

# An Evaluation Of The Nandi Traditional Concept Of God In Light Of The Teachings Of The New Testament

Jacob K Chirchir

Lecturer, Kapsabet Bible College

*Abstract: Before the coming of the missionaries to Africa to preach the good news and teach the word of God, many African tribes believed in the existence of God or a number of gods. This believes is not all together devoid of some truth about God's nature. God through the general revelation in nature and man's conscience had revealed His truth to all people. In the light of this fact, this paper seeks to discuss what the Nandi people traditionally believed about the nature of God. It is hoped that by comparing what the traditional Nandi religion believed and taught about God with what the New Testament teaches about God, the church in Nandi will be helped to know the common ground that exists between the traditional beliefs and what the bible teaches. This common ground can be used as the starting point of sharing the gospel of God's love in Christ.*

*Keywords: God, Traditional Religion, Nandi People, New Testament.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The belief in the God is a central tenet of all religions. In fact one basic and central feature of all religions in the world is the fact that they all hold to the existence of a supernatural being or beings. This is evident in both the ancient and modern religions throughout the world. We can therefore confidently conclude that without a supernatural being, there can be no religion.

The doctrine of God is very central in Christianity. According to Christian theology God has revealed Himself to mankind in two distinct ways. The systematic theologians term God's revelation of Himself as either general revelation or special revelation. General revelation is wide in scope. It is God's self- manifestation to all people at all place at all times. Special revelation on the other hand is specific. It is God's self- manifestation to a particular person(s) in a particular place(s) at a particular time(s). God has specifically revealed Himself through Jesus Christ and through His word, the Bible.

Before the coming of the missionaries to Africa to preach the good news and teach the word of God, many African tribes believed in the existence of God or a number of gods. This believes is not all together devoid of some truth about God's nature. God through the general revelation in nature and

man's conscience had revealed His truth to all people. Paul reminds us that;

Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God has showed it to them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, clearly seen being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse" (Rom 1:19-20).

In the light of the above this paper seeks to discuss what the Nandi people traditionally believed about the nature of God. It is hoped that by comparing what the traditional Nandi religion believed and taught about God with what the New Testament teaches about God, the church in Nandi will be helped to know the common ground that exists between the traditional beliefs and what the bible teaches. This common ground can be used as the starting point of sharing the gospel of God's love in Christ.

## II. THE NANDI TRADITIONAL CONCEPTION OF GOD

The Nandi people traditionally worshipped God whom they called Asis. Many people connect this name i.e. *Asis* with the sun, *Asista*. Snell (1954) points out that "the power behind

the world was *Asis*- an indefinite noun whose definite counterpart was *Asista*- the sun". Snell seems to conclude that the Nandi people were worshipping the sun. This position is not correct. The Nandi people believed in a supreme being called *Asis*. The sun, *Asista*, was believed to be the eye of God. A missionary who served among the Nandi people makes the following observation:

*Asiista* is the kalenjin word for the sun, but when it was used to indicate "God" there was no indication that the object seen in the sky and called "the sun" was the object of their worship. Rather, it was understood that both *Asis* and *Asiista* gave the idea of the spirit or personality behind the object called "the sun"... *Asiista* was the symbol of the personality or spirit which existed beyond it- the symbol of *Asis*. Just as a picture of a friend reminds one of that friend- the actual person- so *Asiista* reminded them of *Asis*, the actual being which they worshipped (Fish, 1995).

*Asis* then was the Supreme Being (God) whom the Nandi people worshipped. The sun only served as a reminder that *Asis* (God) existed. It was a manifestation of *Asis*' power and glory.

The Nandi people did not have a particular set of attributes said to belong to God. The attributes were implied in the names given to God as well as in their prayers and stories told about God. The conduct of the community was also based on God's character and these moral demands tell us something on the attributes of God in the Nandi traditional religion. The attributes of *Asis* will now be discussed under four headings.

#### A. THE INTRINSIC ATTRIBUTES OF ASIS.

The intrinsic attributes that the Nandi people attribute to *Asis* include Omniscience, Omnipotence and Transcendence. One of the ways used to describe God among the Nandi is *Asis Chepkelien Sogol* (lit. the one with nine feet). This was probably in reference to the sun's rays and carries with it the idea of God's Omnipotence and self sufficiency. Nine is the highest single number and therefore a divine number associated with the infinite. Fish (1995) concludes that "Asis did not need anything to be added to him".

The association of the sun as God's eye brings in the in the idea that God is all seeing and all hearing and therefore Omniscient. According to Mbiti (1970), the Nandi people are among the majority of African people who consider God to be supreme, transcendent or remote.

#### B. THE ETERNAL ATTRIBUTES OF ASIS

The eternal attributes of *Asis* include his infinity, eternity and invisibility. *Asis* (God) was the invisible force behind and beyond *Asista* (the sun). The Nandi believed that God was a spirit and referred to him as 'the guardian spirit'. His infinity is implied in the name *Asis Chepkelien Sogol* as earlier discussed.

The eternity of God was implied by another descriptive name that was used frequently by the Nandi. This name is *Asis Chepkochor* (lit. the rising one). One could be sure of God's eternal existence just as they were sure of seeing the sun rise every morning. The old men would say "the sun will come even though you have slept".

#### C. THE MORAL ATTRIBUTES OF ASIS

The two most outstanding attributes of God here are his goodness and holiness. Those who approached God were required to be holy and morally upright. The Nandi people held an annual corporate worship service at the community's sacred place called *Kapkoros*. The person in charge of *Kapkoros* was called *echotyot*. He was a respectable elder, a man of integrity and one whose wife and children had not died (Gehman, 1985). He was assisted by four boys and four girls who were required to be *libwaben* i.e. blameless. Their brothers and sisters had to be alive and they themselves were to be sexually pure and of good character. The whole community was required to prepare for this day. Shedding of blood, fighting, cursing and even sexual intercourse was forbidden prior to the annual visit to the *Kapkoros*. All were required to bathe and wash their clothes so that they would be clean as they approached God. All these conditions and preparations before worship imply that God is Holy.

The Nandi believed that God was too holy to look at man and that is why he uses the sun as his eye. God is also called *Cheptilil* meaning the holy one. The Nandi people also believed in the goodness of God. They invoked his goodness in their blessings. He was also seen as the final arbiter and upholder of tribal sanctity. *Asis* is a just judge.

#### D. THE ACTIVE ATTRIBUTES OF ASIS

*Asis* was seen as the creator, provider and sustainer. God created the earth and the sky. He also created man and gave him cattle. Together with the act of creation comes the act of providence and sustenance. The Nandi looked upon *Asis* to provide for them rain, grain, cattle, children, land and protection. Every morning the head of each family would recite this prayer, "*Asis chebo kipkoyo, konech berur, konech iot*" (God give us blessings, give us offspring). This prayer points out the trust that the Nandi had in God's providence. The Nandi also prayed for protection from God. Mbiti (1970) relates the following prayer:

God, guard for me the children and cattle, God, guard for us the cattle,

God, give us health.

The mothers of the warriors also prayed for their sons to have good health and for protection while away in the battle field.

### III. THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The doctrine of God is central to the New Testament writings. The name of God is often mentioned in all the books of the New Testament. There are about 1,341 references to God in the New Testament. Though there is no systematized teaching on the nature of God in the New Testament, there is nonetheless an agreement among all the writers on how God is like. By comparing what all the New Testament writers say about God, we can come up with a fairly good description of God as presented in the New Testament.

The New Testament builds on the Old Testament assumption of the existence of God. Charles Ryrie (1959) observes that Paul builds his theology of God on the basic assumption of God's existence and the fact that God has revealed himself to man. The New Testament ascribes the following attributes to God.

#### A. HE IS A GLORIOUS GOD

The glory of God is one of the most prominent themes in the Old Testament. The Psalmist says that the Heavens declare the glory of God (Psalm 19:1). God's glory was evident not only in His creation but also in His acts on behalf of Israel. Donald Guthrie (1981) observes that "OT history is seen as a record of God's revelation of his glory in his activities on behalf of his people".

The word glory is used frequently in the New Testament. The Greek word for glory is *doxa*. This word translates the Hebrew *kabod*. Guthrie (1981) observes that "in the NT there are two senses in which *doxa* is used, as visible glory (in the sense of seeing the glory of God) and as uttered praise (in the sense of ascribing glory to God)".

The New Testament records many instances when people ascribed glory to God. Most of these instances are spontaneous responses to God's miraculous acts through Jesus Christ (Mt 9:8; 15:31; Mk 2:12; Lk 2:20; 5:25, 26; 7:16; 9:26; 18:43). God's visible glory was seen by the disciples during the transfiguration event (Mt 17:1 ff; Mk 9:2 ff; Lk. 9:28 ff).

Of all the New Testament writers, Paul talks about God's glory more than anyone else. Leon Morris observes that,

Akin to this is Paul's interest in glory (he uses the word 77 times, nearly 47 percent of its New Testament occurrences). Once he complains that sinners come short of God's glory (Rom. 3:23; cf. 1:23), and he can refer to a human "hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:2). But more often he delights in God's glory (2 Cor. 4:6, 15; Phil. 2:11) or sees it as a motive for conduct: we should, like Abraham, "give glory to God" (Rom. 4:20; cf. 15:7; 1 Cor. 10:31; 2 Cor. 1:20; Phil. 1:11). Frequently he speaks of "glorifying" God (Rom. 15:6, 9; 1 Cor. 6:20; 2 Cor. 9:13; Gal. 1:24). The God who is so central to Paul is a glorious God.

The General Epistles and Revelation also mention the glory of God. Jesus is described as reflecting the glory of God (Heb 1:3). This implies that Jesus was the embodiment of God's presence in the same way that God was present in the Old Testament Theophanies through his *shekinah*. The believer is to glorify God in all that he does because God has called all believers to his own glory and excellence (1 Pet. 2:12; 4:11; 2 Pet. 1:3). It is the duty of man to glorify God in all that he does and says. The book of Revelation paints a picture of God's glory that leads us to worship Him for who he is and what he does e.g. executing his judgment (Rev. 4:11; 7:9-12; 14:6, 7; 15:4-8; 19:1-4). The New Jerusalem is filled with God's glory and does not need to have any form of lighting. It also does not have any temple because God is ever present (Rev. 21: 10, 11, 22, 23).

The God of the New Testament is a glorious God. In his glory, God rules over his creation and intervenes in miraculous ways on behalf of man whom He loves and has called him to fellowship with him. Man is to respond in awe

and glorify God for all the good things he enjoys. Our God is a powerful and mysterious God whom man cannot fully comprehend. The best man can do is to worship Him for who he is.

#### B. HE IS THE MOST WISE AND ALL KNOWING GOD

The God of the New Testament is not only a glorious, powerful and mysterious God. He is also the most wise and omniscient God. The Apostle Paul describes God as "the only wise God (1 Tim 1:17) whose omniscience will be displayed in the Day of Judgment (Rom 2:16; 1 Cor. 4:5)". God's wisdom is superior to man's wisdom and man's wisdom is utter foolishness when compared with God's wisdom. The best of man's wisdom cannot even compare to God's foolishness. God's wisdom is way far above man's wisdom (1 Cor. 1:19-30).

God is not only wise, He is also omniscient. God has perfect knowledge of all things past, present and future. He is perfectly acquainted with every detail in the life of every being in heaven and on earth. Nothing escapes His notice, nothing can be hidden from Him, and nothing is forgotten by Him. Jesus acknowledged this fact when he reminded his disciples not to perform their religious duties like giving alms and prayer in public. They should do them in secret since God sees in secret and already knows what we need even before we ask (Mt 6:1-8). The fact that God knows all the needs of all the believers even before they ask is the greatest evidence of God's perfect knowledge.

Because God is wise and all knowing, the believer can trust Him under all circumstances of life. Since God has a perfect understanding it means that when He wills "his plans and purposes are perfect and can never be in error (Guthrie, 1981)". God can be trusted because He does not lie (Tit 1:2; Heb 6:18). God does not change his plans because He has received more insight. He is all knowing and what He plans is true and does not need any modification as time progresses. He is a trust worthy God and it is the duty of the believers to trust Him and carry out His perfect will.

#### C. HE IS A LOVING AND GRACIOUS GOD

George Ladd (1993) describes God as "seeking love". "God is love" (1 John 4:8). It is not simply that God "loves," but that He is Love itself. God loves His son and this is an indication of His loving nature (Jn. 3:35; 5:20; 10:17; 15:9; 16:27; 17:23f.). Donald Guthrie (1981) observes that "Jesus was deeply conscious of the Father's love for him as the foundation stone and pattern of God's love for people (17:23). It is integral to the teaching of Jesus that for man the most desirable thing is to be the object of God's love (Jn. 14:21, 23)".

God does not only love His son but He also loves all people. In His love for the world, God gave us His son to die for our sins (Jn 3:16). The most significant feature in the statement that God so loved the world that he gave his Son (Jn. 3:16) is not that God loved, but that he loved so comprehensively. This love of God is uninfluenced, eternal and sovereign. It is uninfluenced in the sense that man does nothing to merit God's love. The love of God is free,

spontaneous, uncaused. "We love Him, because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). God did not love us because we loved Him, but He loved us before we had a particle of love for Him. Had God loved us in return for ours, then it would not be spontaneous on His part; but because He loved us when we were loveless, it is clear that His love was uninfluenced.

God's love is also eternal. This is of necessity. God Himself is eternal, and God *is* love; therefore, as God Himself had no beginning, His love had none. In the Old Testament God tells Israel "I have loved you with everlasting love..." (Jer 31:3). The same truth is emphasized in the New Testament. In Ephesians 1:4-5 Paul writes, "According as He has chosen us in Him *before the foundation of the world*, that we should be holy and without blame before Him. *In love* having predestinated us to the adoption of children by Jesus Christ Himself according to the good pleasure of His will..." (Italics added for emphasis). The implication of this passage is that God loved us even before He laid the foundation of this world. If His love is has no beginning it also has no ending.

God's love is sovereign. God Himself is sovereign, under obligations to none, a law unto Himself, acting always according to His own imperial pleasure. Since God is sovereign, and since He is love, it necessarily follows that His love is sovereign. Because God *is* God, He does as He pleases; because God is love, He loves whom He pleases. Such is His own express affirmation: "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated" (Rom 9:13). There was no more reason in Jacob why he should be the object of divine love than there was in Esau. They both had the same parents, and were born at the same time, being twins; yet God loved the one and hated the other! Why? Because it pleased Him to do so. God predestined us in love "according to the good pleasure of His will" (Eph 1:5).

God's love is also infinite, immutable and gracious. God's love is without limit. There is a depth to it which none can fathom; there is a height to it which none can scale; there is a length and breadth to it which defies measurement, by any human standard (Eph 3:14-21). John says that "God *so* loved the world..." (Jn 3:16). This "so" cannot be quantified. Since God is infinite, everything about him is also infinite. Paul talks of God's great love with which he loved us (Eph 2:4). God's love cannot be compared with any other love.

God's love is also immutable. God does not change. As with God Himself there is "no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (James 1:17), so His love knows neither change nor diminution. Even when we become unfaithful and ungrateful God still loves us. In his love God will discipline just as father disciplines his children (Heb 12:5- 11).

The love and the favor of God are inseparable. Guthrie (1981) observes that "The 'grace of God' denotes an essential feature of God's love. When applied to God, the word grace denotes the favor of God towards those who do not deserve his favor, and therefore came to be used particularly of God's saving work in Christ". Grace is another name for the gregarious character of God's love. Even though the word 'grace' is not used in the synoptic, the actions and teaching of Jesus tell us more about God's grace. In fact the mission of Jesus was a supreme revelation of the God of grace.

The Pauline corpus is replete with references to God's grace. I concur with Guthrie (1981) that "if there was one characteristic of God which captured the imagination of Paul

more than another, it was the grace of God". Paul see his own calling as an act of God grace (Gal 1:15) and preaches a gospel of grace. His message is that Christians are saved by grace through faith and not by works (Rom. 3:24; 5:15; Eph. 2:5; Tit. 2:11, Gal. 2:21; Rom. 11:6).

In the Catholic Epistles the believer is encouraged to humble himself so that he may receive the grace of God (Jas 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5). The believer is also to approach the throne of grace with boldness so as to obtain mercy and grace in time of need (Heb 4:16). God is also described as the God of all grace (1 Pet 5:10). Our God is not only loving but He is also gracious and this fact is evident nowhere else than in the New Testament.

#### D. HE IS A JUST AND RIGHTEOUS GOD

George Eldon Ladd (1993) argues that "while God seeks the sinner and offers him or her the gift of the kingdom, he remains a God of retributive righteousness to those who reject the gracious offer". Jesus referred to God as "righteous father" (Jn 17:25). Jesus also encouraged his follows to "first seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Mt 6:33). He also warned his hearers that their righteousness should exceed that of the Pharisees if they wanted to enter the kingdom of God. All these statements of Jesus presuppose that God is righteous.

The Apostle Paul refers to the righteousness of God more frequently than any other New Testament writer. His main theme in the book of Romans revolves around the righteousness of God that has been revealed (Rom 1:17). Man can attain this righteousness only through faith since man is not justified by works but through faith (1:17; 3:21, 22; 4:3, 5, 9, 11). The righteousness that the believer boasts of comes from God (Rom 10:3; Phil 3:9). God's plan for the believer is to transform his life. The believer is to put off the 'old man' and put on the 'new man created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness' (Eph. 4:22- 24).

Since God his absolutely righteous, he will judge justly and righteously (Rom 2:5). God judges each person impartially according to his own deeds (1 Pet 1:17; Heb 10:6; Rom 2:11). An important side to the righteousness and justice of God is his wrath. This theme is emphasized in the New Testament. The wrath of God is His eternal detestation of all unrighteousness. It is the displeasure and indignation of divine equity against evil. It is the holiness of God stirred into activity against sin. It is the moving cause of that just sentence which he passes upon evildoers. God is angry against sin because it is a rebelling against His authority, a wrong done to His inviolable sovereignty. God's justice is exercised through His wrath.

#### E. HE IS A HOLY GOD

Holiness is essentially an attribute of God. It marks him out as being utterly pure in thought and attitude. God is referred to as 'holy father' by Jesus (Jn 17:11). Holiness was the favorite attribute of God for John. He states that "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all" (1 Jn 1:5). In the book of Revelation God is worshipped because of His holiness (Rev 4:8; 15:4). The doctrine of salvation in the New Testament rests on the fact of God's holiness. Because God is holy, he

cannot accept man as he is. Since man cannot attain right standing before a holy God on his own effort, God provides salvation through Christ His son.

Because God is holy He hates all sin. He loves everything which is in conformity to His laws, and loathes everything which is contrary to it. God has often forgiven sinners, but the sinner is only forgiven on the ground of another having borne his punishment: for “without shedding of blood is no remission” (Heb 9:22).

Because God is holy we should desire to be conformed to Him. His commandment is, “Be ye holy, for I am holy” (1 Pet 1:16). We are not asked to be omnipotent or omniscient as God is, but we are to be holy, and that “in all manner of conversation” (1 Pet 1:15). We need to earnestly seek after holiness so that we may conform to what God demands of us.

#### IV. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

As we come to the end of this short paper we need to look back and reflect on some of the issues we have raised. The New Testament reveals to us how God is. Though the writers of the New Testament did not intend to write a systematic theology on the nature of God, what they mention about Him gives us a very clear picture of how He is. Due to the length of this paper we were only able to discuss five attributes of God as taught in the New Testament. There is more that could be said on God’s nature but these five attributes suffice to tell us how God is. He is a glorious, holy, omniscient and wise God. He is also gracious loving, just and righteous.

Our discussion on the traditional Nandi concept of God has revealed that there are many parallels between the Biblical teaching and the Nandi traditional believe about God. These parallels include God’s loving kindness, holiness, providence, omniscience, eternity and omnipotence. The Nandi people may not use the same biblical terminology to describe their God but the concepts are true of both the God of the Bible and *Asis*. What does this imply?

The bible is very clear that God has not left any people group without a witness of Himself. It is a fact that God has not totally abandoned anyone but continues to disclose himself through nature and conscience. The Nandi people through the prevenient grace of God were able to know much about God from what they observed in nature and what God had implanted in their conscience. The traditional religion served as a schoolmaster for the Nandi people and all peoples of Africa in general, in the same way that the Mosaic Law was the schoolmaster for the Jews (Gal 3:24).

The schoolmaster has finished his work and it is time to move on to another plane. The church in Nandi needs to take advantage of the common ground that exists between the traditional beliefs and the biblical teaching to present the gospel and witness effectively to the God of the Bible. Apostle

Paul did the same thing with the people of Athens. He used their religious background to introduce the God of the Bible and the good news of salvation in Christ (Ac 17:16- 31). We need to be proactive as believers and messengers of the gospel. We should avoid condemning those who are still sticking to the traditional beliefs and practices and instead “deal with the traditional concerns in the light of the gospel of Christ (Ferdinandor, 1999)”.

#### V. CONCLUSION

God did not hide himself from man. Instead he revealed himself to all people in all places at all time. There are many links between the biblical teaching and the traditional African religion. We need to take advantage of these links. The need of the hour is a people, men and women, who are ready to preach the gospel and teach the biblical truth in such a way as to reach the African heart in all aspects of life. To the African, everything is religious and Christianity should permeate all aspects of life. We need Christianity that is authentically African without having traces of syncretism or idolatry. The African Christian should be fully satisfied and fully enjoy his fellowship with his creator. We can only achieve this if we commit ourselves to teach the word of God with integrity and in such a way that we address the felt needs of the African people.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Fernandor, Keith. (1999). *The Triumph of Christ in African Perspective*. Cambria: Paternoster.
- [2] Fish, Burnette C, and Gerald W. Fish. (1995). *The Kalenjin Heritage*. Kericho: AGC.
- [3] Gehman, Richard J. (1989). *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*. Nairobi: East African
- [4] \_\_\_\_\_. (1985). *Ancestor Relations Among Three African Societies in Biblical Perspective*. Ann Arbor: University of Microfilms International Educational Publishers.
- [5] Guthrie, Donald. (1981). *New Testament Theology*. Leicester: Intervarsity.
- [6] Ladd, George E. (1993). *A Theology of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- [7] Leon Morris. (n.d.). *New Testament Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- [8] Mbithi, John S. (1970). *Concepts of God in Africa*. London: SPCK.
- [9] Ryrie, Charles C. (1959). *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*. Chicago: Moody Press.
- [10] Snell, G. S. (1954). *Nandi Customary Law*. Nairobi: East Africa Literature Bureau.