

An Unusual Marriage: A reflection on Africa Spirituality and its influences on Christian piety

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Disclaimer:

My reflection on African Spirituality (**Ancestors**), I write about them as a township boy who grew up in Meadowlands Zone 10. From the onset I need to say I have limited knowledge about the concept of ancestors and as someone who has an interest in studying further about the ancestors.

What is Spirituality?

McGrath further says the word "Spirituality" is drawn from the Hebrew word "Ruach," which the Holy Spirit (McGrath; 1992:2).

We know from Genesis 2:7 that when God breathed into the nostrils of man the breath of life man became a living, therefore any Spirituality formation whether African or Christian needs to give life.

What is African Spirituality?

Masango says the process of an African spirituality is developed within the village and he quotes Mbiti, "it takes the whole village to raise a child" (Masango; 2006:930). This means one spiritual formation comes from various pots within the community one lives in.

One of the values an African child is thought from early in life is that of respecting the elders and even the ancestors as they form core value of who you are.

In the African world view whether one is raised in a village or township a person's spiritual formation is shaped by being in a relationship with fellow human being; hence the African philosophy "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu."

It is worth emphasis the point that in an African spirituality "relationship" is a key component in the developmental process of a person's spirituality.

From the above definitions and reflection on Spirituality and African Spirituality one can say spirituality is about formation of human beings, as they pursue to live authentic life. Within us humanity there is a deep spiritual thirst and hunger that needs to be spiritually nourished and feed.

I have noted the discourse on Spirituality and African Spirituality and I am wondering that shouldn't then the whole of spirituality encompass the concept of John 10:10, that of giving life and the concept of UBUNTU attesting to giving life.

African Cosmology

In the study of African Spirituality we must be aware that there is no one spirituality, but there are spiritualities. However within the African traditional religion there are common elements when certain rituals are performed, for example the spilling of animal blood on the ground (hence land is a sensitive and important topic to and traditional beer, as we see as "ukudla okwabaphantsi," translated as "food for ancestors).

This point is further illustrate on by Hunter when he analysis the influence of the amathonga (ancestral spirits) on the life of the community as well as how the living in turn, influence and communicate with the ancestors through ritual, for example through animal sacrifice and beer offerings (Chidester; 1997:173).

The Western definition of Ancestors v/s The African definitions of ancestors

Ancestors: The Cambridge dictionary defines an Ancestor as a “**person related to you who lived a long time ago**” (<https://ldoceonline.com> 04 June 2020).

Setiloane defines Ancestors (**badimo**) as, “the living dead” that maintain ongoing relations with the living thereby make up the broader human community (Chidester; 1997:278). I wonder this understanding does not attest to what writer of the book of Hebrews, when he speaks about the great cloud of witness (Hebrews 12:1).

It is important to notice there difference between these two definitions, “**who lived**” and “**the living dead.**” One suggests that ancestors are no longer part of us, while the African world still sees ancestors as part of larger community.

However it is sad to notice how our African ancestors have been demonised by the Western Missionaries like A.T Bryant as to cult of the dead (Chidester; 1997:214).

The role played by Ancestors in an African community

In the African world view ancestors play an important role in the life of an individual from birth, after a child has been born there is a ritual that has to be performed called (**imbeleko**), it is this ritual that the new born baby is introduction to the ancestors and it is at this stage that the child will be given a name or named after one of the ancestors.

This reminds of the episode of baby Jesus presented in the temple and the name Jesus was confirmed at the temple (Luke 2:21-22), key phrase “according the law of Moses,” which by the way was a Jewish culture.

In traditional African practising families, there must be a slaughtering of an animal whether chicken, goat or cow to appease the ancestors. Papu DJ says, “Ancestors do not want to be forgotten and living would do well not to forget them (Papu; 0000:116).

This teaches a person to always remember ancestor and by so doing we acknowledge that they exist, and we always remember a person who has play an important role in the upbringing of someone.

The reason as Christians we remember and worship Jesus it is because of his influence on our faith and I submit that the church exists as long as there are worshippers are in it, therefore ancestors exist for as long we remember them.

There is a great belief among Africans that if a person lived a good life and dies (divine life), that person according African belief system becomes a good ancestor (Masango; 2006:934), this says to me at the point of death one does not automatically becomes a good ancestor.

Masango expand this point by saying, “in certain villages elders become living as they reach the prime age in their lives and they become spiritual advisors to the young ones (Masango; 2006:936). There is an idiom in isiZulu that says “**Indlela ibuzwa kwabamphabile,**” loosely translated you to ask those you have travelled the road before you.

Both the church and society we are in dire need of “**real mentors,**” if we are truly wanting to end gender base violence and become authentic servants of God. It is my submission that African spirituality can help us in that regard.

An integrated spirituality is a spirituality in which who we are and what we do are intimately related (Masango; 2006:930). A person's action becomes their character.

It is important to note that within the African culture there is a system of hierarchy in communication and this system is respect. For example if as young man I want to get married, I do not go directly to my father but go via mother who speaks and act as my intermediary.

Mogoba when speaking about hierarchically ordered cosmology

God/Triune God (italic my own words)

Ancestor /Spirits (italic my own words)

The living

And nature

I agree with Mogoba's idea that ancestor should be view as intermediaries and not of worship (Chidester; 1997:331-331).

In the African world even though God is accessible to humanity, however He is also in the unseen world where he reside with the ancestor. Therefore ancestors become our mediators and then Jesus chief mediator.

The influences on Christian Piety

Taking Jonathan Edwards understanding on Christian piety, that it is the practice of the church both in its corporate expression and in its individual members (www.Oxfordscholarship.com:2020/06/04).

I submit that Church (MCSA) as corporate body and as its member practicing African spirituality will help, in the formation of ethical leaders. Mission groups like YMG can play a role ikhankatha=mentors in the spiritual formation of young.

This will help us as the church to understand the words uttered by our Lord Christ Jesus when he said, "Do this in remembrance of me," one can even ask what is it that we remember that is of Christ. Lastly I believe the concept of Ancestors as the "as the living dead" can contribute immensely to the doctrine of resurrection.

Conclusion

It is my hope that this presentation will broaden our understanding in African spirituality especially with regards to the concept of badimo/amadlozi. And that we will begin to honour and remember the ancestors both who are still present with us and those who have departed (Babu Mgojo, Ntate Mokitim, Mamu Cynthia Xaba and.....)

Bibliography

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