

GENERAL MANIFESTATIONS OF AFRICAN RELIGIOSITY

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The Contributions of Africa to the Religious Heritage of the World*

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"A HAWK EATS THROUGH THE HELP OF THE SHEPHERDS"

1. Introduction:

Archaeologists and anthropologists continue to unearth physical evidence of African origins of the human race. They dig up skeletons here and there, whether in Ethiopia, in Kenya or South Africa, casting light on the evolutionary development of human persons that, may have started there two million years ago. Such discoveries evoke excitement in the scientific world. If, according to paleontologists, the history and evolution of human beings began in eastern Africa and made its way to the rest of the world, what did persons take with them from this place of their origin? There are certainly shared characteristics and features that bind us together - physical, social, and spiritual, whatever local distinctions there may be. One of these commonalities is the religious constituent that is found everywhere, with particular variations. Did this start already at the earliest development of human persons? Can it be established, that Africa has contributed not only physical but also spiritual genes to modern persons?

We look at some basic elements of African religiosity, especially those that may have similar or modified elements elsewhere. How could these be explained? Two principles may be at work, namely: (i) Parallel and independent creativity that makes it possible for ideas and practices to develop independently in different parts of the same continent or of the world, without direct connection to one another. (ii) Through mutual exchange and fertilisation of ideas as peoples interact by means of travel, conquest, trade, language, learning, conflict, competition, marriage and technological know-how.

2. A Religious Cosmology:

While there are local variations, we can identify common elements that define African cosmology. People tell countless stories and myths to explain how the world began. First and foremost, this is a created universe and God is the supreme Creator. It is a religious universe, with its beginning in and through God. It is governed and filled by God, and there is no end to it. Of central importance is the creation and sustenance of life, with human life being most prominent. God is the Source and Sustainer of life. The manifestations of life are interrelated. Even where there is no evident biological life, people tend to personify the objects, forces and phenomena of nature to grant them mystical life.

African religiosity acknowledges the reality of God but does not define God. If anything, it confesses that God is unknowable. The Maasai (Kenya and Tanzania) name for God, *Engai*

means (among others) "the Unseen One, the Unknown One". Likewise, among the Tenda (Guinea), God is called *Hounounga* which means: "the Unknown". People affirm that God is invisible, which is another way of asserting that they do not know God in any would-be physical form. Subsequently, nowhere in Africa do we find physical images or representations of God, the Creator of the universe. This is remarkable.

In general, people consider the universe to be in two interlocking parts: the visible and the invisible. Human beings live on the visible level, while God and spiritual beings exist on the invisible level. There is a link between the two worlds. God and spiritual beings make their presence felt on the physical level; and persons project themselves into the spiritual level. African religiosity is very sensitive to and about the spiritual dimension.

Spirit beings explain the ontological "space" between human beings and God. These may be acknowledged in different forms, of which the main ones are divinities and spirits. Divinities were created as such by God, and some are also personifications of major natural phenomena and objects such as mountains, lakes, rivers, earthquakes, thunder, etc. The spirits can be considered in two categories: heavenly (sky) and earthly. The "heavenly" spirits are those associated with "heavenly" phenomena and objects like the sun, the stars, comets, rain and storms. The "earthly" ones are partly those associated with earthly phenomena and objects, and partly those that are remnants of persons after death.

One aspect of the spiritual reality is the presence of mystical power that permeates the universe. God is the creator of this power. To a limited degree persons have access to it, or it functions in their lives.

3. God and Monotheism

A very strong aspect of African religiosity is its monotheism. Listen to the voices from the east to the west, from the north to the south of Africa, and they are unanimous in proclaiming that there is only one God, Who is Creator of everything. Of course we cannot count God as such. But people name Him/Her in the singular, and acknowledge no other being of the same nature or equal status as though there would be more than One. God is God and anything else, any other being, is less than God and cannot be called God. African religiosity does not entertain the unimaginable idea that there is or could be more than one God that made the heavens and the earth, Who created the sky and the mountains, the waters and the light, the stars and the moon, Who still creates babies and heals the sick. Some of the names for God cannot be rendered in plural form. In any case, the creation act, for example, is attributed to God in the singular, as is also the on-going work of God. People address their prayers to God in the singular. Proverbs speak of God in the singular.

African religiosity has a lot to say about God. In an ongoing research since 1960, I have not found a single African people without a word or a name for God. The words (names) differ because of different languages. But many attributes about God are similar, and explain or speak about the same God.

African monotheism focuses on God as being the eternal Creator and Sustainer of all things. His/Her unique nature and essence emerge in such a way as to distinguish him/her from all other beings. These other beings are created, whereas God is self-existent. The Zulu (South Africa) point this out clearly, when they call God *uZivelele*, which means: "He who is of himself, the Self-existent One." God is eternal, without beginning and without end, all knowing, all powerful, both distant and near. He /She is holy, just, loving, and merciful.

God is completely other. Yet individually and collectively, people approach him /her, love and have communion with him/her. They speak of him/her in personal terms, as: Father, Friend, Giver of children, rain and all good things, God of our ancestors, God of our forefathers and mothers, God of the skies (heavens), Great elder, Great One, Healer, Helper, Mother, Parent, Pastor, Protector, Ruler of the universe, Saviour, Shepherd, the Everlasting, the Great Spirit, the Judge of all, the Just One, the Kind One, etc. This is an affirmation, that God is personal and unique. The many personal and attributive names of God make this point clear. Other attributes are expressed directly through prayers, invocations and names of people and places.

People also depict God in ethical terms, and express this (as well as other attributes) in different ways, such as proverbs and short statements. For example: The Akan (Ghana) say: "God is not asleep." This proverb affirms the belief that God sees and knows everything; and in the case of wrongdoing, the justice of God is unfailing. In another proverb they affirm God's providence and mercy: "If God gives you sickness, God gives you its cure." Equipped with such a word of assurance, they take courage in the face of hardships (like sickness, failure or danger). People are convinced that God loves them, and some simply point out that, if God did not love them God would not have created them.

The Pygmy prayer-hymn is a clear confession of monotheism, with many attributes about God.

They pray-sing:

In the beginning was God (Khmvoum).

Today is God,

Tomorrow will be God.

Who can make an image of God?

He has no body.

He is as a word that comes out of your mouth.

That word! It is no more,

It is past, and still it lives,

So is God!

The overall picture of God is that of One who is above gender classification, neither male nor female. Many of our languages do not distinguish gender the way it is the case with English and other European languages. To grasp some aspects of God, people find anthropomorphic concepts useful and, according to the situation, may speak of God in male or female terms. They express their belief in and awareness of God through prayers, invocations, sacrifices and offerings, praise songs, and dedication of children to God. In some areas priests and priestesses officiate at religious ceremonies, pray on behalf of their communities, and pass on the theological, philosophical, and practical knowledge of their religion.

There are, however, concepts that point to a plurality of God, even if people acknowledge the unity (oneness) of God. Some societies speak of, or acknowledge other spiritual beings that are closely associated with God. These may represent God in various activities or be manifestations of God.

4. Belief in Spiritual Beings:

The belief in the existence of other spiritual beings besides God is widespread. They were created by God and are subject to God. They can be considered in two categories: those associated with nature and those that are remnants of human beings after death. Nature spirits are personifications of heavenly or earthly objects and phenomena: the stars, the sun, thunder, rain and storms, mountains, earthquakes, lakes, waterfalls, and caves. We have pointed out that death does not annihilate persons. After death, persons in form of spirits continue to live in the next world, and the living relate to them, especially to those of family members that are still remembered by name. Some spirits are involved in divination, and others may possess the living.

5. Persons (Human Beings, Man):

One proverb states that: *"In the beginning, God gave to every people a cup, a cup of clay, and from this cup they drank their life. They all dipped in the water, but their cups were different."* African religiosity places persons (mankind) at the centre of creation. According to many accounts and myths, God created persons towards or at, the end after creating other things. It is as if persons formed the finishing touch of God's work. Furthermore, they are placed in a more privileged position than most (if not the rest) of the creation. At the beginning, the persons (male and female) were like children, with God as their parent in a family setting. They lived in a form of paradise, leading a state of life without suffering, fear, sickness or even death. God was close to them and communicated with them. God's dwelling place, heaven (the sky), and the earth (ground), the dwelling place of persons were joined. God gave the persons one or more of three great gifts: rejuvenation (falls they grew old), immortality (as protection against death), and resurrection (in case they died). In many myths it is also told that God gave them also a rule or instruction, that they were to observe.

However, things did not remain at the paradise level forever. The first persons lost the three gifts and did not know how to regain them. In some cases, it was the persons themselves who brought about the loss by failing to observe God's instructions. In other cases, another creature (animal, bird or insect) was responsible. For example, God sent a message (about death, immortality or resurrection) to the persons, but the messenger went unduly slowly, forgot or changed the message replacing it with a contrary one. That way persons lost paradise, with the result that suffering, sickness and death came into the world and have remained with us ever since. Heaven and earth severed from each other and God withdrew from being directly with persons.

However, God did not abandon people altogether. God continues to provide them with food, children, rain, sunshine, and medicines to heal the sick. Children perpetuate life and thus counteract death. On their part, persons sacrifice and make offerings to God and speak to God personally or communally through prayer, invocation, ritual, dance or singing. God reveals Himself/Herself to people; and God communicates with them through dreams, visions and

nature. They perceive His/Her continuing presence and activities for them personally or for creation at large. They still consider themselves to be God's children and look upon God as their Parent, Father and Mother.

According to African religiosity, the loss of paradise, immortality, rejuvenation, resurrection and direct contact between heaven and earth was an ontological and not an ethical loss. It did not turn persons into "fallen" creatures, nor did it defile persons ethically so as to make them evil (sinful) before God. The story serves to explain the ontological separation between God and persons, and the regrettable consequences for persons. The Fang of Cameroon and Gabon affirm this aptly, saying that:

"Nzame (God) is on high, man is below!

Nzame is Nzame, man is man:

Each to himself/herself, each in his/her dwelling."

After the original loss, people accepted the new state of their life as it was, apparently without complaining or denying it. The Dinka (Sudan) regard this turn of events with almost a touch of fatalism:

"In the time when God created all things,

He created the sun.

And the sun is born and dies and comes again.

He created the moon,

And the moon is born and dies and comes again.

He created the stars,

And the stars are born and die and come again.

He created man,

And man is born and dies and comes not again."

The person consists of body and spirit. Death entered the world through various ways, after the creation of persons. It destroys the body, but the spirit continues in the next life. This is a very strong element of belief in African religiosity. Most peoples observe rituals of disposing the dead bodies, largely through burial in the compound of the surviving relatives, or other burial places. In some societies the body was formerly left to rot in the woods, becoming a welcome meal to animals, birds, insects and worms. In many societies, since thousands of years, it was the custom to bury belongings, weapons, tools, foodstuffs or even servants with the dead body. This custom points to the belief in the continuation of life after death. Graves and burial sites are some of the best archaeological sources for looking into the life of past generations. The most monumental of these are the pyramids or their ruins in Egypt and the region southwards and south-eastwards in the Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia. Funeral texts, whether written or oral, have a rich content of religious ideas and practices.

People take for granted the continuation of life after physical death. The relation between the living and the departed (whom I have called the living dead), is cultivated in different ways, being stronger in some societies than others. These may include the use of libation, (symbolic) offerings, appearances of the departed in visions or dreams of the living, naming of children after the departed if they resemble them, and through divination. People may call upon the departed or mention them in making formal covenants or oaths. In some prayers people ask the living dead

to assist them by conveying their prayers, sacrifices and offerings to God, since people consider them to be closer to God than are human persons.

Death and after death rituals formally complete the "rites of passage" which are observed in many communities. These are observed starting with pregnancy in some societies, but more at birth, name giving, initiation (before, during or after puberty), engagement, marriage (wedding), procreation, status installation, and death. On the one hand the rites emphasise the role of the community, since they are a public witness that a person has been added to the visible community and eventually exits from it into the invisible. On the other hand, the rites affirm the identity and importance of the individual.

Marriage is a religious duty that, under normal circumstances, everyone is obliged or expected to fulfil. The bearing of children is an essential part of marriage, and no efforts are spared to ensure that there are children in each marriage; otherwise, the couple fails to become a family. In this way, in effect the family never dies, only its members do.

Community life is a strong feature of African religiosity. It includes the living and the living dead (departed). Persons are related to one another through blood, marriage and other social arrangements. Basically, African Religion is a communal religiosity. The individual finds his or her identity best of all in relation to other persons - in the family, in the community, and through one's own (physical or social) descendants. It is within the community that people learn, experience and practise moral and spiritual values. These values include: love, friendship, hospitality, helpfulness, support, generosity, sharing, respect (especially from 'junior' to 'senior' status through blood, social relationships and age), comforting and caring (in time of infancy, sickness and bereavement), celebrating and laughing together. That way, people share both their joys and their sorrows. Individualism is apportioned a minor role. Religiosity is the property and practice of the community.

Nevertheless, it is also within the community where serious tensions arise, sometimes leading to break ups of families, fights, accusations, hurt, curse, revenge, abuse of persons, oppression, discrimination (exclusion), destruction of property, and even killings. One of the main manifestations of such tensions and conflicts is the real and imaginary application of magic and witchcraft. This is found in all African societies, both in rural and urban populations. Belief in and practice of witchcraft causes fear, suspicion and tensions that in many societies may lead to communal killing of the accused offender.

6. Belief in Mystical Power:

There is a deeply rooted belief in a mystical power or force in the universe that derives from God. People use this power in medical practice, divination, exorcism, protecting persons and property, predicting where to find lost articles, and foretelling the outcome of an undertaking. It is also this power that they employ in the practice of magic, sorcery, and witchcraft. Individuals such as diviners, traditional doctors, and witches know better than other people, how to employ it, sometimes in connection with spirits. The belief in and practice of magic causes much fear in African life, which leads to accusations, quarrels, fights, and countermeasures in families and communities. The positive use of this mystical power is cherished and plays a major role in

regulating ethical relations in the community and in supplying answers to questions about the causes of good luck and misfortunes. For fear of witchcraft and formal curse, people may refrain from stealing, speaking rudely, showing disrespect where respect is expected, committing taboos against incest or doing harm to people like women, children, the handicapped, the weak and strangers. This is a positive effect of mystical power in society.

7. Sacred places and objects:

People have set apart places as sacred including mountains, caves, waterfalls, rocks, groves, trees, rainmaking stones, and certain animals, and made objects that they regard and use as sacred, such as altars, sacrificial pots, masks, drums, and colours. Communities observe and treat some places as sanctuaries in which no human beings or animals may be killed, and where no trees may be felled. The community or individuals make sacrifices, offerings, prayers and rituals there. Some homesteads have family altars or graves that serve as sacred spots where family members make prayers, offerings, and small sacrifices.

African religiosity has often personalised nature in order that humans may communicate and live in harmony with it. This is not worship of nature, but an acknowledgement that nature deserves to be respected, to be held sacred and used responsibly. If humans hurt nature, nature hurts them. Humans are the priests of nature, indeed of the universe. This is a sacred trust given to them by God, who endowed them with more abilities than other creatures on earth. African religiosity is very sensitive towards the relation between nature and persons, even if today this sensitivity is getting lost in the money oriented exploitation of natural resources.

8. Ethics:

There is an ethical order given by God, for the wellbeing of persons and nature. They attempt to live by it, in form of laws, rules, customs, traditions and taboos. Human relations are largely oriented horizontally. What is right or wrong is judged normally in terms of interpersonal relations - in the family, in the community, towards the surrounding, and towards the departed. It is persons that deal with any known breaches, and may subsequently punish the wrong doer. In some cases people perform rituals to cleanse the offender and those affected. Relations with the spiritual world are also important, as this is very close to the physical world and the two interact. Persons are aware of the spiritual world with God, divinities (in some cases) and spirits, especially those of the departed.

The ethics and morals of African religiosity are embedded in values, customs, traditional laws, and taboos. God is ultimately the Giver of morality. Moral offences include disrespect or rudeness toward elderly people, sexual transgressions (like incest, rape, intercourse with children, adultery, or persons of the same sex), murder, stealing, robbery, telling lies, deliberately causing bodily or property harm, and the use of sorcery and witchcraft. The community punishes such acts by making the offender and his or her family suffer shame or pay a fine, by ostracism, or by beating, stoning or burning the offender to death.

On the other hand, kindness, friendliness, truthfulness, politeness, generosity, hospitality, hard work, caring for the sick or elderly parents, respect for elderly people and the weak and retarded, and protection of children and women are virtues that earn praise and admiration in the

community. Women are regarded and treated as full moral agents. Nevertheless, society protects women against maltreatment by men. The reason for this is that they are generally less able to defend themselves physically, especially when they are pregnant or aged. Society rewards the good and punishes the evil. It is held that the living dead maintain interest in the morals of their descendants, and may punish offenders by causing failure in undertakings, sickness, and bad dreams as warnings or deterrents. God is ultimately watching over the moral life of the community, society, and humankind. From time to time God may punish the wider society or give warnings through calamities, epidemics, drought, war, and famine, if moral order is severely broken.

The home and the community instil moral teaching, generally from the older to the younger members, through word and example. Initiation ceremonies (some of which may last several years) are the formal communal occasions for instilling moral values in young people and passing on to them important traditions. Stories, proverbs, wise sayings and taboos are employed in the teaching of morals as well as for entertainment. Where the basic philosophy of life is "I am because we are," it is extremely important that the two dimensions of "I am" and "We are" be carefully observed and maintained for the survival of all. The individual is very much exposed to the community and anonymity is virtually out of the question.

African religiosity affirms and celebrates life. Laughter is heard even in the most difficult living situations. Communal festivals filled as they are, with laughter, eating, dancing, singing, drumming, and rejoicing, renew and strengthen community ties. Even sad occasions like funerals are communal events that bring together many people to share in mourning, and thus lighten the burden of bereavement. Life is often a struggle against forces of destruction like illness, disease, accidents, childlessness, suffering, misfortune, spirit possession, quarrels, war, forced deportation and death. Natural threats such as drought, earthquakes, epidemics, famines, calamities, and locust invasions affect the whole community. The people's religiosity equips them to face and survive these difficult situations.

In especially health matters, people have evolved ways of coping with various threats to their life. Medicine women and men (traditional doctors) are found in every village. Their work, which is in constant demand, is highly appreciated by the community. They undergo long training and apprenticeship. They learn to diagnose illnesses and complaints that affect not only human beings but also animals and fields. They acquire knowledge of herbs, roots, fruits, shells, insects and juices, and their medicinal properties. They use divination to communicate with the invisible world and at the psychic level of consciousness. They perform healing rituals and invocations. Their "medicine" is directed not only against the disease or misfortune in question, but also to the removal and prevention of its mystical cause such as witchcraft, the curse or broken taboos. They carry out the process of diagnosis, treatment, cure, and take preventive measures, often in the presence of the family or community, which thus participates in undergoing its own healing.

Generally, society shows great care toward the handicapped, weak and retarded people. Part of this special care and consideration comes from the fear that, if you mistreat or fail to help the handicapped, you are invoking a curse upon yourself or members of your family will become similarly handicapped.

From time to time the community is provoked beyond endurance and a mob kills an offender by stoning, beating, or burning. Such are those accused of stealing and robbery (nearly always men), practising witchcraft (nearly always women), or committing sexual offences like incest, intercourse with children, or rape (only men). In such cases, the community undergoes a "cleansing" process, physically and ethically.

"Medicine" is also used to bring good fortune like health, success, increased love and protection against danger. In their practice, traditional doctors hold that it is God Who heals or brings about good results, and some of them regularly invoke God for healing and for the welfare of the individuals and community. Traditionally, they are upright, trustworthy, and respected members of their community, the symbols of its welfare and health. Through them folk medical knowledge and practice have been passed down over many centuries and millennia. They have rendered health services to individuals and communities. Treatment and healing are based on community involvement. In view of the fact that modern western medicine and its wonders are too expensive for most Africans, traditional doctors continue to respond to the health needs of many people (maybe 85%), and complement or even replace the services of modern medicine. As in other spheres of religious life, women are very active in health matters, and show deeper sensitivities than men. This comes from the fact that they carry human life in their own bodies and are more attuned to the spiritual dimension of health. In many communities women traditional doctors outnumber their male counterparts, and nearly all mediums are women.

9. Spirituality:

Spirituality is a great value of African religiosity. It comes out especially through prayers, invocations, rituals, offerings and sacrifices. These are the outpourings of a person's (or community's) soul and spirit in the direction of the divine, the spiritual realm and its values. These values work to cultivate the area of persons that communicates with or strives towards the spiritual realm, and satisfy spiritual hunger or thirst. Those who participate in these exercises, do so in a spiritual attitude of a spiritual direction.

We can here mention spiritual values that, in one form or another, are embedded in or appear out of African religiosity. Purity and cleanliness of heart in approaching God are cultivated because persons believe that God is holy, pure and 'clean'. Humility is an element that comes out because persons feel that they are very small before God. They need God's help, and they humble themselves in soliciting that help. Trust, faith and confidence lead them to offer prayers and sacrifices, or to perform other rituals of worship, believing that God is there and the spiritual realm is there. In praying or making offerings, persons move in word, ritual, hope and trust towards the spiritual realities. Peace is a common element of spirituality. It carries with it tranquillity, quietness, happiness, assurance, the flow of fellowship and happiness. Love, care, tenderness and gentleness come out especially in prayers.

A spiritual element of 'struggle', 'wrestling', 'desperation' and sorrow may find expression in prayer or sacrifice. This belongs to persons' relationship with God and other spiritual realities. One example comes from the Dinka (Sudan) prayer in a situation of severe sickness:

"God has forsaken us,
The Creator of the sun refuses us life.
O cold white moon,
The Creator of the sun refuses us life."
Another is in the Barundi (Burundi) prayer for help (*Kwambaza*) by a childless woman:
"O Imana (God) of Urundi, if only you would help me!
O Imana of pity, Imana of my father's home (country), if only you would help me!
O Imana of the country of the Hutu and the Tutsi, if only you would help me just this once!
O Imana, if only you would give me a homestead and children!
I prostrate before you, Imana of Urundi.
I cry to you: Give me offspring, give me as you give to others!
Imana, what shall I do, where shall I go?
I am in distress: where is there room for me?
O Merciful, O Imana of mercy, help this once!"

Praise, thanksgiving and honour to God are other strong elements of spirituality in African religiosity. Through these expressions, the spirit (soul) gives itself back to God, acknowledging its dependence upon God and airing its joys over God's providence. By means of sacrifices and offerings, with the prayers that accompany them, persons give something material to God. Thereby they spiritualise the material and mediate it towards or for the spiritual. People feel that all things (including themselves) belong to God, and in confidence they give back what belongs to Him/Her.

African religiosity cherishes blessings. These take on many forms. They show how people feel towards God: that God is near to them, that God is kindly disposed towards them, that God provides for them. Blessings give them confidence, joy, peace, and a feeling of family relationship with God as their Parent and they as His/Her children. Older persons pronounce blessings towards younger, or those of a higher social or official status towards the rest. It is assumed and believed that God actualises the contents or intentions of the blessings. These cover a variety of good things like long life, safety in travelling, safety in sleeping or working, finding a good wife or husband, bearing (many) children, rescue from danger, protection against sickness or accident or death, success in undertaking, keeping alive 'till we meet again', etc.

10. Conclusion:

African religiosity has no sacred books except of those of ancient Egypt. It is found primarily in oral sources, including stories, myths, proverbs, prayers, ritual incantations, songs, names of people and places, and the knowledge of religious personages. Other sources are art, language, ceremonies and rituals, religious objects and places like shrines, altars, and ceremonial symbols, and in magical objects and practices. For all its riches, it has no written sources on which its authority may be based. It is lived (not read), it is experienced (not meditated), it is integrated into the life of the people: wherever they are, their religiosity, their religion, is with them.

African Religion spread rapidly to the Western hemisphere through people who were forcibly transplanted to the West Indies and the Americas by the slave trade. It settled there and has survived in a mixture with Christianity, despite the influence of other cultures and environments. For example, the spirit possessions that abound among peoples of African descent in Brazil and

the West Indies have their origins in Africa. *Voodoo* in the Caribbean and *macumba* in Brazil are remnants of African religiosity that have been modified to suit local practice. Catholicism in Latin America, especially in Brazil, is strongly impacted by this religiosity. Many elements of African religiosity seem to have been integrated into the (free) Christianity of African Americans.

But what about African religiosity in Arab countries that transported, kept and still keep millions of African slaves? We do not hear about it directly. What contributions is it making to Islam as a religious tradition, both from the beginning and as a major religion in Africa? What elements of African religiosity are in the Koran?

Of special interest is the impact and relationship that African religiosity may have on the content and development of Jewish religion. For thousands of years, Jewish and African peoples have been in contact with one another. For several centuries the Hebrews were settled (as slaves) in Egypt and, as a minority in a foreign land, they could not avoid coming under strong influence of the host peoples. Moses grew up in a deeply religious royal environment in Egypt. Did he not have a lifelong contact with African peoples, their established religiosity and wisdom? Was it not queen Nefertiti (c. 1385- c. 1350 BCE) of Egypt who struggled to introduce a form of monotheism in the country, already before Moses was born there (in the 13th century BCE, if that is the more acceptable dating of his life). In any case, it is held that the Ten Commandments were already part of the laws of Egypt and the Upper Nile, before God gave them to Moses. They made sense to the people because they were already familiar with them in general, while they lived in Africa. In the New Testament times there was already a constant flow of peoples between Africa and the world of the New Testament where Jesus lived and worked, and where Christianity took form.

Many items in the Bible have an astonishing closeness to African religiosity. Africa is very much in the Bible and the Bible in Africa. How do we explain this proximity, which is not found in other parts of the world? What has African religiosity contributed to Biblical religion? This is one of the core questions for our Working Committee.

I do not feel academically competent to take this discussion far. There are students of history of religions, of Biblical studies, students of language, anthropology and archaeology among us and elsewhere, who can shed light upon these and similar questions. But the temptation is there, to see or seek African presence in both Jewish and Christian religions, and possibly in Islam as well. This is a great and exciting challenge.

We should not belittle what may come out of the challenge that our Working Committee is taking up. Let me cite some proverbs indicating that contributions to the welfare of others may come even from neglected or unexpected sources. The Ga and Dangme (Ghana) say: "*Atēplē Gazo ke e fi ngē mi nē a kē ya he na*. The cockroach says its faeces are among (i.e., on, or are part of) the moneys used to buy the cow." The explanation points to the olden days, when "rich people kept their money in straw bags and bowls. Cockroaches entered these containers and would excrete on the money, sometimes staining it. Thus, when the money was used to buy a cow, the droppings of the cockroaches were taken along with the money. In the proverb, cockroach droppings stands for something that is despised or not highly regarded; the cow stands

for something that is much valued." The application is that "Everyone has something that he/she can contribute for the progress of the whole community."

The Lugbara (Uganda) say: "*Anya ni ta ma orindi*, that is: Millet is the soul of food. This means that: 'A little millet contributes a substantial ingredient to a meal. A few people can make a substantial contribution to the activity of a group.'" In another proverb they say: "*A'umva ni alu onjayia si*. The taste of the chick is in the pepper." The explanation is that: "A few people can give a welcome zest to an occasion, or a small contribution can put the finishing touch to an undertaking."

The Basotho (Lesotho) observe that: "*Phakoe e ja ka balisa* = A hawk eats through the help of the shepherds." This means that: "Success has come because of the contribution of others."

What has Africa contributed to the success (realisation) of world religions? If it supplied the shepherds through whose help the hawks have managed to eat, what kind of shepherds are they? And, what kind of food is it, since "the taste of the chick is in the pepper"? Inevitably, ideas from Africa have crossed the mountains, rivers and seas, through migration, travels, and pursuit of trade, knowledge or adventure, all through history. Voluntary or enslaved African migrants have gone to every corner of the globe; African scholars are known to have worked in the Mediterranean regions, Middle East and Europe since ancient times. In course of history, Africa with its religiosity has become very present in the world and the world in Africa. Modern facilities of communication have brought peoples to the doorsteps of one another. This has an enormous impact upon the exchange of ideas, experiences, and knowledge, whatever abuses and injustices may come with it.

We should look at these questions not only in terms of the historical past, but also in our contemporary situation. Is there still room today, for continued contribution by African religiosity to world religions, and in what form? On the other side of the coin is the question: What contributions have other peoples (shepherds) made and continue to make to African religiosity? These also need to be located, sifted, weighed and evaluated.

11: For Possible Exploration:

As areas of possible exploration we could look at the following, among others:

1. Cosmology, Universe its Origin and Nature

Creation of the world and of persons

Mystical Power, Force

Ontology

2. God

Nature and activities of God, Self-existent, Creator

Revelation

Monotheism

Other spiritual (divine?) Beings

Persons' Worship and Communion with God

3. *Spiritual realities besides God*

Their relationship with God.

Divinities, Deities.

Spirits of the sky, of the earth, of the departed persons.

4. *Persons (Man - Male and Female)*

Creation, Original state

Loss of Paradise and its consequences.

Community: "I am because we are..."

Rights of persons regardless of age, gender, religious persuasion, race, nationality, status
(strangers, refugees, prisoners)

Ethics and Morals, Values

Life stages, Rites of passage

Death, Hereafter, Relation with the living dead (departed)

Relation to: one another, nature, spiritual realities and God

Mystical power

Life sustaining, life destroying forces

Healing, health, welfare

Sense of the sacred

Affirmation and celebration of life

Relation with Nature

5. *Spirituality:*

Worship

Sacrifice and Offering

Prayer

Spiritual values

Sacred places, objects and symbols

Relation with Nature

Blessings

6. *African religiosity in the Bible and the Bible in African religiosity*

Geography and History of the Bible

Biblical Jewish and African peoples - interaction

Judaism and African religiosity

Religious language - commonalities and differences

Revelation

Christianity and African religiosity -

in Africa, Americas, Caribbean, Europe and Israel

7. *African religiosity and Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and modern religious movements.*

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12. Notes:

Prayers cited come from: Mbiti, John S.: THE PRAYERS OF AFRICAN RELIGION, London and Maryknoll, New York 1975.

Proverbs cited come from Nussbaum, Stan, ed.: AFRICAN PROVERBS, CD Rom, Colorado Springs, U.S.A. 1996. Those from the Akan are collected by Kofi A. Opoku, HEARING AND KEEPING; from the Basotho by 'Makali I. Mokitimi: THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE; and from the Lugbara by Albert Dalfovo: LUGBARA WISDOM, published as separate volumes by UNISA Press, Pretoria 1997.

African Names of God: I have a list of some 1500 such names in CONCEPTS OF GOD IN AFRICA, London 1979, pp. 326-336. I have computerised these with additional 300 names. If anyone can use them and add new ones, please contact me!

Some books addressing the issue of African contributions to the religions of the world. The Working Committee will or should expand the literature in this area:

Adamo, David Tuesday: AFRICA AND THE AFRICANS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT, Christian Universities Press, San Francisco 1998.

Adamo, David Tuesday: AFRICA AND THE NEW TESTAMENT, author's Manuscript 2000.

Barrett, Leonard E. THE SUN AND THE DRUM. AFRICAN ROOTS IN JAMAICAN FOLK TRADITION. Sanster's and Heinemann, Kingston Jamaica and London 1976.

Bastide, Roger. 1978. THE AFRICAN RELIGIONS OF BRAZIL. Translated by Helen Sebba. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Ben-Jochannan Yosef, Oduyoye, Modupe and Finch, Charles: THE AFRIKAN ORIGINS OF THE MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS, edied by Amon Saba Saakan, Yosef Ben-Jochannan, Karnak House, London 1988.

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Getui, M., Holter, K. and Zinkuratire, V., eds.: INTERPRETING THE OLD TESTAMENT IN AFRICA, Peter Lang, Bern, Oxford, New York, et al. 2001.

Lucas, J.O.: RELIGIONS IN WEST AFRICA AND ANCIENT EGYPT, Nigerian National Press, Apapa, Nigeria 1971.

Williams, J.J.: HEBREWISM OF WEST AFRICA, Dial Press, New York 1930.

<http://www.afrikaworld.net/afrel/mbiti.htm>