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(132) AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY AND AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

Francisca Hildegardis Chimhanda

Introduction

The spirituality of a people can be understood as the driving force or innate capacity for maintaining an authentic God-human-cosmos reciprocal and mutual relationship. It is what causes human beings to overcome their limitations in knowing and responding to God. From this perspective, African Christian spirituality is seemingly embedded in cultural and Christian values for attaining the creation and baptismal dignity of the *imago Dei/Christi* (image of God/Christ; cf. Gen. 1:26-27; Rom. 8:17; Gal. 4:6). But African Christian spirituality is complex and therefore defies simplistic definition. However, there are commonalities and divergences in African culture(s) and Christian spirituality. This is because what unites African culture and Christian traditions (God/Christ) is greater than what divides them. This chapter on African spirituality concentrates on the commonalities rather than the divergences.

African Christian spirituality is culturally and historically conditioned. It is thus dynamic and this posits a challenge for its relevance in responding to current contextual issues. The latter include Christian monotheism in relation to ancestral belief, post-colonial challenges (including land ownership, re-distribution, good stewardship, and environmental sustainability), and gender equality. We will draw practical examples of African Christian spirituality from the Shona people of Zimbabwe¹ and the Roman Catholic Church.

A creative dialogue of culture and the gospel shows that there is mutual influencing of enculturation, evangelisation and the incarnation. This is justified by acknowledging that, prior to Christian evangelisation, Africans knew God through their experience of the transcendent. Christianity introduced the concept of special revelation of God in and through Christ, and thus reinforced African spirituality and expanded the view.

Pope John Paul II explains the mutual influencing of the incarnation, evangelization and enculturation as follows:

The purpose of evangelization is ‘transforming humanity from within and making it new’. In and through the Only Son, the relations of people with God, one another and all creation will be renewed. For this reason the proclamation of the Gospel can contribute to the interior transformation of all people of good will whose hearts are open to the Holy Spirit’s action.²

Pope Francis³ is emphatic that God is the gospel, who is ‘a source of newness’.

¹ The Shona people of Zimbabwe are grouped into five major Shona dialects – Karanga, Zezuru, Manyika, Korekore and Ndaou.

² Pope John Paul II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Ecclesia in Africa* [EA], 42, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_14091995_ecclesia-in-africa.html (accessed 16 July, 2015).

³ Pope Francis, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), 10-11, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (accessed 11 September, 2015).

African Christian Spirituality

It appears that the key to unlocking African Christian spirituality is the Great Commandment to ‘Love God... and your neighbour as yourself’ (Matt. 22:34-39; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-27). In the African Bantu Shona religious worldview, ‘neighbour’ includes the environment⁴ and *Ubuntu* ethic (which in Shona is ‘*unhu*’ meaning personhood). Consequently, salient features of African Christian spirituality to be examined include belief in God or the Supreme Being,⁵ *Ubuntu* ethic or the attainment of full humanity,⁶ and belief in unity between the spiritual and the physical environments.⁷

African Belief in the Supreme Being

In the critical dialogue of culture and the gospel, Shona Christians located God at the apex of the ancestral mediation ladder⁸ in cases of petition for rain, harvest thanksgiving, peace and deliverance from drought, disease and pestilence. The Shona area spirits are known as *Mhondoro* (lion spirits) and these are proto-ancestors in the dynasty of chiefs. At the foot of the ancestral mediation ladder are *vadzimu* (family spirits) who also have living mediums (men and women). They have called the Christian God, *Mwari*. Although the Shona pray to *Mwari* and the ancestors, they do not equate *Mwari* with the ancestors. The Shona assign to *Mwari* prerogatives of *Musiki* (Creator) and, in particular, *Musikavanhu* (Creator of human beings) and ultimate giver and source of all life and redemption.⁹

For the Shona, *Mwari* is elusive, neither male nor female, and is a universal God, who gives rain and sunshine and ‘fruitful seasons’ to all people (Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:15-17). The Shona understand the environment as a catholic (universal) space for encounter with the gracious God. Consequently, the forests are holy and things found in it (mushrooms, wild fruits, honey, medicinal herbs, trees and shrubs, etc.) are to be made available to everyone by picking them sparingly and in such a way as to promote continued growth and propagation.

If traditionally the Shona considered *Mwaria* a remote god, only interested in national issues, Christianity introduced or reinforced the immanence and dynamic agency of God in and through Christ. Shona Christians have internalised this concept as attested by theophoric names, for example *Tinashe* (God amongst us), that is Emmanuel (Matt. 1:23), *Simbarashe* (power of God) and *Ngonidzashe* (mercy of God). The suffix ‘-*she*’ stands for Chief, also called *Mambo*. Shona Christians have called God and Christ *Ishe* and *Mambo*, respectively.

⁴ Francisca Chimhanda, ‘The Liberation Potential of Shona Culture and the Gospel: A Post-Feminist Perspective.’ *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, Vol. XL (2014): 308.

⁵ Vincent Mulago, ‘Traditional African Religion and Christianity.’ In *African Traditional Religion and Christianity*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (New York: Paragon House, 1991) 119-134.

⁶ Luke Lungile Pato, ‘Being Fully Human: From the Perspective of African Culture and Spirituality’, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, issue 66, (1997): 53-61.

⁷ John Pobee, *Skenosis: Christian Faith in an African Context* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1992), 66; Pato, ‘Being Fully Human’, 56.

⁸ Francisca Chimhanda, *Christ the Ancestor: Shona Christianity and the Roots for Feminist Liberative Praxis* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2011), 82; Michael Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Shona, with Special Reference to their Religion* (Gweru: Mambo Press), 24.

⁹ Chimhanda, *Christ the Ancestor*, 82-84; Nisbert Taringa, ‘African Metaphors for God: Male or Female?’, *Scriptura* Vol. 86, (2004): 174-179.

African Ancestral Belief

African ancestral belief posits God and the environment in anthropomorphic existential analogy. Pope Francis concurs with this view in alluding to ‘human ecology’.¹⁰ For the Shona, land is mother, the big breast that feeds its children to satiety and the great womb from which people come (at birth) and return (at death).¹¹ For Christianity, the environment is our mother who ‘opens her arms to embrace us... sustains and governs us... and... produces various fruits with coloured flowers and herbs’.¹² Sacramentally, God is in creation but transcends it. Ontologically, the earth and all that is in it is God’s (Ps 24:1-2). African ancestors are not gods. The historical Bantu migration shows they became owners of the land by default (through conquest and occupation). *Ivhu* (soil) is personified as the ancestors, and their living descendants are *vana vevhu* (children of the soil). This is biblical and, to a certain extent, Christian. In the second creation myth in Genesis, Adam is created from dust (Gen. 2:7).

The chief’s lordship over the land can be best understood in terms of servant leadership and stewardship over God’s graces (Gen. 1:28-30). Good stewardship is shown in the Shona practice of *Zundera Mambo* (the community works in the chief’s field and proceeds are used to provide for *vanhu vaMwari* – (the widow, orphan, stranger and the mentally and physically challenged). This is also echoed in sacramental Christology that portrays the encounter with Christ in the distressing disguise of the poor, sick, prisoners, etc. (Matt. 25:35-46). The *Zundera Mambo* concept can provide a correction to post-colonial Africa in general, and Zimbabwe in particular, where the leaders have succumbed to dictatorship and massive looting of the national coffers. This has produced a minority of black elites and made the poor majority poorer.

Ancestral spirituality is a powerful tool in curbing ecological disaster. It means that land is communal and a priceless heritage. Consequently, the present generation has a responsibility to preserve the environment and pass it on to future generations.

Ubuntu spirituality

As shown above, *Unhu (Ubuntu)* spirituality is concerned with the attainment of full humanity or newness of life. Christian parallels to this include the attainment of ‘eternal life’, ‘fullness of (life) God’ (Eph. 3:19) and ‘life... abundantly’ (John 10:10). Four pillars of *Unhu* are elaborated below.

Unhu (Personhood)

Becoming ‘fully human’ is a process that takes place from before birth to life after death. Communal ontology and epistemology as aspects of African Christian spirituality mean that both the person and church need to exist with and for others. Life is celebrated in a series of rites of passage. According to the Shona, in this process *unhu* can be enhanced or diminished. In the liberation struggle against colonialism, political slogans like *ivhukuvanhu* (land to the people) implied that the colonial oppressors had no *unhu* or were not human. This was because, from the outset, they regarded Blacks as non-persons, when they acquired vast tracts of already inhabited ancestral land.

Shona communal identity is undergirded by totemism. *Mutupo* (totem – animal or part of it) and *chidavo* (praise names) are used in greeting, thanking, and for correct burial and inauguration of the dead as the powerful protective ancestors. Thus, it is the whole family, clan and ancestors that are greeted,

¹⁰ Pope Francis encyclical *Laudato Si(LS)*, 5

http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf (accessed 13 November, 2015).

¹¹ Francisca Chimhandu, ‘Land is our Mother: A Shona Bantu Feminist Perspective’, in *Tradition: Fixed and Mobile: Essays in Honour of Rev. Prof. Rodney Moss*, eds. Itumeleng D. Mothoagae and Anselm Laurence Prior (Pretoria: UNISA, 2013), 123-149.

¹² Pope Francis, LS, 1.

thanked and praised. In the Roman Catholic tradition, Pope John Paul II asserts that African ancestral veneration is 'a preparation for belief in the Communion of the Saints'.¹³

But in corporate personality, there is the risk that the individual's unique dignity and rights can be compromised, in what Gordon Chavhunduka calls 'extended patience'.¹⁴ This is the case, for example, with substitute and pledged, levirate marriages that impinge on the dignity and rights of the girl-child and widows. Alternatively, the individual can be a liability to the whole extended family, as in the case of murder.

Umwe (Togetherness)

Traditionally, among the Shona, *umwe* was shown in the practice of *humwe* (families, village community and neighbouring village communities join in common tasks like ploughing, weeding, harvesting etc.). Today, with urbanisation and the erosion of the extended family, *humwe* practice has almost died out. However, the *humwe* concept is used in projects like running children's homes (in particular for HIV and AIDS orphans) and educating children from poor families.

Ushamwari (Friendship)

Although African religion does not proselytise, it is inclusive of all people beyond the boundaries of the family, clan and tribe. This orientation is captured in the Shona adage: 'Friendship is greater than consanguine relationships.'

Kugamuchira Vayeni (Hospitality)

The Shona put a high value on hospitality. This is evidenced by the fact that they have a time of day called *Ruvhunzavayeni* (dusk – when 'visitors' begin to arrive and 'ask' either for direction to their destination or to be put up). The *Zundera Mambo* practice described above is an element of Shona hospitality.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how African Bantu Shona spirituality is rich in life-affirming elements critical to the God-human-cosmos interrelationship. The creative dialogue of culture and the gospel exposed the mutual influencing of evangelisation, enculturation and the incarnation. The great commandment of love and the Bantu ethic of being fully human were recognised as the key for unlocking African Christian spirituality. African Christian spirituality was acknowledged as dynamic and, therefore, offering the possibility of responding to current social, economic and political issues, for the ultimate purpose of the attainment of fullness of life for humanity (including a sustainable environment), all to the greater glory of God.

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¹³ Pope John Paul II, *EA*, 43.

¹⁴ Gordon L. Chavhunduka, 'Traditional Medicine and Christian Beliefs', *Christianity South of the Zambezi*, Vol. 2, (1977), 131-146.

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