

# John Mbiti's Legacy on Teaching, Research, and Publication in African Traditional Religion at Makerere University

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## Abstract

The paper examines John Samuel Mbiti's legacy in teaching, research, and publication in African Traditional Religion (ATR) at Makerere University. It documents his contribution to Religious Studies' scholarship. The crux of the paper is to interrogate his contribution towards teaching, research, and publication in ATR, with an interest in how this has continued to influence scholarship in religious studies. By examining his legacy, we aim at documenting knowledge production in ATR. This paper utilises data obtained through in-depth interviews with Mbiti's contemporaries and other scholars, including alumni and current students of Religious Studies, and those that have read his publications. Besides, archival records of Mbiti's works and online articles were reviewed to provide data that will enhance the discourse on his legacy. The paper contributes to the existing knowledge on Mbiti's legacy in the teaching, research, and publication of ATR literature.

**Keywords:** African Traditional Religion, Mbiti, Religious Studies, legacy.

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## Introduction

This paper presents Professor John Samuel Mbiti's legacy on teaching, research, and publications on African Traditional Religion (ATR) while serving in the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy (as it was called at that time) at Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda, between 1964 and 1974. The paper explores part of Mbiti's legacy while at Makerere University and elsewhere, with a special focus on ATR, since his legacy in other areas is too big to be considered in a single chapter given the space and time limitations. Therefore, this paper only examines a specific aspect of Mbiti's broad legacy, with a focus on the teaching, research, and publication of ATR literature.

There is no doubt that John Samuel Mbiti's legacy in teaching, research, and publication in African Traditional Religion (ATR) at Makerere University is colossal. This is so, especially when one considers his place in African theology and philosophy. The key questions, particularly interrogated in this paper, include: who was Mbiti, in terms of his biography, professional and academic career? What was his legacy and scholarly contribution at Makerere University; in terms of teaching, research, and publication, particularly in African Traditional Religion literature? What reflections can be made of Mbiti's legacy, both at Makerere University, generally, and at the Department of Religion and Peace Studies, in particular?

The major sources of information for this paper included, among others, documentary analysis from the various archival materials, which the authors were able to access, such as reports, and specific secondary sources, including those authored by Mbiti himself. The paper also reviews occasional research journals and other academic papers and articles written by Religious Studies and other scholars at different moments in time and includes tributes following Mbiti's death in 2019. Besides, the authors contacted and interacted with various primary sources of information, including some existing contemporaries of Mbiti, staff, alumni, and students in the Department of Religion and Peace Studies at Makerere University as well as other key informants from outside the department. Specific voices from some of these primary sources were captured in the paper in the form of oral interviews, while a list of the several references and oral sources used in this paper indicated at the end.

The paper examines Mbiti's legacy at Makerere University, particularly in the Department of Religion and Peace Studies.

## **Mbiti's biography, profession and academic career**

### ***Early life, family and education***

Later, Mbiti continued with his studies, attaining another Bachelor of Arts degree and a Bachelor of Theology

degree from Barrington College in Rhode Island in 1956 and 1957, respectively. He lectured on religion in Kenya and England in the late 1950's, before he attained a PhD in Theology at Cambridge University in the United Kingdom, in 1963. His doctoral dissertation, *'Christian Eschatology in Relation to the Evangelisation of Tribal Africa'*, was of seminal importance for his subsequent theological and philosophical writing. His ordination in the Church of England as an Anglican priest or pastor in the same church followed his graduation from Cambridge University (eNotes Study Guide Article, May 5, 2015, p.1). He served as a parish priest in England for a while, before coming back to Makerere University in 1964, this time as a teacher of theology and religion, particularly traditional African religion, between 1964 and 1974.

It should be noted that Mbiti's development as a promising young Christian academic, did not come about by accident. As a young man and member of the Akamba people, an area in eastern and south-central Kenya, he was systematically and deeply immersed in Christian life and doctrine. His education was Christian and Western. He also received informal education, especially in Akamba stories and the art of story-telling, which were fascinating to him, leading him to write and publish a novel, *Mutunga na Ngewa Yake* (1954), numerous poems and short stories, and an *English-Kamba Vocabulary* (1959). Beyond these, he sought out and recorded about

fifteen hundred traditional stories, publishing a representative selection as *Akamba Stories* (1966). Thus, Mbiti's professional and illustrious Christian academic career, including writing and publishing were formed in him at the very early years of his life, and the same can be said of his interest in African traditional religions, despite the fact that his formal education was Christian and Western, not traditional and African, as pointed out above. To emphasise this, (eNotes Study Guide Article, May 5, 2015) mentions that:

By the age of about thirty, Mbiti was both a budding Christian theologian, and a collector and student of materials illuminating portions of traditional African life. At the root of his activities was a profound sense of the needs of a changing Africa, especially its young people. Both Christianity (including Western technological civilisation) and African traditionalism were necessary; none of them alone was sufficient. Mbiti saw that a conjoining of these elements, a syncretism, must occur, and he would make a major contribution (eNotes Study Guide Article, May 5, 2015, p.1).

On May 15, 1965, Mbiti was married to Verena Mbiti-Siegenthaler, a teacher of languages and social worker. The two had four children together; three daughters (Maria Mwende, Esther Mwende, and Anna Kavata) and a son (Samuel Kyeni). Thus, Mbiti became a devoted family man, drawing on this personal practical experience to help him formulate

a well-developed philosophy of marriage, incorporating traditional African and Christian values, and modern liberal elements (*eNotes Study Guide Article*, May 5, 2015, p.1). This development in Mbiti's life was short lived, after joining the recently started Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy at Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda, in 1964, from where his professional and academic career continued to develop, as seen in the subsequent sections.

***Mbiti's times as an academic staff and leader at Makerere University: professional and academic career development***

At the time Mbiti came to Makerere University and joined the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy, the Head of Department was Noel Quinton King, who had founded the Department in 1963. King personally sourced Mbiti from Cambridge University to join the Department of Religious Studies at Makerere University. Fresh from Cambridge University in the UK, Mbiti had his mark and impact on the department, and Makerere University generally. There is no doubt that his professional and academic career or scholarship was actually started, nurtured, developed, and largely defined in Uganda, and at Makerere University, in particular. After a few years as a lecturer, teaching traditional African religions, Mbiti replaced King as Head of Department from 1968 to 1974. For more on Mbiti and his life at Makerere University see (Mpyangu

& Tuhirirwe in Ahikire et. al., 2022: 424-426)<sup>1</sup>.

By the time Mbiti became the Head of Department<sup>2</sup>, there was not much academic vibrancy, especially in the area of research and publication, as it was later to be under his leadership. The department had been newly established about five years ago. The curriculum was thin and was largely built on teaching topics in the fields of Christianity, Islam and Courses A and B (Diploma). As a new academic leader in the department, Mbiti set a high standard of scholarship and administration, thereby taking the department to another level. Attendance of scholarly conferences and community interactions became vigorous during his time. For example, Mbiti attended a number of conferences, visited schools and institutions, and gave many lectures and papers on different occasions. His talks often covered topics on African traditional Religions, African names of God, and the Encounter between Christianity and African Traditional Religions.

Of particular significance to this paper was Mbiti's handling of teaching, research, and publication, most especially in ATR, which was

<sup>1</sup> Mpyangu and Tuhirirwe wrote about the Trajectory the Historical of Religious studies at Makerere University which was part of a project Historicizing the Humanities at Makerere University since 1922.

<sup>2</sup> It should be remembered that Noel King had traveled to Cambridge to headhunt Mbiti to come join the department and actually take over as the Head, This search for talent and intentionality in identifying who should takeover headship and promote the teaching of Religious Studies at Makerere University was phenomenal.

his specialty while he was the Head of Department. Having newly introduced ATR in the department, he quickly realised that its success and sustainability largely depended on intensive research and publication in it. Consequently, he encouraged research and publication in ATR, and personally took the lead on it, culminating in his groundbreaking work and first publication, as well as subsequent ones from "*African Religions and Philosophy*" (1969). These publications helped a great deal in providing the needed resource material, which was necessary for teaching and learning ATR as a new course in the department. Most importantly, it should be noted that he led to revolutionising the teaching of African theology i.e., John Mbiti played a pivotal role in reshaping the way African theology, and religion were studied and understood. He challenged the Eurocentric biases prevalent in the academic world and provided Africans with a platform to articulate their religious beliefs and practices. This book became a cornerstone in the teaching of ATR, influencing subsequent generations of scholars.

Besides, Mbiti realised that a well-trained human resource was very necessary if the teaching, research, and publication of ATR and other areas of teaching on the curriculum were to be nurtured and developed. To realise this, Mbiti encouraged the training of staff to higher academic qualifications and research, leading

to the production of occasional research papers and other academic publications. More and more students in the department were encouraged to study and to do research. Byaruhanga-Akiiki (personal interview, November 12 2019) recalls as follows concerning the period when Mbiti was the Head of Department:

When I joined the department, it was under the headship of Professor Mbiti. I joined Louise Pirouet, my co-PhD candidate, who was under the Church Missionary Society (CMS). After registering for the PhD, I became an assistant lecturer, and I was in charge of student research, which led to the production of occasional research papers. We produced about 28 occasional research papers, and then Aloysius Lugira took over. By that time, students were already encouraged to do research. We were joined by Rev. David Ndyabahika and Eustas Rutiiba (both passed on). In the beginning, the department was called Religious Studies and Philosophy.

Mbiti taught at Makerere until 1974, when he was appointed and served as director of the influential World Council of Churches (WCC), Bossey Ecumenical Institute, in Bogis-Bossey, Geneva, Switzerland. While there, he became known for organising conferences on intercultural theology. The presence of Christians from Africa, Asia, and Latin America started to be felt in the WCC as their participation increased. He became vocal on matters of contextualised theological education

as he traversed various universities worldwide (Anekwe Oborji, 2019).

Besides, while in Switzerland, he continued his academic career and scholarship, including research and publications. He was a visiting professor at many universities in Europe, America, Canada, Australia, and Africa, and travelled widely in many countries within and outside Africa. While Mbiti held visiting professorships at these universities across the world, he published extensively on philosophy, theology, and African oral traditions. He retired a few years prior to his death as a part-time professor at the University of Bern and a Parish Minister in Burgdorf, Switzerland. Mbiti was settled, married, and worked till his death on October 6, 2019, in Switzerland.

After his death, the global community of African and other theologians and scholars mourned the loss of a leading African intellectual, the greatest mind to shed intellectual light on the ancestral religious world and heritage of the African people. Anekwe Oborji (2019), a Roman Catholic priest who lives in Rome, where he is professor of Missiology at the Pontifical Urbaniana University, quotes one of his former students in Rome, writing:

We are proud to be Africans today, because of the dignity he (Mbiti) gave to the African tradition, up to where it is now. He has left a memorable legacy of the cultural values of Africa. We are proud of him, and he will forever be quoted in all ATR-related studies.

This appreciation lends to the position of several students and scholars of Religious Studies and ATR in particular, as they get an opportunity to celebrate their African tradition and heritage. This is further highlighted by (Kaunda and Gathogo 2020) as follows:

In only half a century since its 1969 publication, Mbiti's magnum opus, *African Religions and Philosophy*, has transformed the way countless African peoples perceive themselves as well as their Christian faith, despite protracted systems of cultural, social, and spiritual-religious peripheralisation and domination historically imposed upon them by colonialism and mission Christianity, and today, by the so-called globalisation process, so often detrimental to African peoples' identity, freedom, and dignity as human beings.

A colleague and friend of Mbiti, Jesse K. Mugambi (Kenya), paid tribute as follows:

Professor John Samuel Mbiti bid us goodbye on October 6 2019 in Switzerland. He is one of the very rare record-breakers in academia. The total number of words in his books and papers runs 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 including 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 language 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 summarise my encounter with him and his impact on me. (Healey & Joseph, 2020:2).

This tribute puts together a comprehensive description of a great person. John S. Mbiti Healey and Joseph (2020) have provided an exhaustive tribute to Mbiti.

## **Mbiti's legacy at Makerere University**

How might we remember Mbiti at Makerere University; what is his legacy at Makerere University and possibly beyond? We take serious note of the following citation from Peterson:

He was one of the architects of the curriculum of multi-culturalism. Working from Kampala, he helped to define a whole world of ritual and thought. It is right that he should be honoured 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. (Peterson, MISR<sup>3</sup> Seminar Presentation, February 2020).

Further to this, Peterson says:

*Mbiti's view of African religious life – as integrated, whole, and all-embracing – made non-conformists seem to be opponents of good order. It made divisions of principle appear petty, trivial, and superficial. By drawing attention to the unity that underneath outward diversity, Professor Mbiti's work offered a theological rationale to religious consolidation.*

Mbiti's legacy at Makerere University and in the current Department of Religion and Peace Studies in particular, is large. Joining Makerere University in 1964 and serving as an academic staff and leader up to 1974 seems like a short period for one to have had such great academic accomplishments, as Mbiti did. However, Mbiti was able to accomplish it all, leaving behind such an indelible legacy. It should be remembered that Mbiti and his contemporaries partly served Makerere University during one of the most difficult political times in Uganda. In January 1971, General Idi Amin overthrew President Milton

<sup>3</sup> MISR refers to Makerere Institute of Social Research.

Obote in a coup d'état, and became President of Uganda. What followed was a period of political turmoil, military dictatorship, and intense suffering throughout the country. The impact of Idi Amin's military regime was felt everywhere in Uganda, with many people murdered in cold blood, on economic breakdown, and a total state of political and social quagmire. A big number of prominent people in Uganda lost their lives or their loved ones, as others went into exile in the neighbouring countries and beyond.

The impact of Idi Amin's regime certainly also affected Makerere University. By the time of the coup d'état in January 1971 in Uganda, Mbiti was already a Professor and Head of the then Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy. Peterson gives an account of the happenings during that period:

In those vexed and dangerous times, a great many intellectuals fled Uganda, seeking refuge in other places. In October 1972, Frank Kalimuzo, the Vice Chancellor of Makerere University, was seized by Amin's men and murdered. Ali Mazrui fled to the University of Michigan, where he was to become a leading interpreter of African and African-American history. John Mbiti remained at his post in Makerere, even as the institution folded around him. (Presentation, MISR Seminar Series, February 2020).

Later in 1973, the Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi visited Uganda, and before an audience at Makerere

University, he offered to furnish President Idi Amin with funds to effect the transformation of Uganda into an Islamic country. Mbiti was not pleased with this news. In response, he delivered a sermon to a packed audience at St. Francis Chapel, Makerere University, in which he emphasised the fact that "Christianity and Africa have fallen in love with each other and intend to live in bonds of a lifelong marriage. Christianity is here to stay." This certainly was an act of great courage on the part of Mbiti. However, later that year, he, fearing for his life, fled Uganda and embarked on a lecture tour in the United States. In 1974, he took up the directorship of the Ecumenical Institute in Geneva, Switzerland, where he was to spend the remainder of his life, until his death on October 6, 2019, at the age of 87.

So then, what is the legacy of Mbiti at Makerere University? Mbiti's legacy at Makerere University is large, and it went beyond the Department where he was based. We address Mbiti's legacy from two broad perspectives namely, Mbiti's legacy at Makerere University in general terms, and Mbiti's legacy at Makerere University in specific terms particularly in teaching, research and publication in African Traditional Religion.

### **Mbiti's legacy at Makerere University in general terms**

Mbiti was an academic staff and leader at Makerere University at the level of a Head of Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy.

As a staff member and former Head of Department, he remains in the departmental archival records. He ably steered the department during the formative years after Noel King had established it in 1963 and became its first head. Mbiti's legacy is in the establishment and development of the course, African Traditional Religions, which is still taught in the department to-date and remains indelible. This course was not known at Makerere University therefore, in Mbiti we see where the notion of 'African Traditional Religion' at Makerere University came from, spread, as well as where it leads up to today.

Mbiti had a great passion for African traditional religions and culture and wanted it to be part of what was to be taught in the department. To achieve this, he ensured that it became part of the curriculum, and went ahead to conduct research and publish intensively in this area, so that his contemporaries, students, and future scholars would all have written materials and sources to refer to. So, African traditional religion and culture became part of a curriculum that Mbiti and other members of the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy launched. While describing how this was implemented, Peterson says the following, concerning the curriculum in the department in those years:

*The curriculum addressed different aspects of the scholarly work in which Prof. Mbiti was engaged. There was a unit on 'African Concepts of God'; another on 'Spirits and the*

*Spirit World in Africa'; and a third on 'The Meeting of Christianity with African Religion and Culture'.* (Presentation, MISR Seminar Series, February 2020).

It should be observed that generally, the curriculum at that time was an expansion on the foundational work that Mbiti had done to define and clarify the elements of religion that were common and shared across Uganda's disparate and divided religious landscape. Peterson asserts that:

There was a travelling seminar called the 'Seminar on Religion and Culture in Africa' that was organised through Makerere's extra-mural education unit and convened in several provinces around Uganda. The aim, said one of the tutors, was to 'address itself to the African traditional religious beliefs and practices and their impact on and interactions with Revealed Religions, namely Christianity and Islam'. (Presentation, MISR Seminar Series, February 2020).

In the provinces, where the said seminar was convened, government officials equally shared the platform with Makerere lecturers. There was much on which they could disagree and agree at the same time, which is the essence of academic engagement or interface.

Besides, Mbiti's academic leadership style as Head Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy at Makerere University was quite unique. He clearly demonstrated and put into action what it means to 'take the University to the public' not 'the public coming

to the University'. The notion of 'community service' or 'service to the community', which is one of the core roles of the staff at the University was very well grasped by Mbiti and he implemented it very well as an academic leader and staff at Makerere University. For example, during his time at Makerere University, Mbiti and his colleagues in the Department not only offered regular lectures to young priests in training on the subject "ATR and Christianity", but also initiated a travelling seminar called the 'Seminar on religion and culture in Africa', that was organised through Makerere's extra-mural education unit, and convened in several provinces around Uganda, as mentioned earlier. This created an opportunity for the 'Open University' and public academic debates or engagements, thereby enabling the University to fulfill part of her mandate. Ideally, the University is not meant to remain just an ivory tower, where intellectuals only debate amongst themselves, and what they debate sometimes is not of direct relevance to the public out there. Mbiti leaves Makerere University with that legacy which should be effectively carried forward today.

Certainly, Mbiti's legacy at Makerere University goes beyond the subject of religious studies and philosophy, where his specialty was, to literature, particularly oral literature, and other areas. As we have observed in this paper, by the time he was appointed at Makerere University, he was already an accomplished writer and translator

and had published and translated some literary works. Some of his papers and poems were published in journals and magazines. He very well shared the academic publishing platform and ably engaged with creative literature scholars, such as Wole Soyinka, Okot p'Bitek, and others. As noted in this paper, on his part, Mbiti published two works in form of poems in the magazine during those years. Besides, we note that Mbiti published some other works, while at Makerere University, in addition to the works in ATR. For example, in 1971 he published *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*, and in the years that followed, he brought out several other works, such as translations of African Religion and Philosophies in French and German; an edition of his inaugural lecture; a book about prayer and African religion. Thus, it is vivid that, in this case, Mbiti's legacy goes far beyond the disciplines of religious studies and philosophy. Whereas his specialty was, literature and other areas, his diversity is still felt to date. This is so because his works in these other disciplines continue to be read and cited by various scholars and students.

### **Mbiti's legacy at Makerere University, particularly in teaching, research and publication on African Traditional Religions**

In more specific terms, another indelible legacy of Mbiti was the genealogy of his scholarship, exemplified in his teaching, research,

and publications in ATR. After his death in 2019, Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta eulogised him while praising and hymning him as “a role model and an ambassador for the Kenya brand abroad”. (*Peterson, seminar presentation at MISR February 2020*). What should be clear is that Mbiti's scholarly career was largely defined in Uganda at Makerere University, after his appointment as a lecturer from Cambridge University in 1964. The genealogy of his scholarship since that time was consistent, especially in light of teaching, research, and publication in ATR. We examine in detail Mbiti's legacy in these specific areas below:

### ***The Teaching of African Traditional Religions***

Mbiti almost single handedly introduced, nurtured and developed the course as part of the curriculum in the department. When ATR was introduced in the department, he spearheaded not only its teaching, but also research and publication in order to ensure its growth and sustainability. No doubt, research and publication of research findings were very necessary, if the teachers and students in the course were to have resource materials that were vital to enrich and develop the course.

As a staff member and later the Head of Department, Mbiti did a lot, not only in teaching but also in promoting research, especially in ATR. This included dispatching

research teams to the communities to interact with the communities and acquire primary information. Consequently, Mbiti and the team at the Department vigorously engaged in publishing books, including the pioneering book on *African Traditional Religion and Philosophy in 1969*. This was followed by other publications in ATR, e.g. *Concepts of God in Africa 1970*, *Love and Marriage in Africa 1973*, and *Introduction to African Religion 1975*.

These resource publications became very vital for him, and other staff in the department, as well as students, for reference, and consequently made the teaching of ATR possible. The fact that four publications came out in the department in a space of six years, from 1969 to 1975, spearheaded by Mbiti and his colleagues, at a time when research and publishing were not easy, speaks a lot about the genius that Mbiti and his colleagues were. Besides, it sets a huge challenge for the current and future scholars in this area of study, whose conditions for research and publication are seemingly better than those at Mbiti's time. Mbiti's work provided valuable resources for the teaching of ATR. His accessible writing style and clear explanations made complex concepts in ATR, understandable to both students and educators. This facilitated the inclusion of ATR in academic curricula worldwide.

## Research and Publication of African Traditional Religions

Mbiti, born a Kenyan Christian philosopher, writer, and ordained Anglican priest, is generally considered to be the father of modern African Theology, particularly African traditional religion. His research interests included theology in Africa and Asia and ecumenism. Indeed, his contribution to African theology and philosophy is great, especially in the area of research and publication. From the colonial context in Africa and an African identity crisis, Mbiti took the lead with research and publication, especially about African traditional religion. In all, Mbiti ably demonstrated, through his scholarly research and publications in African Traditional Religion, that indeed the Africans had not only possessed an organised religion but also had a notion of the Supreme Being, God (Mbaya & Cezula, 2019). According to Anekwe Oborji (2019), in his article on Mbiti accessed online (August 2022),

*“Mbiti published over 400 articles, reviews, and books on theology, religion, philosophy, and literature. In all these, Africa remained the center and context of his academic scholarship.”*

Some of his several publications, mostly covering the academic spectrum of African traditional religion include, *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969); *Introduction to African Religion* (1975); and *Concepts of God*

*in Africa* (1970)<sup>4</sup>. Others include: *The Prayers of African Religion* (1975); *Love and Marriage in Africa* (1973); *Prayer and Spirituality in African Religion* (1988); and *African Proverbs* (1997). The other works are too numerous to mention in this paper. The majority of the said publications continue to be cited or used as authentic scholarly references by students and teachers of ATR, both during Mbiti’s times and in posterity. There is no doubt that Mbiti was indeed a tireless and groundbreaking theologian but also a man of many ‘firsts’, including becoming the first African to translate the Bible into his native Kamba language. He was a towering figure in the world of academia, a mentor to many younger African theologians and scholars of all times and places. One Ugandan scholar he impacted was Professor A.B.T Byaruhanga Akiiki, who learned from him, taught, and promoted the teaching of ATR, as well as research and publication. For example, Byaruhanga went ahead to publish several articles, such as *Religion in Bunyoro* (1982), and *Indigenising Religious Names* (1971).

When Mbiti joined Makerere University in 1964, he was full of creative ideas and politically engaged scholars, and he quickly became one of them too. In this paper, we highlight mainly his scholarship and publications in religious studies, and particularly in ATR. However, his scholarship and publication went beyond and across other disciplines.

<sup>4</sup> For an insightful reflection on Mbiti’s *Concepts of God in Africa* see Han & Beyers 2017.

Mbiti has many publications in ATR. These have been cited by many people, including scholars of African religions and cultures all over the world. A quick review of just a few of his publications in this paper, as indicated below, reveals a lot.

Mbiti's work promoted cultural sensitivity and respect for African religious traditions. His teachings encouraged scholars to approach ATR with a deep appreciation for the cultural contexts in which these religions are practiced. This perspective has fostered a more inclusive and respectful approach to the study of ATR, inspiring researchers to engage with local communities in meaningful ways.

Relatedly, Mbiti's publications have achieved global recognition and have been translated into numerous languages. His work not only made ATR accessible to a broader audience but also facilitated cross-cultural dialogue and understanding. This global awareness has led to increased interest in ATR, both within and outside of Africa, contributing to a more diverse and inclusive academic discourse.

It should be underscored that Mbiti's teachings and writings continue to inspire new generations of scholars and researchers to explore ATR. His legacy can be seen in the proliferation of academic programs and courses dedicated to the study of ATR in universities around the world. As a result, there is a growing community of scholars and students

actively engaged in advancing our understanding of African traditional religions.

### ***African Religions and Philosophy (1969)***

This was Mbiti's seminal book, first published in 1969. It was therefore, his ground-breaking work in African Traditional Religion. It was also the first work to challenge the Christian assumption that traditional African religious ideas were "demonic and anti-Christian". As a lecturer of theology and traditional African religions at Makerere University, Mbiti ably challenged Christian inferences that traditional African religious ideas were "demonic and anti-Christian" in this book. In the preface to the second edition of this book, Mbiti did not hide his feelings and frustration about the rejection the book went through, before being accepted for publication. Among other things, Mbiti wrote:

*"I also thank the publishers (Heinemann Press) very heartily, for promoting the book, for facilitating its translation into other languages and for asking to have a new edition of it published. It is amazing to think that the original manuscript was rejected by several other publishers before being accepted by the current publisher!" (Mbiti, 1989 2nd Ed. pg. xiii).*

Mbiti's sympathetic treatment of traditional religions was based on massive field work. African Religions and Philosophy is a systematic study of the attitudes of mind and beliefs that have evolved in the many societies of Africa. It was largely

composed to fulfill Mbiti's obligation to an academic discipline, which was, under his stewardship, coming into play. There was no space for experimentation with literary voices. Mbiti wrote the book as a course of lectures on African religions, and the first of its kind is in Makerere University's curriculum. Peterson further puts it that:

The book laid out, in chapter after chapter, a systematic theology for African Traditional Religion. Their outward diversity notwithstanding, Mbiti, argued in the said book, that African religions shared an underlying structure: a veneration for the divine, a sacred sensibility, rituals, an awareness of evil, an account of creation. The book was a work of huge ambition, a powerful argument for the intellectual integrity of a religious system. (Presentation, MISR Seminar Series, February 2020).

Further, in the second edition of this book (1990), Mbiti has updated his material to include the involvement of women in religion and the potential unity to be found in what was once thought to be a mass of quite separate religions. Mbiti adds a new dimension to the understanding of history, thinking, and life throughout the African continent. Religion is approached from an African point of view but is as accessible to readers who belong to non-African societies as it is to those who have grown up in African nations. Since its first publication, this book has become acknowledged as the standard work in the field of study,

and it is an essential reading for anyone concerned with African religion, history, philosophy, anthropology, or general African studies.

To sum it up, Mbiti's 1969 first publication set the parameters for a whole field of scholarly inquiry. It powerfully showed that African philosophical and religious traditions were consistent and sensible, and that they could be understood as a religious system, and not superstition. In Kenya, one of the leading political figures and leaders of the opposition, Raila Odinga, praised him, following his death at the age of 87, and described his book as "an eye-opener and ground-breaking work." (Presentation, MISR Seminal Series, February 2020).

### **Concepts of God in Africa (1970)**

This was Mbiti's second book, published in 1970. It was published to promote Christian knowledge. As Peterson states:

*"For Mbiti, it was essential that African religions be grasped systematically. In Kampala, he offered regular lectures to young priests-in-training on the subject 'Traditional Religion and Christianity.'" His scholarly work was an aspect of his larger vocation; he was opening up paths of comparison and mutual dialogue between Christianity and African religions. (Presentation, MISR Seminar Series, February 2020).*

The *Concepts of God in Africa* (1970) emerged largely out of his strong

desire to inform his readership that the Africans not only had their traditional religions but also had the concept of the Supreme Being, God, for millions of years. To this end, the traditional Africans, in all their different ethnic communities, had known and believed in the one Supreme Being and had given Him various names and attributes. Every African had this idea, and it was not brought into Africa by outsiders.

In this and other related publications, Mbiti clearly brought out the notion of God as perceived in traditional Africa. Quoting from Nieder – Heitmann in the work: *An Analysis and Evaluation of John S. Mbiti's Theological Evaluation of African Traditional Religion* (1981, 68), Mbaya and Cezula maintain that not only did Mbiti argue for the notion of the Supreme Being in ATR, but he went a step further, that Africans have the notion of a 'personal God', who is known and worshipped. This God is approached through not only ancestral mediations but also directly through prayers. More critically, however, Nieder–Heitmann noted that, in response to the argument by some Western scholars that God in Africa is viewed or experienced as remote, Mbiti and the Yoruba scholar, Bolaji Idowu (1973) stressed his importance in African cosmology, ritual, and ethics (Mbaya & Cezula, 2019).

Thus, Nieder–Heitmann, as again cited by Mbaya and Cezula, argued that Mbiti “not only opposed the

view of Western scholars, but his mastery succeeded in resolving the paradoxical conceptualisation of God at once, transcendent and intervening and involved in the affairs of men (immanent). God is thus both far and near for many Africans.” For Mbiti, according to Nieder–Heitmann, as again cited by Mbaya and Cezula:

*“Religion is to the Africans an ontological phenomenon that pertains to the question of existence or being.” “For him, therefore, and for the larger community of which he is part, to live is to be caught up in a religious drama. This is fundamental, for it means that man lives in a religious universe.” “Africans have their own ontology, but it is a religious ontology, and to understand their religions, we must penetrate it.”* (Mbaya & Cezula, 2019).

### **Introduction to African Religion (1975)**

In the colonial context referred to above, Mbiti took the lead and came up with his monograph, *An Introduction to African Religion*, 1975. As cited from its book cover by Mbaya and Cezula, (2019), The Church Times hailed it as “ground-breaking ... a work of scholarship, that breaks new and intriguing ground.” The Church Times went on to assert that “... in this work (Mbiti), it shows how, behind many simple expressions of belief, there often lies a profound faith in God as Father and Creator.” In this book, Mbiti outlines African beliefs, traditions, and cultures. According to him, the ontology of

an African is embodied in the saying “Africans are notoriously religious” (Mbaya & Cezula, 2019). Accordingly, the citation below sums up the main content of the said publication, Mbiti’s book: *An Introduction to African Religion*:

African life, cultures, and beliefs exist as an integral system. In contrast to the Western worldview, where life is dissected and compartmentalised, Mbiti shows the holistic character of African cultures: the unity between religion and life, rather than the partitioning of the two. He goes right into the deep ‘bone-marrow’ of African life and spirituality, the pulse and rhythm of African life.

It should be observed, however, that in his own time, Mbiti’s account of African traditional religion was subjected to criticism, especially from his colleague, Okot p’Bitek at Makerere University. Okot p’Bitek was an anthropologist and poet based in the Department of Literature at Makerere University. His work on *African Religions in Western scholarship* was published in 1970. He argued that Mbiti and other scholars had forced the changeable dynamics of African religious practice into the foreign categories of western theology. He wrote: “The African deities of these books, clothed with the attributes of the Christian God are, in the main, creations of the students of African religions.” It is possible that Mbiti must have known or not of Okot p’Bitek’s criticism. However, he made no public response to it.

Instead, he remained focused on his work and mission, and in the same year that Okot p’Bitek’s criticism was published, Mbiti brought out his second book, *Concepts of God in Africa*, as well as several others, as mentioned above.

When Mbiti joined Makerere University from Cambridge University in 1964, the university was full of creative and politically engaged scholars. He quickly became one of them. Peterson reminisces about the said scholarly engagements at this period, saying that at the center of all this was *Transition Magazine*, edited by Rajat Neogy, with the assistance of the political scientist Ali Mazurui, the Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo, and others. Peterson further highlights that:

There were short stories from the South African Bessie Head, essays from Nigerian Wole Soyinka, fiction from Brit Paul Theroux, and philosophy from Ugandan Okot p’Bitek. Makerere lecturers were regular contributors to *Transition*. Among them was Fred Welbourn, whose *East African Rebels* (1961) had powerfully argued for the political rationality of dissident Christian movements. Another contributor was Bethwell Ogot, who was at the time of Mbiti’s appointment, revising the book that would be published as *History of the Southern Luo* (1967). All of these scholars were public figures, and all of them saw themselves as contributing towards the building of a specifically African university,

furnished with a curriculum that responded to the priorities of the age. (Peterson Presentation, MISR Seminar Series, February 2020).

We can say that Mbiti was an accomplished scholar in religious studies, particularly in ATR. However, while at Makerere University, Mbiti shared the scholarly platform with renowned literature scholars in the field of poetry, like Okot p'Bitek. He published several works in oral literature even before he joined Makerere University, including a Kikamba translation of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and other forms of oral literature, as mentioned earlier. Certainly, and as Peterson rightly puts it, these, and other early works of translation gave Mbiti a vocation as a spokesperson for African languages and cultures. (Peterson Presentation, MISR Seminar series, February 2020).

Mbiti's philosophy has two dimensions: Africanism and the philosophy of African religion. The Africanism philosophy answers the question, what does it mean to be African? On this question, Mbiti said:

“What happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group, community, or country happens to the individual. People, country, environment, and spirituality are intricately related. The individual can only say, ‘I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.’” (Mbiti 1969, pg. 106).

On the philosophy of African religion, Mbiti is regarded as ‘the father of modern African theology’. His main idea is that Africa has its own religion, and to emphasise this idea, he challenged the European view that Africa has no religion of its own, and the colonial and Christian view that African religious views are primitive, demonic, and evil, and that Africans are savages. He argued that African religion and religious views are just as legitimate and require respect as other religions. He promoted the inclusion of African religions and philosophy within the curricula of schools and institutions, despite skepticism, criticism, and opposition, mainly from missionaries and others alike. According to Mbiti, “Even though attempts are made to give Christianity an African character, its Western form is in many ways foreign to African peoples. This foreignness is a drawback because it means that Christianity is kept on the surface and is not free to deepen its influence in all areas of African life and problems.”

Besides, we have seen that the Makerere University that Mbiti joined in 1964 was full of dynamic, creative, and politically engaged scholars. These included academic giants like Rajat Neogy, the editor of *Transition Magazine* Ali Mazurui, a political scientist who was also the assistant editor of the said magazine; Christopher Okigbo, the Nigerian poet; and others. Makerere University lecturers were regular contributors to

this magazine, and Mbiti was one of them, publishing two poems. Clearly, Mbiti equally shared the scholarly platform, with these scholars, including publishing with them. So, his area of scholarship went beyond the discipline of Religious studies, and he is equally mentioned in other disciplines, such as Literature, where his works are quoted or referred to. He certainly made a significant and lasting scholarly contribution in this area, as well.

Apart from the above-mentioned works, Mbiti did some other works while at Makerere University that deserve mentioning. For example, in 1971, he published *The New Testament Eschatology* in an African Background, and in the years that followed, he brought out several other works, such as translations of African religion and philosophies in French and German and an edition of his inaugural lecture, a book about prayer and African religion.

Mbiti's legacy at Makerere University is intertwined with the great influence he had on his contemporaries, students, future scholars, and teachers of ATR. It must have been very exciting and fulfilling to work with, under Mbiti's academic leadership, or to be taught by Mbiti during his time at Makerere University. He was an all-round intellectual and an accomplished academic, who influenced many scholars and students during his time and for posterity. In particular, he influenced

many of his contemporaries, students, mentees, future scholars, and teachers of ATR to appreciate and love the subject. He brought life and meaning to the subject of African Traditional Religion, which was hitherto unknown and controversial, and ushered it into academic light at Makerere University, and the Department of Religion and Peace Studies, where it is still taught to date, as one of the major areas on the curriculum.

Some of Mbiti's students, mentees, colleagues, contemporaries, and accomplished scholars, with whom he shared a scholarly platform while he was at Makerere University but also from elsewhere in the world, include: Prof. Noel Quinton King, E. Bolaji Idowu, Wole Soyinka, Okot p'Bitek (a Ugandan poet), Prof. Ali Mazrui, Christopher Okigbo (a Nigerian poet), Fred Welbourn, Bethwell Ogot, and Stephen N. Ezeanya, among several others. It is important to observe that Mbiti's students, mentees, colleagues, and contemporaries came from across Africa and beyond. Many people will continue to be influenced through Mbiti's several publications, even when he is long dead. Some of the scholars in African Traditional Religion and some other disciplines, that Mbiti greatly influenced by include, among several others, the following: Ifeanyi Anthony Menkiti, who was a Nigerian poet, philosopher, and professor, as well as the owner of the Grolier Poetry Book; Jesse Ndwiga Kanyua Mugambi, who is a

professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Nairobi in Kenya; Prof. Byaruhanga-Akiiki, who is Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at Makerere University in Uganda; and Prof. Aloysious Lugira, who is Professor of Religious Studies, based in the United States of America, among several others.

### **Reflections on Mbiti's work and legacy at Makerere University**

Examining Mbiti's works and legacy at Makerere University in teaching, research, and publication of ATR leads one into a deep moment of reflection about this academic icon's great contribution to scholarship. Mbiti's academic accomplishments, while at Makerere University, where he was a lecturer and academic leader, remain a wonder to many who endeavour to explore them. In Mbiti, we see an ambitious and illustrious academic who was by large a ground breaker. Certainly, the story of the beginning and development of ATR at Makerere University cannot be complete without mentioning the name of Mbiti.

As he introduced this course, it was not only new but also largely controversial. This was because it was being introduced in largely a Christian and Islamic religious environment and by an accomplished Christian scholar, who had acquired both Western and modern education. However, Mbiti endured all this controversy

and criticism and promoted ATR. He successfully combined the two aspects, that is, syncretism and ecumenism, while holding on to promoting African traditional beliefs and practices, which were viewed as irreligious and pagan, without losing focus, on his faith as a Christian and an ordained minister in the Church.

Besides, despite the controversy that came with the introduction of ATR at Makerere University and in the entire country at the time, Mbiti continued to lead the way in not only the teaching but also in conducting research and publishing his research findings. These publications would later greatly enhance the teaching and learning about ATR in the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy and later in posterity. The zeal and determination of Mbiti, combined with his intellectualism and scholarship, were indeed great. He was able to publish a number of books in ATR and in other fields, including Literature, while at Makerere University and even when he left. As earlier noted, he even went ahead and translated the Bible into his native Kamba language. The short period in which some of these works were accomplished remains a big challenge to many of the scholars today. For example, in a space of seven years between 1969 and 1975, Mbiti published five books in ATR alone, not counting other publications.

Mbiti was able to take over the leadership of the department from

King at a time when it was still in its infancy. He led it into a vibrant academic unit at Makerere University, that was engaged in real academic work, including teaching, research, publication, and community outreach. By engaging with the community, Mbiti and his colleagues in the department actually removed the ‘ivory tower mentality’ among some academicians. He demystified the said ‘ivory tower’, and took it to the people out there, thereby enabling academic interaction between the university and the local community.

In Mbiti and his colleagues in the department at his time, we see the full accomplishment of all the tasks of an academic at the university. Mbiti increased vibrancy in the teaching, research, and publication among ATR. Mbiti also revolutionised the teaching of theology and philosophy of Africans, such that several publications continue to be read and referred to as part of scholarship in ATR. Mbiti’s legacy at Makerere University and beyond continues to live on, most especially in the minds and hearts of his former students, mentees, contemporaries, readers of his several publications in ATR and other areas, colleagues, workmates, and certainly in the minds and hearts of his immediate family members and relatives.

However, Mbiti’s broad legacy, leaves a very big challenge for future scholars, teachers, and researchers in ATR. How do they continue

Mbiti’s legacy? What lessons can they learn from Mbiti that can help in the continuity of his legacy? Today, research and publication in ATR are not as vibrant as they were during the time of Mbiti. This is in spite of the fact that the subject is part of the curriculum in institutions of learning in Uganda. The post-Mbiti generation of scholars in ATR needs to re-think the future and continuity of ATR.

Finally, like any other human being, Mbiti’s work, influence, and legacy at Makerere University and elsewhere are assessed based on both its strength and criticism. On the strengths, his work, which was based on extensive field research in Africa with over 300 tribes, was mainly ‘decolonial’, as he largely challenged colonial thinking and ideas. He promoted, for example, proverbs, rituals, prayers and memories by collecting and publishing a number of them even though African philosophies were not written at the time, but only existed in oral forms and practices. It should be noted that his writing was based on his lectures at Makerere University, in Uganda, making it relevant for Africa. His seminal work on *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969) was published in Johannesburg, Africa. Besides, Mbiti promoted indigenous languages, including Akamba, his mother language. He also challenged prejudice against African culture and religious heritage.

On criticism, Mbiti’s work is said to be more Christian–focused and

tried to christianise African religious worldviews. Okot p'Bitek, his contemporary at Makerere University, Uganda, for example, said Mbiti used Western intellectual understanding of religion to interpret Africa's view of God. It is possible that Mbiti's more Christian focus in his work was informed and shaped by his Christian religious persuasions and as a pastor or priest in the Anglican Church. Besides, Mbiti is criticised for having married and settled outside Africa in Switzerland, where he worked and died, thereby betraying his pan-Africanist ideology. Further criticism of Mbiti is that his work exposed Africans to colonisers. For example, he published information about African beliefs, and what could help make Africans more Christian or more Islamic. By Mbiti criticising the methods of Christianity and Islam in Africa, he was actually providing colonialists and missionaries with tools to improve their methods. In that way, it could be said, his criticism was no different from those of anthropologists, who studied Africans for the benefit of colonisers.

## Conclusion

In this paper, the authors have attempted to document the legacy of Professor John Samuel Mbiti. There is no doubt that his legacy, especially in the domain of scholarship, was colossal. It is therefore not possible to cover it all with this single paper. However, several authors have

largely concentrated on Mbiti's legacy in terms of his teaching, research, and publication in African Traditional Religion while he was at Makerere University. Mbiti was an exceptional scholar who, with his several publications, has helped many people to better understand African traditional religions. His resonating academic works testify to his greatness as a scholar of ATR. Anekwe Oborji (2019) has ably described Mbiti as "the Kenyan theologian, philosopher, and pastor, generally acclaimed as the father of the Christian theology of ATR and of indigenous efforts for the inculturation of the Gospel on the continent."

Mbiti was a philosopher, theologian, and pan-Africanist. His main philosophical and theological ideas and thoughts are contained in his publications, most especially in a seminal book published in 1969 titled *African Religions and Philosophy*.

On the whole, Mbiti's legacy, especially in religion, theology, and oral literature, at Makerere University and beyond, remains great. He left an indelible mark on the teaching, research, and publication of African traditional religion and other literary works. Contemporary and posterity students, teachers, and scholars of African traditional religion shall continue to read and refer to his works. Mbiti gave African Traditional Religion a high academic profile at Makerere University, where it is taught to-date and his publications remain a

very vital resource. He gave dignity to the Africans as he taught about the African tradition. His name and great scholarly contribution shall continue to be mentioned and cherished at Makerere University, particularly in the Department of Religion and Peace Studies, which he headed and where he taught African Traditional Religion during its formative years.

Mbiti remains highly appreciated as Africa's greatest scholar in African Traditional Religions. By collecting and synthesizing the indigenous concepts of God, myths and stories, prayers, and proverbs into a religiously oriented 'African worldview,' Mbiti exposed the complex relationship between African and Christian ontology, theology, and ethics.

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