an appointment during which we went through his comments regarding my observations on some of his arguments. He was very thorough in his critique of my manuscript. This interview had a great impact on the final formulation of my Thesis. Another influence came from my interview of other East African creative writers especially Okot p'Bitek. This research was later published as *Critiques of Christianity in African Literature* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1992). The book includes a chapter on John S. Mbiti, as revised on the basis of our discussions sixteen years earlier. My Thesis for MA was completed in 1977. Thereafter I enrolled for doctoral research at the University of Nairobi.

For my doctoral research I wrote on “Problems of Meaning with Reference to Religion”, completed in 1984. The focus was on Ludwig Wittgenstein's remark that “whereof we cannot speak, thereon we must pass over in silence”. Wittgenstein did not write off religion. Rather he recognized and appreciated that philosophical logic was inadequate for expressing religious experience. Further, he recognized and appreciated that meaning in verbal language depends on

*Tribute to John S. Mbiti*

the uses we attach to words and gestures. There are no fixed meanings for any words. We decide what meaning we wish to attach to a word, according to our interests, values and ideologies. Religious language, therefore, must be ‘unmasked’ and unpacked, in order that people of various cultures may communicate effectively. The fruits of my doctoral research were to be utilized in my lectures at the University of Nairobi, particularly in my teaching of undergraduate courses in Philosophy of Religion, Religion and Science, and Contemporary Religious Thought. Some aspects of the doctoral research were summarized in my textbook titled *Philosophy of Religion* (BRP 103, College of Education and External Studies, 1988). Contrasting Mbiti with Wittgenstein, perhaps it would be appropriate to suggest that where Wittgenstein would pass over in silence, Mbiti would illustrate in parables, proverbs and riddles— according to the African cultural and religious heritage. In all my research, Professor Mbiti’s published works have formed one of my frames of reference. His contribution to theological anthropology is remarkable.

When three of my books were published in 1989, Professor Mbiti was gracious to send me his critiques, very precise and concise. He was always very gentle in his criticism, and very cool when responding to those who might differ with his views or approaches. In 1996 while I was on the staff of the All Africa Conference of Churches I invited him to address one of our Occasional Guest Lectures. It was very well attended, and the discussion reminded me of the other lecture he had delivered eighteen years earlier at the All Saints Cathedral. This time he focused on the meeting points between Christianity and African Religion. What is the resonance between the Holy Spirit and the traditional African concept of spirits? The lecture raised more questions than answers. Mbiti challenged African missiologists to be more careful and avoid condemning African notions of spirits. Without such notions, it is difficult for Africans to make sense of the Holy Spirit.

In March, 2005 Professor Mbiti and I were invited as speakers to deliver lectures at a conference convened by the University of the Western Cape. Several other prominent African theologians also attended: Mercy Oduyoye, John Pobee, Tinyiko Maluleke, Isabel Phiri and others. It was refreshing to hear Professor Mbiti again. This time he referred to the African concept of time, emphasizing in a new way, the fact that “time” in Africa is not a commodity for sale or purchase, but an expression of relationships. At the end of his lecture, questions were invited. One of the questions is, in my view the most memorable. A White South African asked:

‘Professor Mbiti, you have talked at length about African identity. How do you define an African?’

There was silence in the room, as Professor Mbiti prepared himself to answer.

Then Mbiti began to speak: ‘I do not know what your problem is. Africans know themselves. They do not need to be defined.’

There was laughter in the theatre for a short while, then silence as we prepared ourselves for the next question.

When I learned that Professor Mbiti was coming to Nairobi in September, 2005, I requested him to spare a few hours for us to get together and chat. I was privileged to spend a whole afternoon and evening with him on 10 September. During that time, he allowed me to engage in a video-recorded conversation. It was the first time in our academic and professional careers to share experiences covering so much scope for so long. Professor Mbiti remained continually involved in research. One of his latest research initiatives was in African Proverbs.

This event was in the context of a wider collaborative project, and the major part of which he was responsible, came to a climax in 2000 with the final publication of five volumes of proverbs that he edited from Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Lesotho and Uganda. He also undertook, as sole author, the task of translating the entire New Testament into the Kamba language. The first draft was completed in September 2005, and the published version was published at Nairobi in December 2014. His doctoral research, published as *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background* (1971), is certainly echoed in these later publications.

Professor John S. Mbiti occupies a unique place in the history of African religious scholarship. He is the first and only scholar to synthesize continental European structural anthropology with the Anglo-American Empiricist ethnography. This synthesis made it possible for Mbiti to compile and publish a compendium of research, hitherto unmatched by any other scholar. Three masterpieces are testimonials to this achievement: *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969); *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK) and *Prayers of African Religion* (London: SPCK, 1975). Many critiques of Mbiti's works have focused on his theory of the African concept of time. However, it is worthwhile to appreciate that his enquiry into the African concept of time was not an end in itself. Rather, it was a conclusion he reached while inquiring why African Christians responded to missionary evangelization in a particular way. John Mbiti's enquiry was not approached from philosophical ontology, but from theological eschatology. Both philosophical ontology and theological eschatology are controversial subjects.

Perhaps it is correct to suggest that if the assumptions are correctly formulated and the scope is clearly demarcated, any argument can hold— including Mbiti's view of the "African Concept of Time." My view of this subject is that matter, duration and space are interrelated in any ontological framework including African ontology. For that reason, "time"— "duration" as an ontological concept should be analyzed as an attribute of "matter" and "space." Professor Mbiti was dealing more with New Testament Eschatology than Philosophical Ontology, hence his conclusion. Viewed from his theological perspective, his observations and conclusions made sense. Different conclusions could be drawn from the same empirical observations if differing presuppositions are used as the basis for analysis and synthesis. The fact that Mbiti's work stimulated so much debate both in Africa and abroad is direct evidence of his immense contribution to African scholarship.

*Multi-Dimensional Aspects of Mbiti's Authorship* John Mbiti is one of the most prolific African scholars of the twentieth century. He was very widely travelled and exposed, having studied and worked in Kenya, Uganda, USA, UK and Switzerland where he lived with annual visits to his home in Kenya. His first degree was in English and Geography before he specialized in Theology and Religious Studies. The foundational training in Language and Geography paid



## *Tribute to John S. Mbiti*

dividends, as manifested in his passionate concern to present the African cultural and religious heritage integrally. While most ethnographers would have wished to emphasize the diversity of African peoples, Professor Mbiti successfully illustrated the cultural and religious fabric that weaves together the legacy of Africa's common history from prehistoric times. In the academic discipline of Religious Studies he tops the list. He is a creative writer, poet, ethnographer, anthropologist, linguist, New Testament exegete, novel translator, Bible translator, liturgist, philologist. The rest of this tribute illustrates these various aspects of Mbiti's creative mind.

*Creative Writer:* In 1954, at the age of 23 Mbiti published a novel in Kamba entitled *Mutinga na Ngewa Yake*, which went through several reprints. In the same year he published a Kkamba translation of R.L. Stevenson's abridged novel, *Treasure Island* under the title *Kithimani kya Uthwii*. In 1966 he published *Akamba Stories*, an anthology of folklore from the Akamba heritage. Thus Mbiti started his literary career as a novelist. He writes lucidly and graphically. His attention to detail is remarkable. During my interview with him in September 2004 he explained how everything around him brightened his imagination both at home and in school. He was keen to learn from both the Akamba heritage and the missionary legacy. This openness to learn produced a mind finely tuned to linguistic subtlety and artistic creativity.

*Poet:* John Mbiti's *Poems of Nature and Faith* was published in 1969. It illustrates his mastery of the English language, which he used for expressing the African worldview with particular reference to faith in God and appreciation of Creation.

*Ethnographer:* Ethnography is the science of describing and documenting the cultural and religious heritage of specific ethnic communities. His doctoral thesis at Cambridge University was an ethnographic monograph published under the title *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*. Although this book portrays Mbiti's knowledge and expertise as a New Testament scholar, it is equally successful in establishing John Mbiti as an accomplished ethnographer. In 1970 he published *Concepts of God in Africa*, a systematic compilation of notions of deity among the peoples of tropical Africa. The book is derived from ethnographic monographs.

*Anthropologist:* John Mbiti qualifies for the title of Anthropologist in view of his interest in the traits that are applicable to the whole of humankind in general, as manifested among the various peoples of Africa. In continental Europe the discipline of Anthropology belongs to the social sciences together with psychology, sociology and Economics. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century Anthropology acquired a profile under the banner of structuralism. Darwinist evolutionism was extended to human cultures, presupposing that human beings evolve their social structures progressively from simpler to more complex forms. Erroneously, moral evolutionism was appended to this Darwinist thinking and extended to the study of religions. The result was the hypothesis most lucidly articulated by Sir Edward Tylor in his book *Primitive Culture* (1875). Anthropology is distinct from Ethnography. The latter collects, compiles analyses empirical data pertaining to specific ethnic communities in the same way that biological and physical sciences do. John Mbiti strongly argued against evolutionist interpretations of religion, and maintained that humans, irrespective of the complexity or simplicity of their technology, have the capacity to profoundly worship the Creator.

*Linguist and Translator:* John Mbiti spoke, taught, preached and wrote in several languages, perhaps many more than any of his peers. He is the first African scholar to translate and publish the New Testament, as the sole author, from Biblical Greek into an African language – Kamba. With this achievement he ranks among the pioneer translators of the Bible, including Martin Luther, John Wycliffe and William Tyndale. He has challenged other African scholars to emulate him, and avail African readers the joy of reading the Bible in their own languages, in versions authored by their own scholars who understand their respective worldviews from within. New Testament Scholar: John Mbiti's book *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*, established him as a great authority in Biblical Greek as well as the Kamba worldview. Few scholars globally have achieved so much as linguists, translators and authors.

*Ecumenist:* Although an Anglican priest, John Mbiti was at home in various Christian expressions of Christianity. This openness facilitated his service as Director of the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, as a member of staff in the World Council of Churches (1974-80).

*Missiologist:* In 1970 John Mbiti wrote a challenging paper titled "The Crisis of Mission in Africa." Concisely, he outlined the challenges that the missionary enterprise had brought alongside the Gospel, especially because of emphasizing conversion at the expense of theological depth. He observed that Christianity in Africa risks expanding numerically, at the expense of theological depth. This risk is more apparent in this Third Millennium, than it was during the 1970s.

*Mentor:* Many scholars from across the world and across the whole denominational spectrum have grown theologically through the mentorship of Professor John Mbiti. This achievement is attested in references that are acknowledged in many books.

*Pan-Africanist:* While Mbiti was deeply rooted in his Akamba culture, he was at the same time a Pan-Africanist and a globalist. He was at home wherever he went, and mentored many people through his humility and accessibility.

## **Conclusion**

Professor John Samuel Mbiti was a profound theologian and philosopher, solidly grounded in his Akamba worldview, at the same time that he felt "at home" in any culture wherever he was invited to go and study, work, speak. Beneath his simple lifestyle there was a deep religiosity and profound philosophical and theological outlook. No words can adequately articulate the depth of insight that Professor Mbiti radiated among the audiences he addressed, and the reader who perused his books and papers. He has set a very high standard for the present and future generations to emulate, both in Africa and elsewhere.

## **2. Tribute by Laurenti Magesa (Kenya and Tanzania):**

Mzee John was a great mind and soul. What he did for African self-identity in African theology and in many other areas is incomparable. May he rest in eternal peace. This leads me to reflect on:

### *Orality and Ubuntu*

“If you want it to endure, put it down on paper!”

Such is the advice academic institutions throughout the world have insisted on since the invention of the art of writing nearly 3,500 years before the Christian Era. Though extremely important, the written text should not – must not – replace the significance of the spoken word in human relations.

As the physical representation of the spoken word, writing is a child of orality or the spoken word, which is, arguably, the most significant distinguishing mark of being human. At its best, speech generates communion, togetherness and community, constructing what is known in African philosophy as Ubuntu. To be human in the African view is to communicate with other human beings.

From the African perspective, oral communication is what creates human relationships by linking individuals and communities together. This has two possible outcomes: as already noted, it either ties people together with bonds of understanding and love, achieving peace, on the one hand, or it can cause misunderstanding and discord, tearing protagonists apart, on the other. Of course, even the written word has the ability to cause either of these results in human relations, but it is the spoken word that must be accorded pride of place in these processes.

A biblical saying illustrates the power of the spoken word in the dynamics of human interactions. Represented as the mouth and the tongue in the Bible, the word is a potent tool. “Those who guard their mouths and their tongues keep themselves from calamity,” the Book of Proverbs notes (Prov. 21:23). Similarly, an African proverb warns, “A cutting word is worse than a bowstring; a cut may heal, but the cut of the tongue does not.” These two maxims may be taken as summarizing biblical and African thought about the significance of the spoken word in human existence.

Regardless of its consequences, oral communication is central to human life and relationships. Absence of it does not augur well for the health of the human community. The widespread use of the internet today, that is replacing face-to-face encounters, is a case in point. Experts now point out the consequences of loss of direct (or primary) verbal communication on individuals and communities. The world was unaware of it only a few decades ago.

In a book titled *What Is Your Dangerous Idea? Today’s Leading Thinkers on the Unthinkable* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014) psychologist Daniel Coleman spells out some of the very serious concerns that cyber communication has engendered. They include the social dimension of the human reality. “The internet,” Coleman points out, “undermines the quality of human interaction, allowing destructive emotional impulses freer rein under specific circumstances.”

They are also neurological: “The reason is a neural fluke that results in cyber-disinhibition of the brain systems that keep our more unruly urges in check. The tech problem: a major disconnect between the ways our brains are wired to connect and the interface offered in online interactions.”

Coleman spells out the difference between actual verbal, face-to-face interaction and virtual engagement by internet (or writing, for that matter). It consists in the fact that inhibitions that govern propriety of human responses in “a live interaction” are reduced, if not completely removed. Because there is now no “real-time, ongoing feedback from the other person,” checks and balances so effectively provided in oral communication are minimized or no longer exist. As Coleman notes, for example, “the person would never say the words in the e-mail to the recipient were they face to face.” At least, the individual in question would not say them or behave in the same way.

What this means is that verbal interaction often serves positively as a form of protector of social behavior. In the African understanding of human life, the word is expected to stand at the service of Ubuntu. The connection between the spoken word and the evolution of society and community is, in this view, therefore, intrinsic and inseparable. It is the reason why the spoken word is accorded such importance in African traditions: it contains the potential to build or destroy, to heal or kill, to bind together or scatter humanity. The word is, for this reason, sacred.

As oral tradition, the word is adaptable and, in terms of large communities, extremely resilient. Stability, often erroneously presumed to be lacking in the oral genre of human communication, but almost exclusively associated with writing (as academic counsels suggest) lies in its flexibility. Unlike the written text which is static and requires arduous interpretation or exegesis – often involving guesswork as to the “intention” of the original author – the durability of the oral tradition lies in its permanent freshness.

Oral tradition does not need formal, constant decoding of meaning. While retaining its basic intrinsic import, it easily adjusts itself to the social requirements of the moment in the current context. Its actual expression may change, but the message it conveys remains pristine, defying the accusation of internal distortion. The elder’s stories around the fireplace in the evening may vary in presentation from generation to generation, but they retain the original meaning and moral guidance.

“Put it down on paper,” yes, but do not discard the story around the fireplace. The former is the child; the latter is the mother of Ubuntu.

### **3. Tribute by Francis Njuguna (Kenya):**

The late African theological guru, Prof John Samuel Mbiti must have been a “theological trouble maker” as it must not have been easy for him to convince each one of us that the African person was notoriously religious. One needed to walk an extra mile and so he did, our African theological guru, the late Professor Mbiti. My take is that our historians will spare him some pages in their work on the theological role he played. May the very theological mustard seed he planted and subsequently watered grow to the biblical BIG tree.

**4. Tribute by Stan Nussbaum (USA):**

I remember John Mbiti as a member of the board of the African Proverbs Project, 1993-96. I have no doubt that his participation helped us get the original grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts which eventuated in the creation of [www.afriprov.org](http://www.afriprov.org). I was amazed and humbled at his consistent, prompt, thorough handling of everything related to his substantial part of that project. I also will never forget something he prayed at our first board meeting in Nairobi, "Lord, some of us are not quite sure what we are to do here, but we have come together to do it." Every word of that is a first-grade word, but the sentence is post-doctoral in its insight. Jesus could do that, and John Mbiti could follow his example. It was a delight to hear him as he did.

**5. Tribute by Ron Pagnucco (USA):**

As D.R. Peterson wrote in "Reading John Mbiti from Uganda" (*Africa is a Country*, 10.18. 2019): "How ought we remember John Mbiti? He was one of the architects of the curriculum of multiculturalism. Working from Kampala, he helped to define a whole world of ritual and thought. It is right that he should be honored and celebrated, for his work greatly enabled a more respectful, more sympathetic, and more systematic engagement between religious traditions. And yet, in our own time, it is important to remember how quickly calls for cultural integrity can become engines for nativism and intolerance. From his lecture hall at Makerere John Mbiti conjured up a religious order in which people fit seamlessly into a theological system that governed their thought and dictated their dispositions. Mbiti's view of African religious life—as integrated, whole, and all-embracing—made non-conformists seem to be opponents of good order. His scholarly work converged with the Amin regime's bloody efforts to root out dissenters, target minorities, and impose political conformity on Uganda's people."

I have tremendous respect for Mbiti and his work. One of the important characteristics of any religion — that religion may permeate all of one's life, be totalizing, which can be good or negative — religion's totalizing character can be useful to any authoritarian ruler if he can enlist the religion to support him, provide sacred legitimation. Of course, as we know well, religion can also be a resilient source of resistance to an authoritarian ruler, as has been true in many cases in Africa, evidenced by our St. Cloud (USA) Diocese's native son, Father John Kaiser, murdered by the Kenyan State for his human rights activism. I would add that I do not think any religion is as homogeneous as Mbiti seems to think, as is evidenced in the book by M.D. Toft, D. Philpott, & T.S. Shah, *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).

**6. Tribute by Grace Njau, CPS (Kenya):**

Here are some attributes of Professor John Mbiti. The late professor John Mbiti was a scholar of the African Religions and Philosophy. He dealt almost exclusively with the traditional concepts and practices in different African societies before the colonial period. Mbiti's work generally

highlighted the changes brought by the colonialists to African societies and how this was embraced. Despite all these changes, the traditional beliefs, customs, culture and other African artifacts still play an important role in the people's day-to-day living. The changes are affecting the material life and beginning to stretch deeper on way of life, language, response to emotional changes etc. His work clearly drew a real picture of the unity of African religion and philosophy.

Change is inevitable in all aspects of life and so are the works of this scholar. He devoted his work in comparing traditional and modern religious activities and their impact in both individual and family level. "The Nature of God" is one of his attributes that I will focus on.

Professor Mbiti expressed the understanding of most African societies of who God is. He also compared this with the Western world's understanding of God. There are similarities and differences cutting across the whole continent so the changes brought by the missionaries to Africa are minimal because God already existed in Africa. Therefore, the African thoughts and beliefs are true and not abstract.

Examples from the African context and other worlds' understanding of the nature of God:

*God is Omniscient* – meaning God knows everything and his understanding surpasses human beings. The Zulu and the Banyarwanda refer to God as the Wise One, The Akan refer him as "He who knows or sees all." The Yoruba people describe him as 'Only God is Wise'

*God is Omnipresent* – God is everywhere and even the wrongdoers cannot escape his judgment and nothing is hidden before him.

*God is Almighty* – Meaning God is bigger than other gods in the society. Most African societies regard him as high in hierarchy followed by other spirits, and below them is the human who reigns in earth. The Yoruba describe God as Akan; the Ashanti describe God as all-powerful and the mighty.

*God is Omnipotent* – God is powerful. The Congo sees God's presence in the forest and the forest is symbolic to them. The Gikuyu make sacrifices and prayers for rain and believe God will make mountains quake and rivers to flow. The Teso and Bukusu also see God's omnipotence in terms of controlling spirits which are beyond human control.

*God is Kind and Merciful* – he is ready to forgive and pity his people in time of sorrow. During difficulties, danger, illnesses he is the one who brings comfort. The Igbo say God does for them what is good and they have no reason to complain.

All these examples match with what the Bible says about who God is in the life of humans. The modern Religious Education that is in the Christian, Muslim, and other religions completes what the traditional African Religion had taught.

Due to development processes that have emerged in most African societies, changes have also been experienced at the commercial, industrial, technical, educational levels and in urbanization, which has called for adjustments here and there. New permanent buildings have replaced the mud shrines and temples. Today Christianity is more pronounced in most African countries and the question remains what is the fate of the old religion?

*Tribute to John S. Mbiti*

Currently its study has become part of history but behind modernization and education, traditional beliefs remain because they cannot fade away -- they keep rising even after their lapse in decades, and their lapse in centuries to come. Humans die but family ties remain strong and are passed from one generation to another.

Religion therefore still wields great power in the modern world; some communities strongly believe in spiritual forces of many kinds. This can be witnessed in the wearing of charms by children and adults as a sign of protection, and the existence of kingdoms in West and East Africa respectively. African religion is important for various educational fields, especially the anthropology, sociology and historical fields. Though this religion has been misunderstood by early authors, all the memories, beliefs, culture and artifacts still linger in our memories.