

**Skinny but imperishable truth:
African religious heritage and the regeneration of Africa**

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The truth may become skinny, but will never perish
(African proverb).

Abstract

The increasing popularity of the guest religions of Christianity and Islam on the continent of Africa seems to have created the erroneous but widespread impression that the religious insights, values and institutions of our African forbears have been superseded by “world religions”, whose spiritual strengths have triumphed over the inherent weaknesses and woeful spiritual inadequacies of the host religious heritage. This has led to the assumption of “voicelessness in religion, ethics and theology” with respect to the African heritage. But there is no such thing as “voicelessness”; every person, every tradition has a voice, only people who claim power or authority, and traditions that lay claim to universality or world domination, choose not to hear other voices but their own and devalue other traditions by calling them “voiceless”, because they either do not see any value in them or that they consider their own traditions to be absolute. This tendency to put others down in order to make one’s position or viewpoint absolute is wisely countered by African wisdom in the Swahili proverb: “It is not necessary to blow out the other person’s lantern to let yours shine”.

Using an African voice to restate a perspective that has become “skinny” as a result of centuries of denigration and distortion, the paper argues that the regeneration of Africa cannot be fully achieved, and meaningful recovery and growth in the new millennium cannot be complete, without the input of the African heritage; and fruitful dialogue with other religious traditions can take place only when it is recognized that the African religious heritage is part of the entire unified landscape and that in religion, ethics and theology there is a valid African perspective.

Introduction

The increasing popularity of the guest religions Christianity and Islam on the continent of Africa seems to have created the erroneous but widespread impression that the indigenous religious insights, values and institutions of our African forbears have been superseded by the “world religions”, whose spiritual strengths have triumphed over the inherent weaknesses and woeful spiritual inadequacies of the host religious heritage. This has led to the assumption of “voicelessness in religion, ethics and theology” with regard to the African heritage. But there is no such thing as “voicelessness”; every person, every tradition has a voice – it is only people who claim power or authority, and traditions that claim universality or world domination, who choose to hear no other voices but their own, and devalue other traditions by calling them “voiceless”. This is because the proponents of the religions that claim universality either do not see any value in the religions they are trying to turn people away from, considering their own traditions to be absolute, or see no place for the traditions they have branded “voiceless” in their grand scheme of things. This tendency to put others down in order to make one’s position or viewpoint absolute or pre-eminent is wisely countered by African wisdom in the Swahili proverb: “It is not necessary to blow out the other person’s lantern to let yours shine”. This suggests that everyone has a lantern; our African religious, ethical and theological heritage constitutes ours.

How the African lantern was blown out and the truth about it became skinny

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People who were convinced that they were in possession of the only truth, utterly confident that they were on a divinely appointed mission, and equipped with profound ignorance, erroneous conceit and thundering contempt, set out to blow out the African lantern by converting people, without knowing what they were converting them from. Africa was, in the words of HM Stanley, “a place governed by insensible fetish” (Opoku 1978:2). The predominant expectation was that this crass and abominable “fetishism”, utterly devoid of any divine self-disclosure, was destined to become extinct, and that the only possible option for Africans, if they were to become religious, was to choose between Christianity and Islam. In the words of Edwin Smith: “African paganism is doomed to decay and extinction. If they are to remain religious the only possible alternative open to the Africans is to choose between Islam and Christianity, both of which offer them a knowledge of God” (1927:217). Knowledge of God was thus assumed to be exclusive to these two religions, and was deemed to be lamentably absent from the host African heritage.

The African cultural environment was regarded as a *tabula rasa*, and missionaries were to inscribe what they regarded as religion and ethics on it. This viewpoint constituted a classic case in which the very possession of “revealed” Scriptures tended to blind those who claimed monopoly on them to the possibility of seeing the divine presence elsewhere. The missionary effort to fill the blank space that Africa was presumed to represent, from the missionary standpoint (with its own version of the gospel, clothed in European cultural vestments), resulted in the establishment of a church that engaged in a monologue and ignored opportunities for engaging in dialogue with the local heritage. Many years later, the church in Africa having been passed into African hands, the inherited missionary attitudes remain alive and well. Commenting on a similar situation among Native Americans, George Tinker (1993:3) observed:

congregations quite commonly remain faithful not only to the denomination, but to the very missionary theology that was first brought to them, even when the denomination has long ago abandoned that language for a more contemporary articulation of the gospel. One must at least suspect that the process of Christianization has involved some internalization of the larger illusion of Indian inferiority and the idealization of white culture and religion. Some have called it internalized racism, and as such it surely results in a praxis of self-hatred.

The same can be said of the African situation, and in this instance Africans are blowing out their own lantern as they continue to derive their cultural framework from an external source and passionately perpetuate missionary attitudes and traditions. The continued use of European imagery, such as depictions of a white Jesus and other biblical figures, that adorns many sanctuaries in Africa and the rarity of any African religious symbols, together with the unhesitating condemnation and even demonisation of African culture, even in churches founded by Africans, suggest that Africans have internalised the European missionary idealisation of European values and have engaged in an irredeemable self-hatred that has paralysed them and stands in the way of recovery and regeneration in the new millennium. If recovery and regeneration are to take place, they must be based on the foundation of African religious and cultural values.

The praxis of self-hatred is part of a larger problem that faces people who have experienced oppression and who tend to internalise their subjugation and believe the preconceptions held about them and stereotypes imposed on them by those who oppress them. Such beliefs certainly stunt their self-advancement and regeneration, and further entrench them in their subjugation. Fortunately, however, as the Senegambian proverb puts it: “The scorching sun can never rub off the stripes of a zebra” (Khan & Khan 2004:61): the truth about the religious and cultural heritage of Africa cannot be erased by its persistent denigration by advocates of other religious traditions that lay claim to world domination, nor by the internalisation of crippling stereotypes by Africans themselves as they embrace newly acquired religious orientations. In fact, concerning the tradition of openness characteristic of the religious heritage of Africa, I have had occasion to say that:

I come to the question of divine self-disclosure in the world with the firm and unquestioning conviction that God was not so unkind as to have refused to disclose Himself/Herself to our African ancestors and that it is the sublime task of Africans, of whatever religious persuasion, be it Christian or Islamic, to discover the many ways in which God made Himself/Herself known in our culture. And we need to seek the good and the true in our traditions and believe in them with our whole heart and use them in the expression of our acquired faiths. Mahatma Gandhi said: “I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to

be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any” (Opoku 2009).

This refusal to be blown off our feet provides us with the opportunity to do our own authentic spiritual work and veritable theologising, lest we wind up living other people’s expectations and dreams and surviving on borrowings from others. Our ancestors have left us with the insight that “borrowed water never quenches thirst”.

African religious heritage

The African religious heritage provides answers to questions about how humans should best relate to their environment, both physical and spiritual, in order to ensure harmony and equilibrium, and it also provides a deep understanding of reality. Religion, in the traditions of our forbears, did not stand by itself as a separate entity, but was part and parcel of their culture which, like their social structure, was infused with a spirituality that could not be separated from the life of the community. In the religious traditions of Africa, what is of primary importance is a person’s ability to take part in the spiritual practices of the community, and not his/her ability to articulate belief in a certain set of doctrines. This is what led Mbonu Ojike to declare: “If religion means deifying one person and crusading around the world to make him acceptable to all humankind, then Africa has no religion. But if religion means doing rather than talking, then Africa has a religion” (Opoku 1978:3).

Born out of the accumulated experiences and sagacious reflections of our forbears, African spirituality provides answers to the myriad questions asked in an endeavour to satisfy the human quest for meaning. And, as a result, life is to be understood as a meaningful enterprise, not a meaningless and toilsome journey through a heartless world. While adopting their own answers to questions concerning the meaning of life, our forbears did not regard the answers provided by other spiritual traditions to be wrong or misguided. Instead, their wisdom, expressed in proverbs such as: “Truth is like a baobab tree, one person’s arms cannot embrace it”; “Wisdom is not in one person’s head”; and “The wise person does not say that he/she has the last word, but the fool insists”, guided them to be open to other ideas and tolerant of other interpretations of the meaning of life. For when the Akan of Ghana say, *Nsem nyinaa ne Nyame* – All truth/wisdom is from God, they are acknowledging God as the perpetual and unfailing source of truth and wisdom. And since God was not confined to the parameters of the spiritual realities known to our ancestors, they accepted other truths that originated from outside their own spiritual landscape.

There are no sacred narratives that portray Africans as altogether defective, incontrovertibly flawed or fundamentally broken; instead there is a theological anthropology that effectively counters any notions of human depravity desperately in need of divine, gracious rescue. The absence of any concept of ontological inadequacy on the part of Africans enabled our forbears to have a mature and wholesome view of themselves, which enabled them to live creative and active lives as generators of societies and civilisations. African spirituality guaranteed the full and unfettered humanity of Africans, indeed of all people: as the Akan proverb states, *Nnipa nyinaa ye Onyame mma, obi nye asase ba* – All human beings are the children of God, none is a child of the earth.

The centrality of the Great Spirit, God, as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe is unequivocally affirmed by African spirituality, and names such as Originator (*Borebore*), The Beginner (*Ebangala*), the One who Bears the World (*Mebee*), and the Very Source of Being (*Orise*), explicitly attest to this. The absence of temples or shrines specifically set aside for the worship of the Supreme Being or Great Spirit (*Chuku*) is a reflection of the lack of limitation placed on this Being, as is the absence of visual representations of this Entity. Furthermore, the absence of priests or priestesses serving as mouthpieces of the Supreme Being suggests that there is no one with a private extension to the Great Spirit. Everybody has direct access to this Being, and when the Akan say: *Obi kwan nsi obi de mu* – No person’s path crosses another person’s path, they are expressing the belief that every person has a direct connection to the Supreme Being without the agency or intervention of another person being necessary.

Humans are directly linked to the Creator by the possession of a divine spark that never dies, hence the belief in the continued existence of the ancestors and their active participation in community affairs, and affirmation of African identity through solidarity with the ancestors. This divine spark is never separated from its Source and it therefore roots human selfhood in God. An inner sense of union with a presence that is eternal is therefore basic to the understanding of human selfhood. “The dead are not dead”, writes Birago Diop in his poem, *The dead are not dead* (Opoku 1978:35), which means that those who are dead are never gone. This belief in the continuity of life gives death a special meaning as an affirmation of the reality and unity of life.

Ethical values

A person is born whole and is believed to be endowed with the potential for right and wrong, hence the Akan proverb: *Wunyin a, na wunhu; na woye bone de a, wuhu* – You do not see (notice) yourself growing up, but you definitely know it when you do wrong (Opoku 1978:162). Pointedly underscoring this belief, Archbishop Sarpong (2004:94) writes:

The Supreme Being, Creator of heaven and earth, is the universal norm of behaviour, the one who tells us what is of value and what is not. It is believed that he has implanted in the human being an inner voice which tells us what is right and wrong, an inner voice that disciplines us, discipline here standing for mental and moral training and systems of rules which enable us to conform to the principles of life.

A person is considered good or bad depending on what he/she does, and not on what he/she believes.

The concept of human beingness, or the essence of being human, termed *Umbuntu* in the Bantu languages of Africa, is central to African cultures and religious traditions. It is “the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining community” (Nussbaum 2009:100). Mutombo Nkulu-N’Sengha (2009:222–223) explains this concept further:

Bumuntu is the African vision of a refined gentle person, a holy person, a saint, a *shuntzu*, a person of *dao*, a person of Buddha nature, an embodiment of Brahman, a genuine human being. The man or woman of *Bumuntu*, is characterized by selfrespect and respect for other human beings. Moreover, he/she respects all life in the universe. He/she sees his/her dignity as inscribed in a triple relationship, with the transcendent beings (God, ancestors, spirits), with all other human beings, and with the natural world (flora and fauna). *Bumuntu* is the embodiment of all virtues, especially the virtues of hospitality and solidarity.

The essence of being human is good character, variously termed *Iwa* by the Yoruba, *Suban* by the Akan and *Bumuntu* or *Umbuntu* in the Bantu cluster of languages. However, as Mluleki Munyaka and Mokgethi Motlhabi (2009:65) explain:

Good character is more than just a manifestation of individual acts. It is a spiritual foundation, an inner state, an orientation, and a disposition towards good which motivates, challenges and makes one perceive, feel and act in a humane way towards others. It is a way of life that seeks to promote and manifest itself and is best realised or made evident in harmonious relations within society.

Through established societal institutions, this ideal is inculcated in individual persons, and one’s humanity is expressed in relationships with others.

The distinctive character of the African conception of community derives from the insight that persons depend on persons to be persons, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (Murove 2009:84), also stated by the Akan of Ghana as: *Onipa na oma onipa ye onipa* – It is a human being who makes another person a human being. The emphasis placed on community arises from the thoughtful consideration that individuals receive their humanity from others and that individuals become fully human to the extent that they are included in relationships with others (Murove 2009:63–84); moreover, individuals in the community experience profound growth when they focus more on others than themselves. Proverbs such as “When a thorn gets into the toe, the whole body bends to pull it out”, or “When the leg breaks, the eyes shed tears” accentuate this viewpoint.

The concept of *Umbuntu* has been a potent force in the events of our time and its effectiveness as a living philosophy indigenous to Africa is something for which no extraneous religious and ethical tradition claiming universality can take credit. Post-apartheid South Africa stands as a concrete and practical example of the efficacy of *Umbuntu*. As Augustine Shutte (2009:99) observes:

The most powerful public manifestation of *Umbuntu* as a present vital force for humanity is the continuing dissipation of the spirit of apartheid. The continuing non-violent revolution in South Africa would not be possible if those who for so long were oppressed by the apartheid system were not educated and practised in the ethic of *Umbuntu*. The real miracle we have witnessed is the survival of that spirit on such a scale. The

extraordinary manifestations of forgiveness during the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which must be something unique in history, would not have been possible without it.

Relationship with nature

Our forbears did not consider a home other than this earth, and they therefore endeavoured to preserve and maintain it through rituals, taboos and attitudes of reverence for other forms of nature which they considered sacred. Their reverence for nature, later to be condemned as pagan and drawing the harshest criticism, reflected a wisdom which is only now beginning to be appreciated as salutary in the face of the world-wide destruction of the environment, global warming and climate change. A fundamental relationship is firmly believed to exist between humans and nature. Humans are part of nature; they are not above it as masters or commanders, and they are expected to cooperate with it. Humans seek a relationship with nature in order to have partnership with and not “dominion” over it; the religious traditions once dubbed “worship of nature” are rather an expression of respect for and relatedness to nature. Above all, nature is good, not flawed, fallen or defective; as the hawk in the Akan proverb, flying aloft and beholding the earth below, says: *Ade a, Onyame yee nyinaa ye!* – All that the Creator created is good.

Ali Mazrui observes that the African attitude towards the environment is one of “ecological concern”, and goes on to explain that: “Ecological concern goes beyond mere fascination. It implies commitment to conserve and enrich. Ecological concern also often requires a capacity to empathise with nature. It requires a readiness on the part of man to see a little of his God in his surroundings ... Ecological concern is an aspect of morality in its quest for empathy” (Murove 2009:325). And, again, in the words of Mazrui, “a mind that does not see itself as part of the natural environment is likely to exploit the environment for its own selfish ends. Unlike such an environmentally exploitative mind, the African mind is predisposed to ecological concern because of its ‘totemic frame of reference’” (Murove 2009:325).

Theological openness

The African religious heritage draws its strength and orientation from African wisdom by not laying claim to absoluteness or universality, by recognising that truth is not an exclusive possession in the hands of a favoured few to be authoritatively dished out to those without it; rather, it is so wide and vast that it does not lie within the grasp of a single tradition: to borrow from the proverb cited earlier, if we are to encircle the baobab tree of truth, we must hold hands. This insight engenders profound humility, based on the acceptance of our limitations as human beings, and leads to openness to other religious traditions, because one tradition alone does not have the entire truth in its possession. Here the Shona proverb, already cited, contrasts the humility of the wise person who does not claim to have the last word with the folly of the fool who insists on it.

Most writers who have tried to explain the success of Christianity and Islam in Africa have failed to grasp the fundamental reason for this success, embedded as it is in African wisdom, and have instead laid emphasis on the appeal of the universality of God in these two religious traditions and other material considerations. An aspect of this African wisdom could be described as “points of convergence” between the message of the guest religions and the indigenous religious heritage. These “points of convergence” are antecedent to the coming of the guest religions and point to this ancient wisdom as testimony to the presence of God in the indigenous culture, which must find a place in the new dispensation as part of the ongoing renewal and regeneration of African society in the new millennium. With regard to “points of convergence” that are antecedent to new dispensations, we may do well to remember the Hausa proverb: “Before the blacksmith forged his razor, the vulture and the guinea fowl shaved their heads”.

Conclusion

The enduring value of the religious heritage of Africa, an unquestionably valid, wise and useful way of looking at our world that is not devoid of divine self-disclosure, remains the authentic source of African identity and the durable foundation for the regeneration of Africa. It constitutes our veritable indigenous contribution to the spiritual achievements of humankind. If we pass over this precious indigenous spiritual heritage, dismissing it and failing to make it our starting point in our religious orientation and scholarly endeavours, others may well describe it as a tradition without a “voice”.

This heritage is indubitably part of the unified religious landscape of the world, but because Africans in modern times have preferred to focus on the “newer” faiths, we seem to lose not only our heritage, but also a divinely given and sagacious way of looking at our world. What is being advocated here, I must hasten to explain, is not the abandonment of the adopted faith of contemporary Africans, but an appreciation of the great depth of the religious traditions we have inherited from our ancestors and our use of them in our time. We cannot live authentic and worthy lives on borrowings; in the words of our wise ancestors centuries ago, “The person who is dressed in other people’s clothes is naked, and the person who is fed on other people’s food is hungry”. We have the spiritual inheritance and the intellectual gifts to permanently and thoroughly banish the nakedness and hunger that have made the truth in our inherited religious traditions skinny and “voiceless”.

I conclude with the words with which I ended a recent lecture:

It is our task as Africans of this generation ... to make strenuous efforts to demonstrate that “the view of the world that our tradition teaches has an innate and sterling integrity of its own and represents a sensible and respectable perspective of the world and a valid means of interpreting experiences” (Deloria 2003:285).

This is where, I submit, I begin my theological exertions. Our spiritual heritage is the stone on which we stand to influence ourselves and our world at large. If we discard it or let circumstances destroy it, we shall have ourselves to blame; in the words of our ancestors: The man who does not lick his lips cannot blame the harmattan for drying them (Opoku 2010:9).

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