

## My encounter with people/believers from Traditional Religions

I am sr Albertina from Nampula-Mozambique. Concerning traditional religion I can't speak of them without considering in general the religions present in the country and place where I come from. Mozambique is a secular state, every citizen is free to practice a religion or not. Though there are different religions, among them Christians, Muslims, Buddhist, etc, the people who practice the traditional religion are the same who identify themselves as Christians or Muslims. From my own experience it seems that people feel that it is their duty to venerate their ancestors just in the same way saints are venerated in the church. It is hard to understand why people mix their faith worshipping God in the church or in the mosque and at the same time through their ancestors. From my findings it seems that people go to church and mosques to assure their place



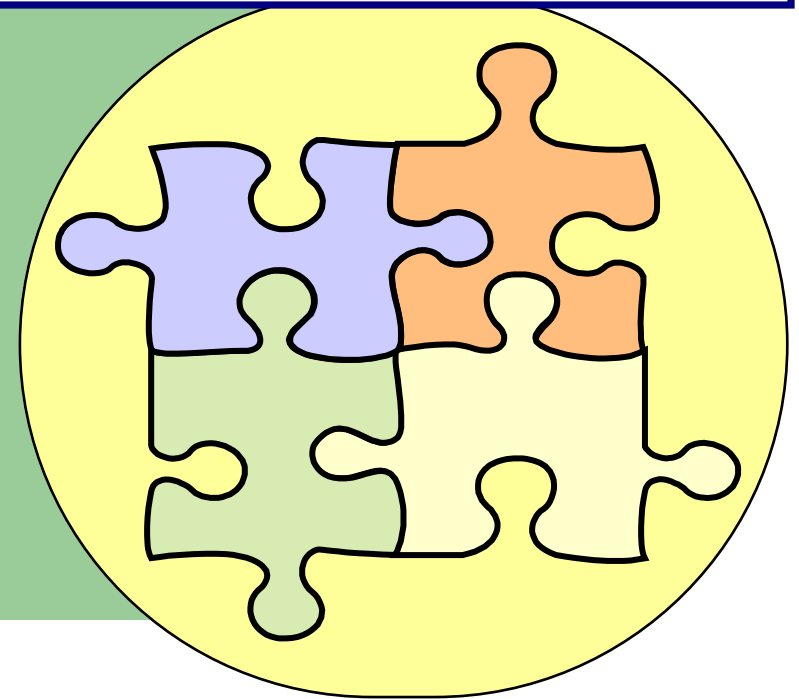
Gathering - Youth Celebration

in heaven and to have a dignified burial on the day of their death. Instead they venerate their ancestors through the traditional religion to assure their protection, prosperity and good health here on earth. Ancestors are believed to be strong intercessors who can give good luck or curse if they are not worshiped. Since the people I have met in my life practicing the traditional religion are the same ones I met in the church or the neighborhood, I learned to respect the belief of others; at the same time I have found occasions to evangelize, planting and strengthening faith and trust in the God we worship as Christians. I see that in essence He is the same God of the ancestors. From my experience of dialogue I'd discourage the attitude of fearing the ancestors as if they are gods to decide our luck as humans, but to respect them and regard them as our intercessors.

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# *In Dialogue...*



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Dear readers,

The echo of the congregational journey a call to listen to our charism and the dynamism that it takes in the life of the Church and of peoples, is the issue of "In Dialogue". It will lead us to reflect together on our encounter and proclamation dialoguing with "traditional religions" on the spiritual and cultural resources that they represent in interreligious and intercultural encounters. .

**First section: Dialogue of Knowledge**, considering different religions present in Ethiopia, where values and religious practices are underlined with the role of Christianity that harmonizes diversities creating cohesion within the same culture and society.

**Second section: Theological Dialogue** with Traditional Religions, where we let ourselves be challenged by the meaning of Encounter with Traditional Religions and the implications for the ministry of evangelization entrusted to us.

**Third section: Dialogue of Life**, the witness of the Comboni Sisters from Latin America and Mozambique, allow us to be enriched by interreligious encounters with indigenous groups, or Christian population that have cultural roots in common with those believers of traditional religions. Some prayers and expressions of their faith, place us in communion with every creature that raises its gaze and opens its heart to God.

We thank the sisters who share with us their reflection on the value of dialogue with "Traditional Religions", in line with the Church, who call us to nourish our concept of mission by living the proclamation in the different forms of Dialogue. With this desire for reflection and journey, we wish you: Happy reading! The Commission:

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singing and dancing in the *Opy Guaçu* (prayer house) and opening their windows and doors of their homes every morning to receive the *Ñanderí*'s (God's) blessings. In Amazon, the *Mboatava*, a Tenharim ritual, was a space to initiate girls and boys, get married, grow as community, and receive God's blessings. Going to the jungle with the indigenous was a spiritual experience; before entering it, they would ask for permission to the forest to hunt, fish, or walk. They were sure that God would protect them while being in the forest. If they were in danger, God would send His messengers to warn them. Sharing the Good News is also to listen and welcome the Gospel already written in the cultural diversity. The indigenous people taught me to see Mother Earth as our common home and territory, a space to take care of and live as His beloved daughter. The Guarani call their territory "*Tekoa*," which



Mboatava feast

means a place with the conditions needed to fulfill the way of being Guarani, where there is forest, water, hunting, fishing, and land for all. This belief is part of the "*Yvy Marã e'I*" (land without evil), a Guarani cosmo vision that thoroughly permeates their lifestyle. I believe that God wants this land without evil here and now for everybody. So, I made the indigenous' fight for their land my struggle. The indigenous people have permeated my spirituality and way of seeing the world. Dialogue is built up through sharing beliefs, hopes, and dreams. I tried to announce the Gospel, but I realized that they had made the Word flesh in their cultures. May God help us make the Word flesh in our lives and build up "good living" for all peoples and the Creation.

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Sr. Olga in Amazon

## Dialogue of life - Witness

### God's Presence in the Indigenous People's Life

Before joining the Comboni Sisters, I lived and worked with the Raramuri, an indigenous group from Chihuahua, Mexico. I learned from them that God listens to every people regardless of their religion and beliefs. An afternoon, returning to my place after participating in a rain ceremony, I asked God if S/He had listened to the way of praying of the Raramuri, quite different from mine. Then, it started to rain. That was God's answer to my prayer and theirs.

After joining the Comboni Sisters, I was sent to Brazil to proclaim the Gospel to the indigenous people. I worked with the Guarani Mbya and Tupinikim in the southeast and with the Tenharim, Parintintim, and Djahoi in the Amazon region. I read that the Word seeds were already in their cultures, and I realized that they were already making the Word flesh in their life. They experience the Word in their interconnectedness with the whole Creation. Through them, I learned that God talks to us in many ways. I have never seen differences in our daily life, and Mother Earth is our common home to be loved. All the indigenous people I worked



Assesoring teachers Tenharim

with are interconnected through the language and relationship; they call each other "relatives." Their understanding of the multiple connections they have makes them capable of thinking holistically and having a strong sense of community, which includes their ancestors and future generations, other peoples, Mother Earth, the universe, and God. Jesus also understood these connections and prayed for his disciples to experience oneness with the Father (Jn 17,21). I have the same prayer for the indigenous people. While working with the indigenous people, I realized that they have a deep spirituality and relationship with God in their daily life and special celebrations. I was amazed to see the Guarani praying by

## Dialogue of Knowledge and Interfaith Values

### Ethnic groups, values and beliefs: the diversity encountered by Christianity and Traditional Religions in Ethiopia

Ethiopia is one of the homes of multitude of ethnicities, religions, religious practices and cultures. Throughout history, religious leaders of all, Christian, Islam and Traditional religions have a significant role to play in the protracted nature of conflict between the diverse identity in the country.

Ethiopia has been tested with several political formation with mixed results, facing a major challenges in managing diversities of religions and ethnicity. In fact, recent events showed the rising tensions between different religions. Especially between Islam and Christianity. However, Ethiopian religious institutions have been, individually and collectively involved in the promotion of social and spiritual integration of Ethiopian people and its numerous diversities and living in harmony with each other. This article will try to show the importance of the interreligious dialogue among different religions and how Christianity encountered these diversity and how the social consistency been enhanced and deeply promoted through collaborative efforts of all religions and through regular engagement to dialogue.

It is important to remember that Ethiopian religious studies have sometimes been treated as a part, not of African studies, but of general Oriental studies. Such an approach made it difficult to notice the connection of Ethiopian religious with other features of life and culture in Ethiopia, as well as their setting within the larger context of Africa. The cultural unity of Ethiopia originates from larger African worldviews.



In general a value is what is considered as good, desirable, worthwhile, a cause worthy of pursuit, worth living for and dying for. It provides the motivation for deliberate human action. "A value can be individual or social"(1).

The study of art and nature practices in Christian rituals and feasts as well as in the Traditional Religion practices have various implications for values and social ethics. Most basic values are related to physical life itself. We are going to look at four dominant spiritual practices using fire, holy

water and the cross that are deeply significant religious symbols and practices of Ethiopian Christianity.

**Light:** *Old and traditional Ethiopian Christians, use wax candles (twaf) during the liturgy, especially when reading the gospel. Light embodies life. According to Aymro and Joachim, "Light symbolizes purity, penetration of darkness, velocity, nourishment of life, illumination of all that comes under influence: it represents the savior and His Mission to enlighten the world"(2).*

**Water:** water symbolizes life and regeneration. Throughout the Nile Valley, there are various religious symbolic expressions, rituals, and prayers related to water. According to Ephraim Issac "In the land where there was hardly any rain, the Nile, which brought the water upon the agricultural life of the people depended on it, playing a dominant role in the religious practices of the Egyptians"(3). The situation in Ethiopia is similar. Ethiopian Orthodox liturgy has a prayer for rivers:

O most benevolent, you alone bring rain. You pour rain on the earth for the trees, the flowers, and all other plants. Since you are the one who feeds those who are flesh and blood, it is suitable to offer praise to you with your beloved Son, Jesus Christ. With him and the Holy Spirit, praise, power, and reign are yours now and forever (2).



Sr. Weynshet receiving a blessings with the cross

### Prayers of Traditional Religions

The spiritual dialogue among religions leads us to consider prayers of some African groups in their being related to the divinity. For the northern Nilotes of Sudan in fact, the spiritual nature of the divine is both personal and impersonal. 'Spirit' is a quality as well as a person, a power immanence and transcendence. At the same time 'Spirit' is addressed directly as 'Father' or 'God' or 'Friend' at other times, the air, the rain. All are manifestations of his nearness and farness and none can exhaust the total reality. In this intimate prayer the Nuer of Sudan address God as a friend in a sacrifice of reconciliation after a spear-fight in which a youth was injured:

Friend, God, who is in this village  
As you are very great, We tell  
you about this wound, For you are the God of our home in very  
truth. We tell you about the fight of-this lad, Let the wound heal,  
Let it be ransomed (1)

In an invocation before a sacrifice to obtain a cure, the Dinka of Sudan address God (the 'Divinity') as well as earth, flesh, grass, fig-tree, head-carrying ring, and even the illness itself. The worshipper sees God as entering into human conflicts and problems, to console and to heal.

You Earth, you are called by my words, And you, Divinity, you are called by my words, Because you look after all people, and are greater than anyone, And, if evil has befallen them, Then you are called to come and join with them in it also. Come, O you Flesh, divinity of Pagong, If you are called, then you will indeed hear me, And you Awar grass, you will hear. And you Flesh of my father and Fig-tree of my father, And Head-carrying ring of my father, you will hear. O Power (illness), we have separated you from ourselves, Release him ... Release him indeed! (2)

United in the experience of trusting God's power of life, we can be enriched by the combonian witness of encounter with believers of TR.

1. Evans-Pritchard, E. E. Y.: *Nuer religion* (Oxford, 1956), p 112.
2. Lienhardt, R. G.: *Divinity and experience* (Oxford, 1961), p 230.



warding off evil (physical and moral), placing the emphasis on the effects and causes of evil. Sacrifices, which involve shedding the blood of human beings or animals, are the main practices to avoid the effects of evil in one's life. Since life is closely associated with blood, the act of shedding blood means that life is given back to God, the main source of life. The central motivation is the quest for life and its preservation. Life is a continuum which follows the dynamism of birth, death and rebirth. In this context, rites of passage such as initiation, marriage and funerals celebrate each phase of this cyclic process. The final aspiration is to attain the status of ancestor and use one's enhanced powers for the benefit of one's family and clan (Oborji 2002:16-23). Ultimately, the sense of sacredness which permeates the life of the peoples we live with, calls us missionaries for a deeper engagement with their understanding of God's mystery at theological level. The margins, described by bell hooks as 'a site of resistance' which 'is part of the whole but outside of the main body' (1989:206-207), are a privileged space for doing theology. The theology of the margins is necessary to speak of God in more familiar and relatable ways, to resist dogmatism and the *tabula rasa* mentality and eventually to regenerate our presences and ministries. In **the theological margins, we might discover like Paul the God in whom 'we live, and move and have our being'** (Acts 17:28).

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It is crucial for agricultural societies to receive and adequate amount of rain in order to produce food, in which the rituals involving water reflect (4).

**Holy oil:** Health is another essential value, closely related to food and shelter. Almost all Christian denomination in Ethiopian use oil (meron) for consecration, in prayer for those to be baptized, and in the healing of the sick. Oil is also used to purify and prepare the dead as a part of the death ritual. Unction oil is used for the consecration of vessels to be used by the clergy, particularly in the celebration of the Eucharist. Through liturgical prayers and evoking the name of the Trinity and using oil, the mundane and the material become sacred.

**The cross:** is an omnipresent symbol of life. In Christianity, the cross which originally was a sign of capital punishment and death, is transformed into a symbol of life. In Ethiopia the presence of the cross is everywhere. One observes hand crosses, processional crosses, crosses around the neck, crosses in icons, crosses in books, crosses inside and outside of churches. People are tattooed with the image of crosses on their forehead, their necks, and their hands. Traditional clothes are decorated with crosses. Crosses are visible on fences, in settings both religious and secular, as well as on buildings and carved in rocks, all these offer occasions to observe reality from a Christian perspective.



Processional Cross

The cultural places are filled with crosses for anyone to see, interprets life and death, past present, and future, and all social situations, in the light of Christianity. Symbols, rituals, and festivals often include Trinitarian invocations, through prayers complemented with the sign of the cross. Giving a high importance to the cross in Ethiopia has various reasons.

The finding of the True Cross from which a part arrived to Ethiopia, and above all, the celebration of what Christ has done on the cross for the redemption of humanity. The solemn ceremony of the Eucharist includes words like "The cross shines among stars".

Besides the verbal proclamation of the Christian community, the value of the cross is also appreciated and glorified in fire and water. Nature is appreciated in its cycle when people celebrate the transition from the rainy, dark, and foggy season to the time of sunshine flowers, and new life, the emergence of the light symbolized by fire which reflects the commemoration of the life-giving cross.

### Traditional Religion

On the other hand, here is a common traditional belief in the evil eye (*Buda*) among both Christian and Muslim Ethiopians. This is the belief that one's misfortune is caused by another's envy, sometimes taking the form of a curse. For example, people may believe that too much admiration of a child can cause an evil eye to become jealous and curse it, making the baby sick. Number of Ethiopian Christians as well as those who practice Traditional Religion also believe in divine healings, exorcisms and direct revelations from God. Demons are often thought to be the cause of illness or ailments; therefore spiritual healing is an important treatment for many Ethiopians. This can involve holy water ceremonies, and meditation and reflection over a fasting period. In 2010, a study by the Pew Research Center found that 74% of Ethiopian Christians claim to have experienced or witnessed an exorcism.

There are also many traditional animist beliefs that are specific to tribal groups: example, the traditional religion of the Oromo people called (*Waaqeffanna*). Most Oromo Ethiopians practicing the traditional religion believe in the spiritual connection of (*Ayanna*), an overall creator, known as (*Waq*). In a 2010 poll, 11% of Ethiopians reported that they believed in sacrifices to spirits or ancestors could protect them from bad happenings. Today also many Oromos practice *Waaqeffanna* in conjunction with Christianity, seeing it as more a cultural practice rather than a religious practice.



for **putting himself in the place of** the people whose religion was different from his own and **trying to understand them**, 'to the Jews I became as a Jew [...], to those outside the law I became as one outside the law' (1Cor 9: 20-21).

Nonetheless, despite its biblical foundations, the fear of syncretism seems to create certain reluctance towards interreligious dialogue. Paul's aim was not to compromise the theological integrity of his message but rather

to transform the false values and beliefs of his hearers. Moreover, the contemporary approach to syncretism attempts to strip it from the negative connotations attached to it. Syncretism, at the crossroads between culture and Christian faith, appears as a necessary stage in the process of inculturation. Eugene Hillman (1989) and Leonardo Boff (1986) see syncretism as a sign of the 'catholization' of Christianity; one of the most syncretistic religions, in Lamin Sanneh's view (1983:245). A remarkable example of 'positive syncretism' is the Ethiopian spirituality, often misunderstood and misjudged by western and westernized missionaries and yet described as 'most thoroughly Africanized' and 'the fullest example of the assimilation of African culture by Christianity' (Shenk 1988:260). In Ethiopian Christianity, Syrian, Byzantine, Coptic, Jewish and traditional elements converge. Through a slow process of evangelization, mostly carried out by Eastern monks, traditional beliefs and practices were not eliminated but rather Christianized or tolerated. As a consequence, Christianity has penetrated all the aspects of social life and has never been considered a foreign religion.

**In order to engage in genuine dialogue with the Traditional Religions it is necessary to study and understand their cultural and religious parameters.** Fundamentally, followers of traditional religions believe in one God, creator of the cosmos and of humanity. However, there is an estrangement between God and the created world caused by human beings. Therefore, humans aspire to restore their primordial relationship with God through the mediation of deities and their ancestors. There is great concern in pursuing good and



Attendants to funeral Gumuz  
People-Ethiopia

African peoples believe in' (Maluleke 1998:127). In this sense, we, Comboni Missionary Sisters, need to come to terms with our own history. Teresa Okure in her reading of the Plan and the Rules of 1871, presented during the Symposium (2013), notes the pejorative description of Africa and her fetishism, the language of conquest and the



Funeral last 3 days. Life of the elder is

dualistic hermeneutics which associates Europeans with progress and intelligence and Africans with savagery and ignorance (pp. 14-22). The issue at stake here is not the missionary praxis of Daniel Comboni and his first missionaries, sons and daughters of their time, but rather our very own. The desire to contextualize the foundational documents of our spirituality calls for a **reflection on our engagement with the Traditional Religions** in Africa and in the other continents. These are the **'theological peripheries' where we are called not only to live in but also to engage with, learn from and develop a theology of the margins.**

♦ What insights can we learn from Paul's missionary approach?

The differences between the speeches in Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:14ff) and in the Aeropagus (Acts 17:16-34) underline Paul's dialogical 'sensitivity towards the religious background of his audience' (p.159). On the one hand, the speech at the synagogue of Antioch is specifically tailored to a Jewish audience. Paul summarizes the history of Israel and extensively quotes the Hebrew Scriptures to present Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophecies. On the other hand, in Athens, Paul uses a terminology which would appeal to his Greek audience. Unlike the monotheistic Jews, the Greeks and the Romans have a great variety of gods who govern and protect all the aspects of life. **Paul respectfully recognizes the genuineness of his audience's religiosity.** He shows sound knowledge of the Greek system of belief which he uses without despising it as 'stepping stones' to communicating the gospel. In so doing, Paul displays great rhetorical skills, which enable him to first **create a common understanding** with his audience to then move onto more controversial issues such as the resurrection of Jesus. In several occasions, Paul demonstrates capacity

## Conclusion

The joy and solidarity shared in the various religious celebrations and practices are indeed significant values. It signifies unity which celebrates diversity as well as promotes peace and harmony. Peace and reconciliation are prerequisites for the celebration. Faith is expressed when leaders of faith are engaged in reconciling parties that have been hostile to each other.

Interreligious dialogue helps different religions come together, allowing the development of the interpersonal relationships among various leaders of faiths with the primary goal of learning about the cultural ideological and religious views of each faith. Such understanding invites to common enrichment between all religions. As we have seen before experiencing regular dialogue among various faith also enhances, deepen and broaden the knowledge and appreciating of one's own religion and culture with all its values and spiritualities through mutual understanding of one another's conviction and witness. (Writer's Name)

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- (4) *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, 318 (41).  
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## Traditional Religions and Interfaith-Cultural Dialogue in Evangelization

IN HIM WE LIVE AND MOVE AND HAVE OUR BEING:

“PAUL AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE WITH TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS”

In the Combonian spheres, there is a tendency to associate ‘interreligious dialogue’ with the context of the Arab-Oriental GIP. This general opinion is mainly based on two assumptions: that one mostly engages in inter-faith dialogue with followers of the major world religions, namely, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism, and that those followers are normally found in the Eastern side of the ‘Combonian world’.



Traditional funeral of an elderly  
-Gumuz People Ethiopia

Surprisingly, both assumptions can easily be challenged. The latter is proved wrong by the fact that followers of the major world religions are found almost everywhere, while the former is the object of discussion of this article. The concept of interreligious dialogue with traditional religions is analysed following the line of argument proposed by Professor Lovemore Togaresei, (University of Botswana), in his article: “Paul and Interreligious Dialogue”. Paul’s dialogical missionary approach leads Togaresei to affirm that the future of Christian Mission in Africa calls for engaging in genuine dialogue with the African Traditional Religions (p. 153).

The starting point is the **concept of interreligious dialogue and its ‘problematic’ relation with evangelizing.**

Togaresei builds on Terry C. Muck’s fourfold definition of interreligious dialogue. Interreligious dialogue is traditionally understood as ‘a communication methodology’, through which ‘conflicts are solved when people learn how to talk with one another’; as ‘an intellectual strategy’, in which dialogue is the ‘essence of human social constructions’; and as a ‘teleological argument’, dialogue for the sake of dialogue. Muck, however, adds an interesting ingredient to these definitions, interreligious dialogue ‘as an expression of a fundamental

emotion or attitude toward people who believe differently on the most important aspects of life; [...] which not only allows for differences but also postulates them and accepts them as fact, but not as truth’ (1997:140-141). The distinction between facts and truth serves Togaresei to ‘marry’ dialogue with evangelizing because ‘they can work together’. Interreligious dialogue is ‘the sensitivity to the existence of and respect of others’ religions’ as well as ‘making use of the religion of the evangelized in the context of Mission’, that is, ‘contextualizing the Gospel’ (p. 155). Some questions arise from Togaresei’s approach to interreligious dialogue:

*how much have we developed sensitivity and respect, particularly towards Traditional Religions, in our respective ministries? Do we take into consideration their sense of the sacred? How much have we considered them essential vehicles to the contextualization of the Gospel? Are we aware of our attitudes and/or emotions at play in our encounters with the Other’s worldview.*

The most diverse African postcolonial academics, such as the late Kenyan John Mbiti (1970) or the feminist Batswana Musa Dube (1998), critique the

‘monological’ character of early missionary endeavour in Africa, the disdain towards the Traditional Religions and the emphasis on the ‘darkness’ of the African continent. What is more, **the lack of genuine dialogue with the Traditional Religions and cultures has led to a shallow evangelization:** ‘many African Christians are in Church in the “morning” and at the traditional practitioner’s place in the



Gumuz traditional healer

“afternoon or evening”” (p. 157). According to Okot p’Bitek, one of the problems is that African deities have been ‘dressed’ in Greek metaphysical garments which ‘suffocate’ them (Maluleke 1998:124). In my opinion, p’Bitek’s argument is absolutely right. The use of alien cultural parameters to speak about God, even alien to the Jewish context where the historical Jesus lived, has produced a foreign image of God which is difficult to relate to. Consequently, **‘the Christian God became one more deity added to the long list of deities**