

DIVINE CALL AND HUMAN RESPONSE

Prayer in the religious traditions of Africa, II

IN THE FIRST part of this introduction to african traditional prayer we tried to answer the questions 'To whom is prayer in the ethnic religions of Africa addressed? How is divine reality perceived and approached?' In this article we shall look at some of the major themes in african prayer. We have seen that the supreme being is often conceived as 'ancestor', 'elder' or 'lifegiver' and that his creative activity and providence are thought to be mediated by human ancestors or intermediaries. It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the major preoccupations in african prayer should be life and the transmission or continuity of life. Also that, as a corollary to the theme of life, we should find an emphasis on health and healing.

The following blessing formula comes from the Meru of Kenya who address God on Mount Kenya, the mountain of brightness (Kirinyaga). The prayer asks for life and health and all that is necessary for them.

Kirinyaga, owner of all things,
I pray thee, give me what I need,
Because I am suffering,
And also my children (are suffering)
And all things that are in this country of mine.
I beg thee for life,
The good one, with things,
Healthy people with no disease,
May they bear healthy children.
And also to women who suffer because they are barren,
Open the way by which they may see children.
(Give) goats, cattle, food, honey.
And also the troubles of the other lands
That I do not know, remove.¹

For many african peoples who raise livestock, human life is bound up with the life of their herds. Indeed the herds are an effective symbol of the human family, a kind of 'shadow family'. Animals are exchanged and sacrificed at important moments in the life of the family and the community. It is therefore natural that the Dinka of Sudan, whose principal interest is raising cattle, should pray both for the 'life of cattle' and the 'life of men'. This prayer is addressed to 'Divinity' or the supreme being whose symbol is the white ox. It also addressed Deng, the rain-divinity and Deng's mother, Abuk, patroness of motherhood, gardens and crops.

I pray the white one.
 Is Divinity not near?
 Does my father not give us life?
 Deng, son of Abuk, pray for life,
 Life of cattle, life of men.²

Since all life comes from God, the life-giver, parenthood is somehow a share in the divine activity. This delightful religious cradle-song from Burundi calls children 'the field that we share with God' (Imana). Women believe that Imana manifests himself to them in the form of a calf when they go to the river. The singer calls her baby 'child of my mother' and even 'mother' because it is a nominal or metaphorical reincarnation of its grandmother.

Hush, child of my mother,
 Hush, hush, O my mother!
 God who gave you to me,
 If only I could meet him,
 I would fall on my knees and pray to him.
 I would pray for little babies,
 For little babies on my back.

You came when the moon was shining,
 You came when another was rising,
 Hush, field that we share,
 That we share with Imana!
 God who gave you to me,
 May he also bring you up for me.³

The Chagga make their prayers facing Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania. Like Mount Kenya, it is thought to be the abode of Ruwa or God. This prayer accompanied a sacrifice on behalf of a sick man. The bull which God bestowed on him in the first place is now restored through sacrifice, and the prayer for healing turns into a prayer for offspring. God is called 'Chief', 'Preserver' and even 'Elephant', the most impressive and mysterious animal in the forest.

We know you, Ruwa, Chief, Preserver,
 He united the bush and the plain,
 You, Ruwa, Chief, the Elephant indeed,
 He who burst forth men that they lived.
 We praise you and pray to you and fall before you.
 You have sent us this animal which is of your own fashioning,
 For you share with no man and none is given thereof.
 Chief, receive this bull of your name.
 Heal him to whom you gave it and his children.
 Sow the seed of offspring with us,

That we may beget like bees.
 May our clan hold together
 That it be not cleft in the land.
 May strangers not come to possess our groves.
 Now Chief, Preserver, bless all that is ours.⁴

Many african peoples believe in some kind of reincarnation, some real and vital link between those who have died and those who are newborn. In some cases reincarnation is thought to be literal. Not only do human beings become ancestors, but ancestors become human beings again. As the Edo of Nigeria have it, burying a dead man is like planting a seed. The following funerary prayer is addressed to the spirit of the dead man and asks that his next incarnation may be happier and more lengthy.

You came to the world and you lived to old age. . . .
 When you come back may you once again bring a good body
 with you.
 Money, health, all the things that are used in living,
 You must bring them with you. . . .
 When you come again may sickness not send you back.
 May you not suffer the diseases of this world in your next
 incarnation.
 Great Man, you will come back!⁵

In the african way of thinking human survival after death is bound up with physical procreation, but it is also, interestingly, bound up with prayer to the ancestors. 'He who holds out his hands dies not' says this prayer of the Kongo people of Angola.

I have held out my hands to you (in prayer),
 And he holds out his hands dies not.
 I have shown you the animals of the feast,
 And I have brought you no other presents
 Except palm wine,
 That you may favour the procreation of (human) wealth.
 And here are the kola nuts I brought for you.⁶

The following prayer of the Dinka in Sudan was recorded on the occasion of a general supplication for good health.

You Divinity, we shall kill your ox.
 And better that you should be pleased with us.
 You will let us walk in health,
 And we have made a feast so that there should be no fever,
 And that no other illness should seize people,

That they may all be well.
 And if my clansman travels,
 Then let him complete his journey without sickness,
 And let no evil befall him or anybody.
 And you, Divinity, do not bring evil upon us,
 And I shall be pleased.
 You women, clap your hands and sing.
 And *wuu* away the fever, that nothing may be wrong with us.
 You tribe of my father, walk in health,
 Nothing shall harm us,
 And Divinity will be pleased with us,
 And we will pray to Divinity that there be no bad things,
 And sing. . . .⁷

It is often felt, in cases of sickness, that only God who is the ultimate source of life can help. That is the opinion expressed in a prayer which comes from another Nilotic people of Sudan, the Anuak.

O God, thou art great,
 Thou art the one who created me,
 I have no other.
 God, thou art in the heavens,
 Thou art the only one:
 Now my child is sick,
 And thou wilt grant me my desire.⁸

A short ejaculatory prayer from the Luyia of Kenya compares God to a traditional medicine man, spitting a medicine upon his patient to make him 'walk well'. 'Po! God, may the day dawn well; May you spit upon us the medicine so that we may walk well!'⁹

Among the Ibo of Nigeria, it is customary to break and chew a kola-nut with a visitor in a greeting ritual. This idea is extended to God, the spirits and to Agbala, a minor divinity.

God, eat kola-nut,
 Spirits, eat kola-nut,
 Sky, eat kola-nut,
 Agbala, eat kola-nut.
 May we not die,
 May we not perish,
 May we not be sick,
 May we not be tormented with maladies.¹⁰

Finally, we might conclude this theme of life, health and healing with a short prayer-formula from the Nyakyusa of Tanzania. It is addressed to the spirits of the dead and accompanies a libation of milk.

Here is your milk. . . .
 May the locusts pass,
 May sickness be slight,
 May milk be plentiful,
 May the cows calve!¹¹

The theme of continuity of life implies always an appeal to the past as a means of understanding the present and discovering a hope for the future. This is, of course, the concept of memorial or anamnesis which is found in virtually every religion in the world. Even in african religions, where the interpretation of history is subordinated to the ideal of human continuity with the world of Nature, the theme of memorial is present. It is an important means of unifying experience and providing certainty in a world of change. The following prayer from the Kikuyu of Kenya is made under the 'very same tree' used by their ancestors. It therefore reproduces their prayer, a prayer which in the past was effective:

Reverend Elder (God) who lives on Kere-Nyaga,
 You make mountains tremble and rivers flood;
 We offer to you this sacrifice that you may bring us rain.
 People and children are crying;
 Sheep, goats and cattle are crying.
 Nwene Nyaga, we beseech you,
 With the blood and fat of this lamb we are going to sacrifice to
 you.
 Refined honey and milk we have brought for you.
 We praise you in the same way as our forefathers used to praise
 you,
 Under this very same tree,
 And you heard them and brought them rain.
 We beseech you to accept this, our sacrifice,
 And bring us rain of prosperity.

Peace, we beseech you,
 Ngai, peace be with us!¹²

The Dinka of Sudan also resort to an efficacious, ancestral prayer. This prayer is that of the worshipper's ancestor, Guejok. It was recited at the sacrifice of a grey ox or *malith* that was expected to urinate, as a sign of divine acceptance. The prayer itself is personalized and addressed by the worshipper.

And you of my father, if you are called then you will help me,
 And join yourself with my words.
 And I did not speak that my children should become ill;

That quarrel is an old matter.
 And you, *malith*, even though you have not urinated,
 You urinated on the way, when you were being brought here,
 And you, my prayer, and you prayer of the long distant past,
 Prayer of my ancestors, you are spoken now.
 Meet together, ee!
 It is that of my ancestor Guejok,
 It is not of the tongue only,
 It is that of Guejok,
 It is not of the tongue only.¹³

A prayer from the Nyoro, on the occasion of entering a new house, sees house-building as a tradition going back to the worshipper's forefathers. The prayer was accompanied by an offering of millet and simsim seeds.

My father built,
 And his father built,
 And I have built,
 Leave me to live here in success,
 Let me sleep in comfort,
 And have children.
 There is food for you.¹⁴

Closely linked with the theme of memorial or anamnesis is that of thanksgiving. The african worshipper is grateful for divine favour in the past and his gratitude takes the form of commitment and the promise of fidelity in the future. Gratitude is a form of trust and a form of praise. One of the most beautiful prayers of thanksgiving, and one which demonstrates all these aspects, is the prayer attributed by the Kikuyu to Gikuyu, the founder of their tribe, after God (the 'Great Elder') had let him into the fertile land which is now their home.

O My Father, Great Elder,
 I have no words to thank you,
 But with your deep wisdom
 I am sure that you can see
 How I value your glorious gifts.
 O My Father, when I look upon your greatness,
 I am confounded with awe.
 O Great Elder,
 Ruler of all things earthly and heavenly,
 I am your warrior,
 Ready to act in accordance with your will.¹⁵

There is also the sentiment, expressed in this pygmy prayer from Zaire (as

well as in the above example from the Kikuyu) of the inadequacy of human gratitude. This is a prayer of thanksgiving for the birth of a child.

O God, thanks!
 Here is the human being whom you gave us.
 Today we bring you the food that you have given us,
 You, my termite heap on which I lean,
 From which come the termites that I eat.
 Lord we thank you; you have given us joy
 With the numerous births you have given us.
 Nothing of all that we offer you is worthy of you.¹⁶

The same sense of inadequacy is present in this ashanti prayer from Ghana, addressed to God (Odomankoma) and other divinities.

The year has come round, great Odomankoma,
 Never can we thank you for your deeds and blessing for us.
 Tano Kofi and all the seventy-seven gods of Brenhoma,
 Come now and eat from our hands and bless your people.
 Let all who are ill get well.
 Let all who are barren bear children.
 Let all who are impotent find remedy.
 Don't let them go blind or paralysed.
 We all beseech happiness,
 Let us have it.¹⁷

The theme of peace is emphasized especially among pastoral peoples who are addicted to feuding and raiding, but there is no lack of realism in the concept. Peace is ultimately guaranteed only by personal self-control and by social harmony and justice. Some of the most beautiful prayers for peace in african tradition come from the Boran of Kenya, as these three examples show.

O God, thou hast let me pass the night in peace,
 Let me pass the day in peace.
 Wherever I may go
 Upon my way which thou madest peaceable for me,
 O God, lead my steps.
 When I have spoken,
 Keep off calumny from me.
 When I am hungry,
 Keep me from murmuring.
 When I am satisfied,
 Keep me from pride.
 Calling upon thee, I pass the day,
 O Lord who has no Lord.¹⁸

Corresponding to the above morning prayer is the following night offering:

O God, thou has let me pass the day in peace,
 Let me pass the night in peace,
 O Lord who hast no Lord.
 There is no strength but in thee.
 Thou alone hast no obligation.
 Under thy hand I pass the night.
 Thou art my mother and my father.¹⁹

Like the two previous texts, this longer prayer asks for peace at the hands of an inscrutable God who permits infringements of peace by violent men, but who demands ultimate trust in his providence.

Good God of this earth, my Lord!
 Thou art above me, I am below thee.
 When misfortune comes to me,
 As trees keep off the sun from me,
 Mayest thou keep off misfortune;
 My Lord, be thou my shadow!
 Calling upon thee, I pass the day.
 Calling upon thee, I pass the night.
 When this moon rises, do not forsake me;
 When I rise, I do not forsake thee;
 Let the danger pass by me.
 God, my Lord, thou Sun with thirty rays,
 When the enemy comes,
 Let not thy worm be killed upon the earth;
 Keep him off, as we seeing a worm upon the earth,
 Crush him if we like, spare him if we like.
 As we tread upon and kill a worm on the earth,
 Thou, if thou pleasest, thou crushest us upon the earth.
 God, thou goest, holding the bad and the good in thy hand;
 My Lord, let us not be killed,
 We, thy worms, we are praying to thee.
 A man who knows not evil and good may not anger thee;
 If once he knew it and was not willing to know it,
 This is wicked — treat him as it pleases thee.
 If he formerly did not learn,
 Do thou, my Lord, teach him.
 If he learns not the language of men,
 He learns thy language.
 God, thou hast made all the animals and men
 That live upon the earth;
 The corn also upon this earth on which we are to live

Hast thou made; we have not made it.
 Thou hast given us strength;
 Thou has given us cattle and corn;
 We worked with them and the seed grew up for us.
 With the corn which thou let'st grow for us
 Men were satisfied.
 The corn in the house has been burnt up;
 Who has burnt the corn in the house?
 Thou knowest.
 I know one or two men,
 I know them when I have seen them with my eye;
 Thou, even if thou didst not see them with thine eyes,
 knowest them by thy heart.
 A single bad man has chased away all our people from their
 houses;
 The children and their mother has he scattered
 Like a flock of turkeys, hither and thither.
 The murderous enemy took the curly-headed child
 Out of his mother's hand and killed him.
 Thou hast permitted all this to be done so.
 Why has thou done so?
 Thou knowest.
 The corn which thou let'st grow
 Dost thou show to our eyes;
 The hungry man looks at it and is comforted.
 When the corn blooms thou sendest butterflies
 And locusts into it — locusts and doves.
 All this comes from thy hand;
 Thou has caused it to be done so?
 Why hast thou done so?
 Thou knowest.
 My Lord, spare those who pray to thee!
 As a thief, stealing another's corn,
 Is bound by the owner of the corn,
 Thus do not thou bind, O Lord;
 Binding the beloved one thou settest free with love.
 If I am beloved by thee,
 Set me free, I entreat thee from my heart;
 If I do not pray to thee with my heart,
 Thou hearest me not.
 If I pray to thee with my heart,
 Thou knowest it and are gracious unto me.²⁰

The following litany for peace, which comes from the Kikuyu of Kenya,

envisages the prosperity that is the consequence of peace. The prayer is addressed to Ngai, the Creator.

Say ye, the elders may have wisdom and speak with one voice,
 Praise ye, Ngai. Peace be with us.
 Say ye that the country may have tranquillity
 And the people may continue to increase.
 Praise ye Ngai, peace be with us.
 Say ye that the people and the flocks and the herds
 May prosper and be free from illness.
 Praise ye Ngai. Peace be with us.
 Say ye the fields may bear much fruit
 And the land may continue to be fertile.
 Praise ye Ngai. Peace be with us.²¹

The Nuer of Sudan use short petitionary prayers to introduce the longer invocation which precedes a sacrifice. This particular prayer is a stock petition for the right dispositions at a sacrifice — peace of heart and freedom from evil. It is addressed to 'Spirit' or Kwoth, and calls him 'Our Father'.

Our Father, it is thy Universe,
 It is thy will, let us be at peace,
 Let the souls of thy people be cool;
 Thou art our Father,
 Remove all evil from our path.²²

In the ethnic religious traditions of Africa there are frequent prayers for conversion of heart, both for oneself and for others. Contrition is sometimes expressed in question form: 'How have I wronged you?' but also in the form of a direct confession of wrongdoing. In the following prayer from the Dinka of Sudan, human beings are referred to as 'children of the ants', the smallest of the small before Divinity. The worshipper confesses that in his pride and greed he slaughtered his best ox, the *majok* with pied markings. *Golong*, a cattle plague is now afflicting his cattle, according to the diviner Mayan, and it is this punishment that prompts the confession.

Children of the ants,
 We have suffered from dryness.
 Why, am I without cattle?
 Why, am I without grain. . . ?
 That is what I ask, ee!
 I am a man who boasted of himself.
 I slaughtered in my greed my *majok* ox.
 Children of Aghok, my father,
 The children of the ants are forsaken.

My father, the Creator, indeed created men.
 We honour our father,
 That he may look in upon us.
 Mayan honours Divinity.
 Mayan, son of Deng, divines.
 It is Golong which devours our cattle.²³

The prophet leader of the Meru of Kenya prays that his work for a client may be successful and that those who do not trust him may be converted.

Almighty God,
 Have mercy on me.
 May this child of mine
 See these things,
 So that my work
 May be seen by all men,
 And also those who do not trust me,
 May their infidelity change.²⁴

From the Dinka again comes the idea that Divinity or God is 'heartbroken' because of man's wrongdoing.

Repeat my words. Thus it is.
 You, head-carrying ring of my father,
 I call on you because you are the one
 Who wastes the limbs,
 And if I call upon you,
 You will hear my words.
 And you, O Divinity,
 You are the great person whom all venerate,
 And you do not repulse your people
 If no one has given you offence.
 And if a man has done wrong,
 You will be heartbroken because of him,
 And if a man has kept malice in his heart,
 Then you will decide between him and his enemy,
 Because it is you who are the father of all people.²⁵

The negative or question form of contrition is instanced by the following two prayers. The first comes from the Nyakyusa of Tanzania and accompanied a confession rite in which water was blown out of the mouth. The prayer is addressed to an ancestor on the occasion of a child's illness, assumed to be a punishment for sin.

Why are you angry, father?
 Since you left me,

I have nourished the children.
 How have I wronged you?
 Even though I have wronged you,
 Forgive me father.
 May the child recover.
 Stand by me.²⁶

The second example comes from the Tumbuka of Malawi and calls upon all the 'great ones', the ancestors, to gather and receive the offerings being made. The occasion was an influenza epidemic.

Let the great ones gather!
 What have we done to suffer so?
 We do not say, Let so-and-so come;
 We say, all.
 Here your children are in distress.
 There is not one able to give a drink of water to another.
 Wherein have we erred?
 Here is food; we give to you.
 Aid us, your children!²⁷

Finally, let it be said that the concept of divine judgment is not entirely lacking from the religious traditions of Africa. The following is an *odu* or recital from the Yoruba of Nigeria, urging moderation in view of 'our sleeping' — our death.

Let us not run the world hastily,
 Let us not grasp at the rope of wealth impatiently;
 What should be treated with mature judgment,
 Let us not treat in a fit of temper;
 Whenever we arrive at a cool place,
 Let us rest sufficiently well;
 Let us give prolonged attention to the future,
 And then let us give due regard to the consequence of things,
 And that is on account of our sleeping.²⁸

And this prayer from the Ewe of Ghana, addressed to the Creator or 'Mother of Gods', pictures reincarnation as being dependent upon the deeds done in life.

Life is like a hill.
 Mawu, the Creator, made it sharp and slippery.
 To right and to left deep waters surround it.
 You cannot turn back once you start to climb.
 You must climb with a load on your head,
 A man's arm will not help him, for it is a trial . . .

At the gates of the land of the dead
 You will pass before a searching judge,
 His justice is true and he will examine your feet.
 He will know how to find every stain
 Whether visible or hidden under the skin.
 If you have fallen on the way he will know.
 If the judge finds no stain on your feet,
 Open your belly to joy, for you have overcome
 And your belly is clean. . . .
 Sickness is the abuse of your well-being;
 You will be reminded at the gates of death,
 The judge will examine your feet
 And you will be punished.²⁹

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NOTES

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