

THE USE OF ORAL HYMNS IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN RELIGION

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Abstract

When the Mamaala African rainmaking clan of South Africa performed rituals after which rain would fall in keeping with the research-established fact that African rainmaking rituals actually bring about rain (Makgopa 2005), they sang specific songs as part of the rituals (Rafapa 2007). This paper explores the nature and context of these poetic performances. The context will be considered from both the culture-specific and cross-cultural perspectives to, hopefully, enrich debate around the impact of globalisation on world cultures. The paper will attempt to show that rather than being mistaken for a culturally inane phenomenon, globalisation can be problematised for what it is as well as negotiated for the modification of those of its features that may lead to cultural distortion and imperialism. It will be demonstrated that oral poems that are a concomitant part of this specific segment of the African cultural complex can serve to reveal facts of culture that have significant implications for globalisation, especially in the context within which globalisation has been conceptualised by writers such as Okwori (2007).

Introduction

The cultural identities for different peoples, constituting the heterogeneous mass of world population, include religion as one of the components of such identities. This paper seeks to explore the cultural identity of Africans and other world groups with regard to the use of hymns in communicating with God, Allah, Vital Force or the Supreme Being. The word "hymn", within the context of this presentation is employed to mean any song meant not merely to address fellow humans in a social scene, but to reach out to the spiritual in order to achieve objectives that go beyond the realm of the material. The objective is to examine whether this common practice among different peoples points to a global, cross-cultural trait emanating from that common fibre linking all creatures known as humans, or whether it manifests locally defined practices of different individual cultural groups.

It is hoped that the findings will enrich the debate on whether the phenomenon of globalisation should level up local cultural identities, thereby superimposing the culture of the dominant nations of the world that drive it, or whether local cultural identities should perhaps modify and thus domesticate globalising developments.

The relevance of such an enquiry finds justification in the writings of researchers concerned with the effects of globalisation on local cultures, such as De Beer (2004) and Okwori (2007). The impact of globalisation on aspects of social life among people of different cultural religions still needs to be determined from as many perspectives as possible if, as De Beer (2004:3) observes, "On one hand [globalization] is experienced as that which is inclined to overpower, to absorb, to devour ... [while] on the other hand ... it is interpreted as enrichment, not necessarily only in economic terms." Okwori

(2007:156) is lucid about the potentially hegemonic discourse of globalisation and its attendant pernicious effects in subjugating “the African into a dependent relationship with the emperors of the global empire”.

Attempts by the champions of globalisation to dispossess Africans, and the other marginalised or oppressed of the world, of their needed substantive identity in the spiritual aspect of culture are echoed in remarks by African scholars such as Sepota (2000) and Makgopa (2005). The former laments that “Christianity is bent on destroying African culture” (Sepota 2000:204), while the latter pinpoints that the colonial invasion of Africa by the Christian missionaries affected the harmonious relationship between “the living-dead and the living” (Makgopa 2005:64).

In censuring such globalising attitudes towards the traditional religious aspect of African cultures, Ward (1989:20) refers to imperialist Christian approaches from the West as “the emptiness of a continent; not that of Africa, but the darkness in Europe – the Westerner, the missionary – itself”. Roos (2009:75) cautions that the African cultural practices do survive even in a globalising world, in her metaphoric remark about Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, that Africa is an “impenetrable jungle, a mysterious menace to all invaders” where “the European presence has little or no lasting impact” (75). Against this theoretical backdrop, the African rainmaking practice of singing hymns should be understood as distinctively African by its nature of resisting the onslaught of Western Christianity. This is not to deny that Western Christians do sing hymns, too, in their own ritual performances. However, such a veneer of religious similarity should be understood for what it is, as a deceptively leveled out cultural practice across Europeans and Africans that, in fact, belies the distinctiveness of Africans as a people. A globalising attitude that has historically represented Africanness as “ignoble savagery” (see, for example, Titlestad 2008:28), would not see the hymn singing rainmaking ritual of Africans in this light.

Rich (2008), broadens the African conception of the relationship between the living and the dead to include other African cultural groups such as the Southern Gabonese. He observes that the globalising technology and concepts spread among the Gabonese by Western colonial administrators and Christian missionaries proved to be a threat to the distinctive spiritual identity of the Gabonese because of the former’s discursively hegemonic manipulation of the concept of *mbuiri* /occult force and practice to keep reliquaries among the latter, regarded as “a bridge between the living and the dead” (Rich 2008:78,80). Attempts to stamp out the local identity of the Gabonese within the global world went even as far as “missionaries and [colonial] administrators” destroying the Gabonese’ occult objects (Rich 2008:72). For this reason, the cultural religious resilience of the Mamaala people, of continued hymn singing in the ritual of rainmaking, is significant for a tempering of a malignant globalisation that seeks to efface the subaltern, such as the Gabonese and other Africans, within a globalised world.

As this enquiry stems from a study conducted in the southern part of the African continent where the major competing religions are African traditional and Christian, the ritual nature and function of religious hymns will be discussed from the points of view of the two major religious groupings. As I use accounts of hymns in the Christian religion obtained from the written text of the bible, an attempt will be made to trace their original oral contexts and circumstances. Writers such as Hermann Gunkel (in Mitchell 2000) are helpful in the reading of biblical tales as folktales that are not detached from their immediate oral environment, including ones where hymns play a significant role. It is in order not to discount the oral context folkloric practices such as rainmaking are intricately tied to as the cited empirical research about the Mamaala rainmaking clan of South Africa set out to do, that an inquiry into the use of hymns among Africans is also traced from its oral origins.

It is the present researcher's approach that, "The printed (published) tales which are analysed" in cultural historiography or studies of folklore "are not representative of the many variants which exist in popular versions" (Burden, 2000:293). The focus group of the research into the South African clan of rainmakers was expected to supply such necessary "variants which exist in popular versions" of the traditional art of rainmaking among Africans, as opposed to examples in reductively written modes, labelled by Burden (2000:293) as "printed (published) tales".

The African oral hymns of the Northern Sotho people discussed in this paper were recorded during an empirical research on the disappearing rainmaking practice of a clan in some part of the Limpopo Province in South Africa, conducted from May to November, in 2007.

For purposes of looking at the use of folkloric hymns cross-culturally, in this paper the researcher gathered and made use of evidence of ritual hymns by means of research methodology referred to by some writers as oral history (see Burden 2000). This is because among the denotations of the concept oral history is that of seeing it as "a process or an information or a research methodology in addition to the end result" or as a "technique of gathering material" (Burden 2000:291-92).

In the way the above writer explicates oral history as a methodology, its salient achievements should include:

- Amplifying the voices of the oppressed peoples in an enlightened and democratised world.
- The addition of oral evidence to the evidence of traditional sources.
- Viewing of information provided by ordinary people, which is often of a practical nature and highly localised, as crucial to a complete understanding of a cultural past.
- Correlation of objects and those who used them by employing verbal transmission of information in order to supply the full context for such a relationship. Rejection of skewed conceptions of historiography in which documents of events of epic loftiness were usually the building blocks of history, and ordinary people only made a chance appearance."

The use of hymns, with selected examples from the bible and evidence gathered orally or historically about the Mamaala clan of rainmakers, will be explored from the aforementioned perspectives .

Hymns of the Mamaala rainmaking clan

Findings of the empirical study on rainmaking among people of the Mamaala clan of the Langa tribe in South Africa point to a pivotal role played by traditional hymns. When a village woman belonging to the sacred Mamaala clan raised alarm for other women to go to the river the next dawn and fetch water for use in rainmaking rituals, she would have to sing praises to the ancestors of this particular clan for a long time calling them by their names, as a way of asking the ancestors to accept the offerings at the rain shrine the following day (Rafapa 2007). Such a link between praise poetry and religious devotion is highlighted in Kiernan's (2000:184) remark that even "the formal praising, of an eminent person ... declaim[s] the mystical source of his power by calling on his ancestors by name". The common features between poetry and song, and their interchangeable social use among Africans, justify a regard for the African cultural functions of oral poetry as identical to the cultural functions of songs or hymns.

The word ancestors in this essay is used in the African sense, which refers to them as the unborn, the living and those who have gone before (see Moremi in Makgopa 2005:67). According to Africans, ancestors are not worshipped but have to be revered, while in the distorted western sense

ancestors are dead relatives of the living, who are given the status of spirits and cannot be talked about without being automatically worshipped (Moremi in Makgopa 2005:67). Some African thinkers such as Makgopa (2005:64) resolve the tensions of using a European language to define an African concept by substituting the word “ancestors” with “the living-dead”.

Apart from singing praises to the ancestors of the Mamaala clan, another rainmaking ritual was performed by uprooting a reed from the depths of the nearby crocodile infested Mogalakwena River. One then had to wade out, drag the reed behind, ignore jeers by bystanders and families hoeing the fields and walk through the dense forest without looking back until the reed was presented at the mouth of the rain enclosure. Upon depositing the reed on the ground, the performer had to sing “*Pula*” (“*Let it rain*”) three times. It was believed that such singing played a part in rain actually falling after all the segments of the rainmaking ritual would have been completed in a day.

The same chanting of “*Pula*” three times characterised the sacred hunt that was one component of rainmaking rituals. Two informants who played the role of sacred hunting for rain while they were still young boys explained that invariably, the hunt had to bring back a giant lizard and two kinds of special buck called *tlholo* and *kome*. The *tlholo* is a kind of buck very rare and difficult to come by. Being a rock climber, the *kome* is found on mountain summits that are difficult to reach. The giant lizard, called *nku ye ntsho* /*black sheep* in traditional religious language has a delicate tail that breaks easily when caught without extreme care. All these animals needed for rituals had to be brought home whole and alive until they were sacrificed inside the shrine.

Upon the boys’ return from such a hunt, a patriarchal figure of the Mamaala village would then join the young men at the foot of the mountain and oversee their proper procession to the precinct of the shrine as well as lead them in singing a song with the lines *Mogobe wa meetse a pula/Sa thokolo tša meetse a pula* (*Lake of rain water/Like hard droppings of rain water*) (Rafapa 2007). Without such singing of a hymn, the team did not believe the ancestors would join and ensure that it rained. Upon reaching the mouth of the shrine, the male virgins dropped their prey on the ground and shouted “*Pula, Pula, Pula!*” (“*Let it rain, Let it rain, Let it rain!*”), before leaving for their various homes.

One more activity for rainmaking involved female village virgins who had to go and fill calabashes with water falling freely from a waterfall. As they filed from the river to the shrine the girls sang a traditional hymn for rain, with the repeated lyrics: *Pula ya borare e ka na, ra tsoga re gata monola* (*How we so wish our ancestors’ rain falls, so we step on wet ground next morning*). In the event of a container falling on the ground, the dozens of girls would break their walking and singing rhythm for a while and piously chant “*Pula, Pula, Pula*” (*Let it rain, Let it rain, Let it rain!*).

Upon reaching the shrine, the female virgins would be welcome by the village women ululating and singing praises to ancestors of the Langa rainmaking clan. At the same time the same middle-aged village women called *mathari* in Northern Sotho, would start singing a traditional hymn dedicated to the rain deity called Mmobe, with the repeated lyrics: “*Mmobe, Mmobe re nyaka pula rena/Re nyaka pula Mmobe re nyaka pula rena...*” (*Mmobe we want rain/As for us, we want rain*). The girls would put the containers on the ground in front of the shrine and sing the word “*Pula*” three times before leaving without glancing back. A select group of elderly women and men would then pick the containers from the ground and hand them over to the rainmaker inside the rain enclosure while remaining outside themselves. There would be difficult years when the rituals seemed not to yield

relief. The rainmaker would permit cleansing of the land. The same male virgins who participated in the sacred hunt then administered the cleansing rituals. Water would be poured in a calabash and mixed with the bark of the *Urera Tenax* / mountain nettle, called *mmololo* in North Sotho. The young men assembled at the shrine and then moved across the village, circling all boundaries, singing the same traditional hymn for the sacred hunt named *Thokolo tša pula*. Each time they came across some material appearing impure or sacrilegious, they would pour a little of the calabash mixture on such a spot, followed by a beating with a small branch of the weeping wattle / *Peltophorum Africanum* (*mosehla* in Northern Sotho / *musese* in TshiVenda). Each such cleansing activity had to be followed by the chant of “Pula”.

What is clear from the findings of this research on traditional rainmaking is that hymns had to be an integral part of communicating with the ancestors and Supreme Being during rainmaking rituals, in order for rain to fall.

Selected examples of the ritual use of hymns in Christianity

The transportation of mystical power through song or music as evidenced in the spiritual aspect of African cultures scrutinised above, finds a parallel in the religious practice of the Israelites. In order for King Joram’s army not to die of thirst during an incursion, the prophet Elisha is approached to communicate with God for salvation (2 Kings 3:12). Significantly, Elisha replies “Now get me a musician” and as the musician plays his harp, “the power of the Lord” comes on Elisha (2 Kings 3:15).

Earlier, during the exodus, when Joshua led the Israelites to capture Jericho, performance of a specific kind of song commanded by the Lord helped the army to reach the goal of having the walls preventing entry into the city of the enemy removed (Joshua 6:20). Significantly, priests presided by blowing the trumpets before the army could join in a song in the performance of this ritual. Besides the common use of hymns for ritual purposes, apportioning of roles in this biblical episode about people of Jewish culture does not differ from the way a few ordained people presided in the rainmaking rituals of the Mamaala people.

For the Africans, “singing and dancing constitute an integral part of oral literature” (Makgopa 2006:56). For the Hebrews, there was a stage when the Old Testament stories “had their greatest imaginative appeal”, with priority given to “the oral as the purest expression of the human spirit” (Gunkel in Mitchell 2000:181). From the two observations by the two writers it follows that both the biblical accounts of the use of hymns by the early Christians operating within a European culture, and historical accounts during the cited empirical research of the use of hymns among Africans in their traditional religions belong to oral literature. This religious practice common to the two cultural clusters can thus be analysed from a common oral context. The philosophical orientations underlying the oral ambience of each cultural cluster are explored below.

Differing philosophical foundations and deceitfully identical practices

The examples of ritual hymnal use by both cultural groups of Africans and those of Europeans reveal idiosyncrasies and commonalities in interesting ways that have determinate implications for globalisation.

It is significant that the findings of the empirical study confirm that traditional rainmaking within the African community of GaMamaala had both idiosyncratic and common features with the way this religious-cultural art was practised among other African communities (Rafapa 2007). For this reason, it can be said that the first level of both similarities and ruptures in the ritual use of hymns is within Africans belonging to various localised cultures. The fact that there was never cause for conflict among practitioners of African religions that may appear different on the surface, can be attributed to the observation by writers such as Mphahlele (2002) that one Africanist outlook underlies all African spiritual experience.

What could be established from the research is that rituals led by Mmatemiša of the Mamaala clan differed only superficially from those of neighbouring Seopa of GaMatlala or those of distant Modjadji of Bolobedu. It could be because each rainmaker had a unique context of ancestors and local cleansing demands. Local identity is crucial for the identity of Africans, in addition to psychosocial alignment with ideas like nationalism, Pan Africanism or globalism (Mphahlele 2002).

Any two or more *baroka* or rainmakers could co-operate and share traditional medicines, as was the case between Mmatemiša and Seopa (Rafapa 2007), because rainmaking rituals among Africans are fundamentally the same. For this reason, even the original mentor for any rainmaker did not matter in forming associative relationships. Seopa, for example, was trained in rainmaking by a certain Thobejane, but could still co-operate with Mmatemiša of the Mamaala clan without any friction (Rafapa 2007).

In religious cultural practices like rainmaking, different African cultural sections respect both localised and cross-ethnic allegiances. That is why accounts like that of the rainmaking cultural activity among the Bapedi of Kgoši Sekwati Mampuru, recorded by Nkadimeng (1973: 3-4) invariably reveal both commonalities and divergences, for example, with how the Balobedu of Queen Modjadji performed their own rainmaking rituals (see Shai, 2006: 43-49). In the SABC 2 programme "Our Nation in Colour" (broadcast on 23 November 2006 at 21h00) and SABC1 documentary "Imani" (broadcast on 11 January 2007 at 12h30), sacred places for and traditional practices of rainmaking among the Batswana and VhaVenda are documented. These television programmes testify to yet more common features as well as differing aspects among the two distinct African cultural groups. One of the several threads tying together the rainmaking rituals of all these various African communities is the singing of specific songs or hymns, to ensure that it rains as expected.

What is important for the role of traditional hymns is that, as Makgopa (2005) has observed, when the Balobedu of Rain Queen Modjadji and Africans of different local identities performed rainmaking rituals including the singing of hymns, it rained. Findings of the empirical study indicated that after members of the Mamaala clan would have specifically chanted traditional songs meant for rainmaking rituals, it rained (Rafapa, 2007). The same observation is made by Nkadimeng (1973) in the case of the Bapedi and by Shai (2006) in the case of BaLobedu.

The next level of continuity and rupture is that between African communities as a broad cluster bound together by a pervasive, underlying Africanist identity, and the other distinctive identity cluster of European cultural groups living a Christian outlook. All the informants during the empirical study agreed that the enforced religion of Christianity and modernisation in general tampered with the rainmaking legacy of the Mamaala people to such a great extent that by the time the fourth generation rainmaker died in 2004 only reputation and memory remained but the practice had long ceased (Rafapa 2007).

However, all the informants agreed that there is not supposed to be any conflict between western Christian and traditional African religions (Rafapa 2007). According to the informants, rain falls when human beings please both God and the ancestors. The people of GaMamaala always worshipped

God without ever being introduced to Christianity, and yet revered ancestors because they are seen as mediators between human beings and God (Rafapa 2007).

Religious songs or hymns among practitioners of indigenous African cultures are rooted in the belief in ancestors. That is why Musehane (2005:83-84) explains that when, among the VhaVenda, ancestors reveal through divining bones that someone is ill because of the *malombo* / traditional prophesying spirit, they are healed and the ancestors reveal matters to them through a kind of singing that is occasionally “accompanied by tshale (rattles)”. Mashamba (2007:63) adds that “ancestors are regarded as our protectors” and may bring this kind of illness “as a way of calling to one of the descendants to become an indigenous healer” or spirit medium. Here the differing worldviews of the VhaVhenda Africans and Judeo-Christians described in the bible come to the surface. The Africans see ancestors as their protector while the Judeo-Christians unequivocally declare Jehovah as their protector. This Jehovah is not regarded as a mediator by means of whom one pays allegiance to the ultimate God, but is himself / herself seen as the ultimate God. Even where the mediatory regard of Jesus Christ could be conceded as the Judeo-Christians’ way of distinguishing a mediator from God, the former’s simultaneous conception also as God by virtue of being a part of the triune erodes the possibility of Judeo-Christians focusing on a mediator and enhances the Judeo-Christians’ object of pious worship as the ultimate God. The Africans, although not discounting of the ultimate God, meditate through the ancestors. These ancestors are seen as “the link between God the Creator and human beings” (Mbiti 1987:63).

Despite these variations on who is communicated to directly during the ritual use of hymns, both Africans and Europeans belong to a folkloric legacy that recognises the use of hymns in spiritual experiences and functions. The misgivings against the imperial imposition of Christianity expressed by respondents in the empirical study and the cited writers on African folklore stem from the same African cultural impulse that resists surface-level lumping together of different ethnic affiliations at the cost of much cherished localised identity. Those wanting the cultural project of globalisation to succeed should concede that it has to be reinvented by the local cultural traits of Africans and the other “others” of the world.

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