

DIVINE CALL AND HUMAN RESPONSE

Prayer in the religious traditions of Africa, I

IT IS DIFFICULT to generalize about the ethnic religions of Africa, for the continent is vast and the traditions are diverse. Even the concept of 'tribe' or 'ethnic group' is a fluid one. Within the frameworks provided by different physical environments, and subject to a limited historical interaction, african peoples have interrogated human existence, have become aware of the divine reality that discloses itself in experience, and have developed their own symbolic universe or 'grammar of faith'. Religion permeated every aspect of life in traditional Africa, but even where historic events, places and personalities appear to play a conspicuous role in religious belief and practice, the religion of traditional Africa has not been primarily an interpretation of history. More basic is the interaction of a human society with a given physical environment. Nature is overwhelming and offers a ready theological dictionary for the expression of religious experience. Not that the ethnic religions of Africa are 'nature religions'. The African does not worship natural pheomena as such, but nature offers him many parables for the mystery of human existence, and he sees that human existence as somehow continuous with the world of nature. As the caribbean poet, Aimé Césaire, has put it: 'Man is flesh of the flesh of the world'. The physical environment is somehow an extension of the human body and the rhythms of human life have their counterparts in the seasons and cycles of nature.

Prayer is a dimension of life in Africa, the disposition of one who believes himself to be in communion with divine reality, and it is expressed typically in symbolic action, dance and ritual. The texts that have been collected by missionaries and ethnographers are merely the verbal aspect of a whole ritual action, and, although tradition may dictate a certain literary form and a conventional turn of phrase, they are otherwise wholly spontaneous. African religion is not a religion of the Book.

Divine reality is experienced and imaged in so many ways by Africans that the Christian is either scandalized or nonplussed, and he may sometimes miss the point of what the African is saying or doing. For example, the Christian may feel that recourse to a created mediator diminishes the stature of the Creator himself and turns him into a *deus otiosus*, literally a 'lazy God'. Such a feeling runs counter to the african acceptance of mediation as enhancing the power and greatness of a chief. Or the

Christian may want to stress the competitive aspect in a pantheon of divinities when the African is more concerned with their dialectical interplay. The Christian who easily accepts the idea of apparitions or 'illuminations' or mystical experiences in prayer, is nevertheless shocked when confronted by spirit possession. And yet one of the most prayerful instances of african religion that I have personally witnessed was a dialogue between worshippers and a medium who, when speaking in complete sincerity of heart, was held to be under the influence of a divinity.

When one asks: to whom is prayer addressed in african ethnic religion? there are a variety of answers possible, for divine reality is perceived according to a whole spectrum of images which go with the theological system or symbolic universe of each ethnic group. However, there has been a widespread sharing of ideas and practices in traditional Africa, although it is possible in an article like this to present examples which represent only the major tendencies.

A minority, perhaps, of african peoples subscribe to an uncomplicated theism, in which prayer is addressed directly to a supreme, creator God, conceived as being uniquely spiritual. The following hymn from the Pygmies of Zaire employs the image of human speech to describe Kmvoum, or God. The idea bears a remarkable parallel to that of God's Word in the Old Testament, the experience of God as a release of psychological energy comparable to a person's spoken word.

In the beginning was Kmvoum,
 Today is Kmvoum,
 Tomorrow will be Kmvoum.
 Who can make an image of Kmvoum?
 He has no body.
 He is as a word which comes out of your mouth.
 That word! It is no more.
 It is past and still it lives!
 So is Kmvoum.¹

For the northern Nilotes of Sudan, the spiritual nature of divine reality is complicated by the diversity of experience, both personal and impersonal, in which it is revealed. 'Spirit' is a category and a quality as well as a person, a power which is a paradox of immanence and transcendence, of conjunction and division. 'Spirit' is refracted at innumerable levels and in a variety of ways. At times 'Spirit' is addressed directly as 'Father' or 'God' or 'Friend'. At other times, the air, the rain, the heat of the human body are personalized and approached as modes of existence for God. 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 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.²

In a final invocation before a sacrifice to obtain a cure, the Dinka of Sudan address God (here called 'Divinity') as well as earth, flesh, grass, fig-tree, head-carrying ring, and even the illness itself, for all these things are particular expressions of the human encounter with the divine. It is striking that 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.
 And you are not now called for good, you are called for evil.
 Come, help!
 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
 We have given you the bull Mayan,
 Release him indeed!³

Such is a highly sophisticated perception of divine reality which is seldom attained. For the most part, when Africans address God directly they see him as a personalized Creator, mastering the recurring phenomena of nature. This is the picture presented by this Shona hymn to Mwari, the Great Spirit, and it is full of imagery borrowed from the rocky, dusty landscape of Zimbabwe.

Great Spirit,
 Piler up of rocks into towering mountains!
 When thou stampest on the stone,
 The dust rises and fills the land.
 Hardness of the precipice;

Waters of the pool that turn
 Into misty rain when stirred.
 Vessel overflowing with oil!
 Father of Runji,
 Who seweth the heavens like cloth:
 Let him knit together that which is below.
 Caller forth of the branching trees:
 Thou bringest forth the shoots
 That they stand erect:
 Thou has filled the land with mankind,
 The dust rises on high, oh Lord!
 Wonderful One, thou livest
 In the midst of the sheltering rocks.
 Thou givest of rain to mankind.
 Hear us Lord!
 Show mercy when we beseech thee, Lord.
 Thou art on high with the spirits of the great.
 Thou raisest the grass-covered hills
 Above the earth, and createst the rivers,
 Gracious One.⁴

God is here the Creator, perceived in the paradox of dryness and moisture, but also, as the hymn's final section shows, God who dwells with 'the spirits of the great'.

This is the other face of God, as it were. Not only is he the Creator, the technician, the 'moulder' or 'potter', but he is also the source of the whole stream of life. He is life-giver, father, ancestor, and this emphasis is brought out in the relationship with the spirits of the dead. Ancestor veneration is so common in african ethnic religion as to be virtually a characteristic, yet it should not be assumed that ancestors everywhere occupy a similar place in the hierarchy of spirits. In some traditions they are not invoked as mediators at all, but are referred to in prayer as part of the whole praying community — pledges that God is listening. In these cases the worshipper presents himself as being 'in harmony' with the ancestors who have already found favour with God. It is an attitude analogous to the role of the saints in the celestial liturgy of the Apocalypse. They join their voices to those of the faithful on earth. The following prayer comes from the Kikuyu of Kenya. It addresses God as 'Great Elder', dwelling on Kere-Nyaga or Mount Kenya, the 'mountain of brightness'. It is a prayer for blessing on a new homestead which accompanies a libation of beer and milk. In the chorus, God is addressed as Ngai, Creator or Sky God:

You, the Great Elder, who dwells on the Kere-Nyaga,
 Your blessing allows homesteads to spread.

Your anger destroys homesteads.
 We beseech you, and in this we are in harmony
 With the spirits of our ancestors;
 We ask you to guard this homestead and let it spread.
 Let the women, herd and flock be prolific.

Chorus

Peace, praise ye Ngai,
 Peace be with us!⁵

In other traditions a more active role is assigned to the ancestors and they are appealed to at the same time as God himself. They are subordinate to God, but are part of his heavenly court, reigning with him and dispensing his mercy and compassion. This is how they are presented in the following prayer from the Luguru of Tanzania. The prayer is for a cure for sickness and it asks that the medicinal roots being used in the treatment of the sick person be effective. God is addressed as 'Father' and 'Conserver'.

You, Father God,
 Who are in the heavens and below;
 Creator of everything, and omniscient
 (Of) how the earth and the heavens (were made).
 We are but little children
 Unknowing anything evil;
 If this sickness has been brought by man,
 We beseech thee, help us through these roots!
 In case it is inflicted by you, the Conserver,
 Likewise do we entreat your mercy on your child;
 Also you, our grandparents who sleep in the abode of the dead,
 We entreat all of you, sleep on one side.

All ancestors, male and female, great and small,
 Help us in this trouble, have compassion on us;
 So that we can also sleep peacefully,
 And hither do I spit out this mouthful of water!
 Pu-pu! Pu-pu!
 Please listen to our earnest request!⁶

The prayer was concluded by spitting out water towards the four cardinal points, as a sign of sincerity and exculpation.

Ancestors may take on even greater theological importance in other traditions. Among some african peoples the concept of mediation is so strong that God is seldom, if ever at all, invoked in prayer. Instead, the worshipper approaches and names the ancestors as God's plenipotentiaries, and then — paradoxically — he may ask God to see that they do their

duty, that the prayer may be heard by them, or he may simply declare that God is witness to the prayer. Such devices show very clearly that the ancestors are not God's rivals and that God is not a *deus otiosus*. The following formula was recorded among the Mende of Sierra Leone as the conclusion of a prayer:

O God, let it reach to Kenei Momo,
 Let it reach to Nduawo,
 Let it reach to all our forefathers
 Who are in your arms.⁷

The following prayer, in the same vein, I recorded myself among the Kimbu of Tanzania in December 1966. The Worshipper spat out maize-flour and water as a blessing and then named the departed rulers of the chiefdom, together with their praise names:

Igeleka, Furrow-that-is-never-reaped!
 Luwumbu, who-walks-underground!
 Ipupi, Terror-of-those-who-wake-him!
 Kasaka, One-who-is-remembered-all-days!
 Look on your children, give them rain, give them food!
 Ilyuva, the Life-Giver has seen it!⁸

The final declaration was accompanied by a gesture indicating the sky which is the abode of God.

Among settled cultivators one finds a greater density of population and a greater historical depth to religious traditions. Often, too, material culture is richer and more elaborate. This is the case, for example, among the Ibo and Yoruba of Nigeria, the Akan peoples of Ghana and the Lake Kingdoms of East Africa. In these societies one finds temple and shrine cults commemorating divinities which are not only personalizations of nature-experience but even deified, historical human beings. Such cults often accompany the institution of divine kingship and/or spirit mediumship. The relationship of such eminent divinities to one another or to a 'High God' may be more or less problematical, and the problem is often expressed mythologically, in terms of marriage, begetting, battle, conquest and defeat. In so far as the cults go back to an historical person, they may be the tradition of a revelatory moment in history, the intuition of a religious founder: At all events, they amount to a departmentalization of divine reality which does not cause any practical difficulty to the worshipper who tends to specialize in a particular cult.

The Shilluk of Sudan commemorate Nyikang as their hero-ancestor, and the spirit of his son Dak is believed to possess each divine king at the

moment of his installation. As the text of the following prayer shows, Nyikang and Dak are invoked together with God.

I implore thee, thou God,
 I pray to thee during the night.
 How are all people kept by thee all days?
 And thou walkest in the midst of the grass,
 I walk with thee;
 When I sleep in the house I sleep with thee.
 To thee I pray for food, and thou givest it to the people,
 And water to drink.

The soul is kept by thee.
 There is no one above thee, thou God.
 Thou becamest the grandfather of Nyikang.
 It is thou (Nyikang) who walkest with God.
 Thou becamest the grandfather (of man) and thy son Dak.
 If a famine comes, is it not given by thee?

So, this cow stands here, is it not thus:
 If she dies does not her blood go to thee?
 Thou God, to whom shall we pray?
 Is it not to thee?
 Thou God, and thou who becamest Nyikang
 And thy son Dak.
 But the soul is it not thine own?
 It is thou who liftest up.⁹

In the pantheon of the Yoruba of Nigeria, Olodumare is the King of the gods, but the work of creating human beings was delegated to Orisa-Nla, otherwise known as Obatala. One day Obatala drank too much palm wine, and in his tipsy state his fingers slipped and he botched his work, producing cripples and people with disabilities from birth. Strong drink is now forbidden to his adepts but he is regarded as the father of laughter, the one who gives to parents the joy of having children.

He is patient, he is not angry.
 He sits in silence to pass judgment.
 He sees you even when he is not looking.
 He stays in a far place — but his eyes are on the town.
 He stands by his children and lets them succeed.
 He causes them to laugh — and they laugh.
 Ohoho — the father of laughter.
 His eye is full of joy.

He rests in the sky like a swarm of bees.
Obatala — who turns blood into children.¹⁰

Olodumare or Edumare, another version of his name, is the King of the Yoruba gods, the symbol of unity-in-tension between them all. He is credited with breathing life into the human forms moulded by Obatala, but his hold over the whole humano-divine family is tenuous. According to Yoruba mythology, the other gods or divinities conspired against their king and he allowed them to rule the world without him. The result was a disaster. The world came to a standstill. Olodumare thus claimed the victory and proved the necessity of co-operation among the gods. Then the gods sang this hymn:

Be there one thousand four hundred divinities of the home.
Be there one thousand two hundred divinities of the market place,
Yet there is not one divinity to compare with Olodumare.
Olodumare is the King unique.
In our recent dispute,
Edumare it is who won.
Yes, Edumare.¹¹

The Ngoni of Malawi offer an example of a people invoking divinities who are eminent ancestors or departed chiefs, without any reference to the supreme being. The prayer that follows accompanied a sacrifice for a sick child. It demonstrates the complete abandonment of the worshipper to the will of the powers that rule the world.

O thou Gumedede!
O thou Mputa!
O thou great chief!
Here is your beast.
That your child may be healed,
Look on what is yours.
May you remain well
And your child recover.
We do not know,
We do not know,
If you say that she will die,
She is yours, this child of yours.
It is your affair.
As for us, we long that your child may recover.
If she dies, this child of yours,
We can only speak your names.
We cry to you for her.¹²

African prayer is far from being exclusively petitionary, but, since Africans commonly live close to the subsistence level, petition in moments of great crisis or need is frequently the occasion for prayer. This is also the reason why the earth plays an important role in the African symbolic universe. People in Africa are close to the earth. It is the source of food and prosperity, the support of men in life and death. The earth is therefore inseparable from the experience of divine reality. It can be viewed as a mode of God's presence or a divine hypostasis in the more theistic traditions. In the more pluralistic systems it is personalized as a separate divinity. At all events, many prayer-texts are addressed by Africans to the earth, the mother and nourisher of mankind. In the following Ibo prayer from Nigeria, Ezechitoke is the earth deity and Ugwuokpuje is the hill deity, personalizations that are frequently associated or identified.

Ezechitoke, Earth Deity,
 Ugwuokpuje that gave me birth,
 Give me things to eat;
 Give me offspring;
 Give me wives;
 Give me money;
 Bless all men.¹³

At a hand-washing ceremony which is part of the ritual for the birth of a child, the Ibo pray for fertility of crops and children. The refrain: 'Earth Goddess, hear' is repeated by all present, beating their hands lightly on the earth.

Fellow-men, we shall all live,
 Earth Goddess hear.
 Whoever plants, let him dig up and eat,
 Earth Goddess, hear.
 We shall give birth to sons,
 Earth Goddess, hear.
 We shall give birth to daughters,
 Earth Goddess, hear.
 We shall train them,
 Earth Goddess, hear.
 When we are old they will feed us,
 Earth Goddess, hear.
 Whoever sees us with an evil eye,
 When he plants may the floods sweep his mounds away.
 Whoever wishes us evil,
 May he break his fist on the ground.
 We are broody hens, we have chicks.
 We do not fly up,

We look after our brood.
 We do not eye others with an evil eye.
 This big-headed thing (child) that came home yesterday,
 He is yet a seed.
 If you wish that he germinates
 And grows to be a tree,
 We shall be ever thankful.
 Earth Goddess, hear;
 He will grow to be like his stock.¹⁴

The Earth has no priests or priestesses among the Ashanti of Ghana, yet people make offerings to her for the fertility of their crops. The earth gives life and also receives the dead. This ashanti drum-hymn expresses human dependence on the earth.

Earth, condolences,
 Earth, condolences,
 Earth and dust,
 The dependable one,
 I lean upon you,
 Earth, when I am about to die,
 I lean upon you.
 Earth, when I am alive,
 I depend upon you.
 Earth that receives dead bodies,
 The Creator's drummer says:
 From wherever he went,
 He has roused himself,
 He has roused himself.¹⁵

The Yoruba of Nigeria personalize death and identify him with their creator-divinity, Obatala, who has power of life and death over human beings. Death and birth are two sides of the same coin, two aspects of the continuing stream of life. The worshipper prays to share in Obatala's creativity and to be ennobled in death by a numerous offspring.

O Death,
 You who domicile with a person
 And imbue him with nobility!
 O Sceptre-Wielder!
 O You who multiply only one into two hundred persons,
 Multiply me into four hundred,
 Multiply me into two hundred,
 Multiply me into one thousand four hundred and sixty persons.¹⁶

The celestial bodies, and sky symbolism generally, are very frequently referred to in african prayer. Many african peoples employ a celestial symbol for the supreme being, the creator or the life-giver. Where the divine reality is perceived in a more complex way, celestial bodies are personalized. However, sunshine and rain are obvious symbols of prosperity, blessing or good fortune and these are the predominant ideas when sky symbolism is employed in prayer. The following 'morning offering' addressed to the sun comes from the Luyia tribe of Kenya:

O Sun,
 As you rise in the east through God's leadership,
 Wash away all the evils I have thought of throughout the night.
 Bless me, so that my enemies will not kill me and my family;
 Guide me though hard work.
 O God, give me mercy upon our children who are suffering.
 Bring riches today as the sun rises;
 Bring all fortunes to me today.¹⁷

Perhaps we might end this first acquaintance with the prayer traditions of Africa with a prayer addressed to the moon, the waxing and waning of which is a symbol of immortality for the Kalahari peoples of southern Africa. It is an explicit prayer for an afterlife:

Take my face and give me yours!
 Take my face, my unhappy face.
 Give me your face,
 With which you return
 When you have died,
 When you have vanished from sight.
 You lie down and return —
 Let me resemble you, because you have joy,
 You return ever more alive,
 After you vanished from sight.
 Did you not promise me once
 That we too should return
 And be happy again after death?¹⁸

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NOTES

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- ⁶ Mawinza, J.: 'Reverence of Ancestors in Tanzania' (mimeographed article, 1968), p 45.
- ⁷ Smith, E. W.: *op. cit.*, p 201.
- ⁸ I collected this prayer personally in Tanzania at Mbole Village in December 1966. Many of the prayers cited in this article appeared in my book: *Prayer in the religious traditions of Africa* (Oxford University Press, Nairobi, 1975).
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- ¹³ Dickson, K. A., and Ellingworth, P.: *Biblical revelation and african beliefs* (London, 1969), p 39.
- ¹⁴ Agunwa, C.: *More than once* (London, 1967), p 101.
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