“GO BACK, AND FETCH WHAT WAS LEFT BEHIND!”

(Akan Proverb)

Riddles, Rituals, and Spirituality in Africa:

Keynote Address at the Fifth Conference of the African Association for the Study of Religions (AASR), at Egerton University, Njoro, Kenya, 18-23 July 2012

Introduction

When unexpected, I received the invitation to deliver the Keynote address at the Fifth Conference of the African Association for the Study of Religions (AASR), I felt both honored and frightened. I was honored, because it came from this eminent Association of scholars.

Nevertheless, the magnitude of the theme frightened me, because it is overwhelming and bewildering. For weeks, I kept wondering what was stalking behind the Conference theme on: “SPORTS, LEISURE, RELIGION, AND SPIRITUALITY IN AFRICA AND THE AFRICAN DIASPORA”. For survival sake, I chose to pitch my tent at the periphery, and speak on “Riddles, Rituals, and Spirituality in Africa”. That is but a small segment, touching on the vast theme of this Conference.

Since our traditional African culture is largely oral and symbolic, I will treat myself to the oral forms of communication. Our peoples did not invent the art of writing, except in ancient Egypt and Ethiopia. However, in the last two hundred years, history has introduced it to us. Nevertheless, the oral world retains deep roots in the indispensable background to African life. Subsequently, both oral and written traditions are thriving side by side, in a fascinating and symbiotic way. Therefore, the Akan (Ghana) proverb is very relevant in reminding us to “Go back, and fetch

what was left behind”. Another proverb that supports it says, “The power of the crocodile is in the water”. To a point, we can let the traditional life be the water, if you wish, while the crocodile is the modern life.

Our communal traditions, culture, wisdom, history, knowledge, morals, philosophy, religiosity, and spirituality are entrenched in oral and symbolic vehicles of communication and transmission. These are living vehicles and not historical objects lying idle in a museum of antiquities. They include Dance, Fables, Invocations, Prayers, Proverbs, Riddles, Rituals, Songs, Stories, Symbols, Tales and Artistic Works of many types like Architecture, Basketry, Bodily signs, Ceramics, Hair-dos, Leather work, Masks, Metalwork, Ornaments, Pottery, Professional equipment, Royal regalia, Skin tattoos, Stone-work, Stools, Teeth-decorations and Beautifications, Tools, and Wood-work.

Riddles

Riddles are a group exercise. So, let us start with a practical setting, for which I have a few riddles to put to this august audience. Whoever gives the first correct answer will get a Swiss chocolate. I allow two attempts.

In my Akamba tradition here in Kenya, the introduction of riddles begins with one person telling others in the group: “Here, catch a riddle!” They respond, “We (are ready to) catch it!” Among the Banyankore and Bakiga of Uganda the person would say, “Shakushaku!” (I challenge you!). The group responds, “Shambagira” to indicate that it accepts the challenge.

1. I speak when I am asked to. I always perform the correct role. I am punctual every day of my life. However, everybody hates me, yet nobody takes me to court. Who am I? Answer:

2. The name of what city in Africa sounds like the parent of an extinct bird? Answer:

3. I am pronounced as one letter but written as three. There are two of me, I am single, I am double, and I can be black, blue, brown, or green. I can be read from right to left or left to right and am still the same. What am I? Answer:

4. Who has more courage than a Maasai warrior? Answer:

If we took the Ghana proverb seriously, and went back to fetch riddles, what would be their value? Riddles constitute a major form of Oral Art. They play an important role in the tradition of conversation, self-expression, and speech. They are elegant and effective ways to communicate a lot of meaning concisely. People formulate them from their general knowledge, observation of Nature, and human behavior. Thus, riddles are informal channels of education. They test and enhance knowledge and reasoning exercises. The group engaged in exchanging riddles shares knowledge, or provokes the members to seek further knowledge about many things in Nature, like plants, animals, water, earth, as well as about human life. They have a world of their own, and an effective methodology of communicating and inspiring. Riddles set the social environment, in which everyone participates – adults, children, young people, parents, grandparents, visitors, husbands and wives, old and young, male and female. Everyone is a participant in a setting of social equality and dignity, and a (temporary) removal of barriers and tensions. Everyone is both performer and spectator. Riddles create an atmosphere of give and take, a relaxed atmosphere. They are a kind social therapy for the family and the community.

Riddles are an open forum of entertainment. There is a lot of laughter in a group sharing riddles. Everyone participates in the exchange of riddles. They enable family members to link up with each other, in an informal and entertaining behavior, which may be augmented by the presence of guests and visitors. Guests contribute new riddles to the host family, and learn other riddles from it. That way, riddles circulate freely in the community and

further out. Potentially, each person is a carrier and distributor of riddles. That augments the dignity of each person.

Riddles stimulate the mind for reflection and memory therapy. Each participant tries to think fast, so that he or she can give the first answer. At the same time, everyone is challenged to think of a riddle, to contribute a riddle that would perhaps puzzle the group and find nobody that can resolve it – the riddle setter becomes a winner.

A simple riddle can lead to profound thinking. Some, maybe many, discoveries and inventions begin with a riddle, or with trying to find an answer to a riddle in the natural world or in daily life. That may then lead to a practical or scientific solution. We know the story of Icarus in Greek mythology, whose father made him wings, which he attached to his arms with wax. However, the father warned him not to fly close to the sun. The young man did but contrary to the warning --then the wax melted, the wings detached, and he fell into the sea where he drowned. Was it a riddle about flying that father and son tried to resolve? Among other things, that story has inspired many works of Art – paintings and drawings. Other persons elsewhere in the world have attempted similar constructions, and some have finally succeeded - to the benefit of modern travelers by air.

Some riddles may provoke philosophical enquiries. Thus, take the riddle: Can you name three consecutive days of the week in English without using the words Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, or Saturday? In English, the Answer is: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow. If you were to set this riddle in an African language, you might ask for a different number of days. For example, in Kiswahili in eastern Africa, you would ask for five days: juzi {before yesterday}, jana {yesterday}, leo {today}, kesho {tomorrow}, and kesho kutwa {the day after tomorrow}. In Kiikamba my mother-tongue in Kenya, you would ask for seven days: iso i yi mbee {the day prior to the day before

yesterday, i.e. the second day before yesterday}, iso {the day before yesterday}, iyoo {yesterday}, umunthi {today}, uni {tomorrow}, auke {the day after tomorrow}, and auke u wi mbee {the following day after the day after tomorrow, i.e. the second day after tomorrow}. These answers in the two (maybe more) African languages would pose the serious question about concepts of time in African tradition.

For example, when there are no traditional calendars to depict time concepts mathematically into the distant future, how do you go on to talk about days, like 07 February 2013? In what kind of time framework, do the parents function, that come to you on Saturday and ask you to help them with fees for their daughter in secondary school, when schools open on the following Monday (kesho kutwa in Kiswahili, auke in Kiikamba)? What kind of time concepts are behind the notoriously frequent use of the word “soon” in newspapers, by public speakers, administrators, building constructors, etc., in dealing with planning, action, or answer to pending issues, etc. Or, as well in the common practice of persons borrowing money from others and promising to pay back “soon”? Often it then takes ages for that “soon” to materialize, and the parties concerned begin to avoid each other because of the debt! That may even lead to court cases. Such considerations make me still stick to my theory of African concepts of time, as being structured on a long indefinite past, an intensive and broad present, and a short mathematical future (besides the rhythm of nature like day and night, birth and death, and the seasons). Nobody else has put up another theory for us to shoot down.

While riddles are generally short, there are also long riddles that take the form of short stories and puzzles. They form the core of oral literature in many African societies. People retell them, and in retelling, they expand or modify them. The famous stories about Ananse the clever or wise spider of the Akan of Ghana, seem

originally to be set in form of riddles, which Ananse always resolves. They were told repeatedly, and strung together to become short stories. Eventually they developed into a classic of oral literature on their own right. They are both entertaining and educational.

Let’s take an abbreviated example about Nana (King) Oppong who had a pot of stories. All the animals wished to get those stories. He promised to give the pot to anyone who would bring him a live python, a live lion, and a swarm of honeybees. Many tried to solve the riddle, but failed. Ananse the Spider worked out the solution. He prepared a long stick, a big bag, and an empty glass jar. He managed to tie the python onto the stick, to trick the lion to get into the bag, and to pour water onto the beehive so that the bees came out and took shelter in the jar he had placed nearby. He took the three items to Nana Oppong the chief of forest and lord of the trees, and received the pot of stories as promised.

Riddles also serve as the voice of the seemingly voiceless and sometimes oppressed in our society. This applies especially to women, children, and servants in households, employees in offices or factories, and women in many Churches. Riddles can act as proverbs, perhaps to address sensitive issues. For example, a woman who has suffered considerably more from her husband than he has suffered from her, but cannot openly complain or talk about it, may buy and wear a kanga cloth with the Kiswahili proverb: “Matatizo nimeyazoea” (“I am used to suffering, to hardships, to difficult trials”). She is communicating with a riddle in form of a proverb. But, she cannot openly say that she has been suffering for a long time from her husband, in-laws, or whoever it is, or health problems, or problems in her workplace if employed. The riddle could be asking: What are those hardships? From where or whom does that woman suffer? The answer may be: Her husband, her in-laws, her boss at work, or an illness. But,

if it is a person, she cannot say that openly, otherwise there will be more trouble or she might be dismissed from work or get divorced.

Riddles are bricks of Community building. There are no personal or private riddles – you do not set a riddle to or for yourself alone. You need two, three, ten, or more persons together, who are generally at peace with one another. You do not set riddles in an atmosphere of tension, of fights, of quarrels, enmity, of suspicion, of disrespect, or of hatred, unless you do so in silence or hidden ways. To the contrary, riddles generate an atmosphere of friendliness, affirming the dignity of the persons sharing riddles. The social setting briefly suppresses age, religious, and gender differences. Old and young, male and female, Muslims and Christians, followers of African Religion, foreigners and indigenous persons –all are invited to join in riddle entertainment, exchange, and information. Therefore, participants laugh together, or express together sentiments of surprise, of wonder, of admiration. The group admires the person who sets or answers many riddles. The group and community are joined in a common exercise, and the cohesion of the group or family is refreshed and enhanced. No person is openly hurt or offended through riddles – generally.

Some riddles are for communication in specialized groups like “secret societies” of Western Africa, or initiation rituals, or other hidden messages that only members of the group concerned can decipher (but may not divulge). Some such riddles might be carved as symbols on wood, stone, or metal, weaved on carpets or house curtains, or tattooed on the bodies of the persons concerned. Today they may be written or drawn on paper, or in a computer image, or sent by mobile phones.

1. Shortened from Kojo, K. P. : The Parade. A Stampede of Stories

about Ananse, the Trickster Spider, Frances

Lincoln Children’s Books, London 2010, pp. 24-41.[iii]

Riddles can have profound meaning behind their apparent simplicity or superficiality. My friend Archbishop Desmond Tutu is said to have had a favorite riddle: “How do you eat an elephant?”{Answer: “One bite at a time!”}. He used to quote this riddle during the struggle against the gigantic Apartheid in South Africa. He was aware that the victory against it could not be accomplished in one stroke. It needed many bites, each at a time. Archbishop Tutu’s riddle won him the Nobel Prize for Peace. In addition, South Africa won victory against Apartheid.

Some riddles translate from words to practical actions. We take an example: “A house standing on one pillar. What is it?” The answer: “Mushroom”. School children can readily convert the idea of this riddle, into a form of sport, and set it upon themselves to compete by standing or running on one leg. The riddle becomes both a sport and an exercise in bodily balancing and concentration.

We can try it out here, if you want, and see who wins: So, let us get up and let each stand on one leg like a house standing on one pillar, when I tell you: Get set! Ready! Steady! Go! 15 seconds, 20 seconds, 30 seconds, and 40 seconds – is anyone still standing, except perhaps the Maasai males among us? The riddle encourages participants to engage in sports, compete with one another, while it also provides entertainment and pleasure. Standing on one leg has also medical benefits. Following a leg injury or operation, doctors will generally prescribe physical therapies. You may have to stand on one leg for a while and change to the other. You discover deeper meaning of the riddle that a house standing on one pillar is not just literally a mushroom but symbolically much more – it can be your very body living out the riddle in practical reality.

Riddles march with time, they become modernized and use contemporary images and events. Thus, for example, the riddle about the alarm clock. Few people in Africa had Alarm Clocks

some ten to twenty years ago. Today, alarm clocks are everywhere in mobile telephones. Another recent riddle from asks, “What things always chase each other but never overtake one another?” The answer: “The wheels of a vehicle”.

I have not seen a collection of African riddles, or a research dissertation on riddles, or heard of university courses on riddles. If anyone here has such information please, share it with the Conference. Although they are not extinct, riddles seem to have been literally left behind.

Rituals

We take up rituals as another part of the theme of this Conference. In Africa, rituals are ubiquitous and accompany the individual from before birth to long after death. They are indispensable, and many are handed down from generation to generation, while people also develop new ones or modify old rituals, as the need may arise. The community knows and practices rituals as part of its life, its identity, and its worldview.

Rituals of Peace Making

Let us take rituals of peace making, for example. Peace is probably the most prevalent concern in African life, at all levels of society: family, community, ethnic groups, nation, and international relations. The theme of peace and conflict in Africa is overflowing with information and discussions - in books, articles, conferences, mass media, etc. Family and domestic conflicts are not reported in mass media, but we know that they are prevalent in every community, often flaring up in physical fights, killings, divorces, separations, court cases, curses, and personal enmity. Community conflicts may take on the form of clan or ethnic tensions and fights, religious fears and extremism, and localized wars and armed confrontations. Internal national conflicts occur through political differences, religious misconceptions, ethnic prejudices, and groups that may want to

secede from the national unity. There are international conflicts, arising from historical and colonial boundaries, ethnic incursions, or competition over economic potentials like minerals, oil, pasture, and water.

In a variety of ways, the generations of African peoples have addressed the various conflicts, in search of peace settlement. We take three concrete examples of Peace rituals.2

2. See, for example, the works and bibliographies: Getui, Mary N. and Avanga, Hazel, eds.: Conflicts in Africa. A Women Response. The Kenya Chapter of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, Nairobi 2002;

Getui, Mary N. and Wamue, Grace, eds.: Violence Against Women. Reflections by Kenyan Women Theologians, Acton Publishers, Nairobi 1996;

Phiri, Isabel Apawo and Nadar,Sarojini, eds.: African Women, Religion, and Health. Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 2006;

Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue: Resources for Peace in Traditional Religions, Vatican City 2006;

Tarimo, Aquiline, S.J. and Manwelo, Pauline: African Peacemaking and Governance, Acton Publishers, Nairobi 2007, 2008;

Wijsen, Frans: Seeds of Conflict in a Haven of Peace. From Religious Studies to Interreligious Studies in Africa, Rodopi, Amsterdam, New York 2007;

Dialogue & Alliance, A Journal of the Universal Peace Federation. Issue Theme: Peace building in Africa, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2010, Tarrytown, New York.

The Zande of South Sudan:

In the event, of war breaking out between Zande clans, the oldest women from both clans went and placed themselves between the fighters. They reasoned with the armed men, pleading with them to lay down their arms. Failing with words to persuade them, the women would expose their nakedness, go down on their knees, and crawl towards the combatants. They would then chant:

“We are your mothers,

We do not want war.

We do not want bloodshed.

Do not fight with your brothers.

They have sent us to sue for peace.”

This act would serve as a curse, in case the fighters did not lay down their arms. Because the people had deep respect for elderly women, the fighters would normally put down their weapons and both sides would work out a peace agreement. The women are prominently at the centre of this ritual for peace. They are women who have given birth and know what it means to physically bear a baby in the stomach for nine months, endure the pain of giving birth, nourish the baby day and night, and bring it up to a mature person. They know how much the mother loves her children. The women are both physically and mystically bound to their offspring, in a deeper and stronger manner than are the men. They have the right to appeal to the fighters: “We are your mothers”. No other relationship is deeper than that. Here they appeal from a mutually binding relationship. The women mention blood: “We do not want bloodshed.” They know the power of blood, and they have shed plenty of blood: menstrual blood, the flow of their blood to the unborn baby during pregnancy, and the flood of blood at the actual birth of the baby. They know that life is bound with blood. “We do not want bloodshed” – any further

shedding of blood means death. The women shed legitimate blood, life giving blood, and life-sustaining blood.

That is sacrosanct blood. Men do not carry life-giving blood. Men do not have grains of this sacred blood. Shedding of blood or excessive bleeding may lead ultimately to death. That is the contrary to the natural shedding of blood in and from women. In this respect, women's blood points to life, blood affirms life, blood augments life, and blood sustains life. The mothers know that. They do not want their sons and husbands to be instruments of death, or to be killed, so they make their appeal, they send out their message, loud and clear, by word of mouth and by action of stripping naked and crawling on their knees: "We do not want war. / We do not want bloodshed / Do not fight with your brothers."

These naked women, crawling on their knees like babies, are real architects of peace: "Your brothers have sent us to sue for peace." This is an extremely moving ritual for peace. Anyone in his or her right mind would take notice. The communities from the fighting clans come out and witness this appeal for peace, this naked ritual for peace. In such a solemn, if tense, atmosphere the fighting men dare not fire or shoot their weapons any more. The ritual disarms them. They lay down the weapons. Peace wins a victory. Relationships are restored. The process of reconciliation starts its work. The women put on their clothes and go home, happy and at peace, and their clans have learnt a lesson. The curse will not fall on anybody in the community, and nobody will be guilty of shedding human blood. The community can now live out the important elements of life, as the Basutho proverb says, "Peace, rain, prosperity!"

The Luo and the Maasai of Kenya:

These two neighboring peoples had a peace making ritual, when fighting broke between them. This is reported as follows: elders

from both sides arranged for a peace ritual. They convened a big gathering along the border where fighting had taken place. Men, women, and children attended in full, on the agreed day. “They chopped down trees whose white sap is used as poison for arrow tips. These poison trees were formed into a fence along the common border, with the antagonists facing one another across the newly formed poison-tree fence. The weapons of warfare were placed along the fence: spears, bows and arrows, swords and shields... 6

“Then they took a black dog and laid it across the fence. The dog was cut into two and blood was allowed to flow through the fence and onto the ground, on both sides of the fence. Then the mothers with suckling babies exchanged their young back and forth across the fence, so that Maasai mothers could suckle Luo babies and Luo mothers could suckle Maasai babies. Prayers followed this, in which he respective elders beseeched God to bless the covenant of peace. The participants pronounced anathemas {curses} on anyone who ever crossed that fence to do evil. “The covenant had united the two sides in a bond of peace...”

This ritual is full of powerful symbols that are not hard to understand. Firstly: Everyone is for peace, and peace is for everyone. Therefore, they all turn up to participate in the peace ritual – elders of male and women, women, men, youth, children, and babies. They do that, in the presence of God, and will call upon God to grant and guarantee their peace.

Secondly: By agreeing to come together face to face, for a ritual dialogue of peace, the two warring peoples show willingness to abandon fighting and embrace peace. There is a willingness to lay down weapons of warfare. These are physical weapons like bows and arrows, verbal weapons of mutual enmity, and inner weapons like hatred, bitterness, and fear. Laying down all these weapons is an act of liberation that enables both sides to be reconciled, to

work for peace. This is movingly demonstrated by the mutual suckling of babies across the fence of poison trees. Babies are the living symbols of peace, and the mother suckling her baby stares most deeply at the peace on the face of her baby. Babies have no weapons of warfare, and they are fed with the milk of mothers across whatever barriers there might be. Here, the babies are the bridges for the mutual transportation and exchange of peace.

Thirdly: blood is involved. It is blood from a dog, which here takes the place of human blood. Perhaps it is a call to halt the shedding of human blood, which in this case is more precious than that of a dog –though we pity the slaughter of such an innocent animal. Its blood may also symbolize the devastation of war affecting everything around.

Fourthly: there is a deep spiritual dimension to peace. The elders offer prayers to God, as recognition, that God wills peace for both peoples at war. As well as asking God to bless this act of peace making, they invoke a curse upon those who break this seal of peace. African peoples place great weight on curses, and it is expected that the warring parties will fear the curse and honor the peace agreement.

In this Luo-Maasai ritual of peace, we see the prominence of women. They are willing to hand over their babies across the fence of enmity. That act touches the ultimate depth of the mother's love. In a symbolic way, they sacrifice their babies to the people on the other side. In mutual trust, they receive

babies from the other party. It is also the women, who suckle babies from their mutual “enemies” and thus reverse enmity into friendship, hatred into love, and fear into trust.

Gbaya People of the Cameroon and Central African Republic:

The whole traditional life of the Gbaya People of the Cameroon and Central African Republic revolves around a sacred tree known as soré, rendered by one Western writer as “An African Tree of life.” They use the soré tree for literally everything to do with their lives, including: initiation rites, in conducting mediations, in reconciling disputes between villages, to scare away sickness and witchcraft, to neutralize magic, in making new villages, for washing away broken taboos, in announcing death and in comforting the bereaved, in making marriage contracts, in blessing hunting expeditions, in trying to resolve unknown mysteries of life, in protecting property, for new canoes, etc. etc. The people have authorized persons who administer the soré for the various purposes. The tree grows readily, after cutting and sticking the branches into the ground. People plant it in their homesteads and fields, so that it is plentiful everywhere. The soré is the most valuable object or item in the life and worldview of the Gbaya people, who number over one million persons {2010}. Clan identity is strong but age groups cut across clan lines.

The Gbaya use the soré tree to strengthen, heal, and protect life in its complex dimensions. Matters of peace are supreme in daily life, in domestic life, in community life, and in relation with nature. The local traditional priest and a woman known as the "peace thrower" (okoo-pi-gangmo) employ the soré to address the situations, which call for peace. We take two examples: First is Soré for cooling weapons: "If a gun has killed a person, that gun is not used for hunting until it has been cooled by soré. The same applies to spears, knives, and machetes; no animal killed by these 7 weapons is eaten unless the weapons were cooled by soré before the hunt. Such weapons must be taken to the foot of a soré tree in the evening, at sunset. Early the next morning a limbo priest goes to the soré and strips off pieces of its bark, saying, as he strokes the weapons with the bark, 'Because you killed people, I am cooling you! May there never be such a terrible

thing like that killing again! May everything in our village be calm!'"3

The second example is about the Gbaya woman peace-thrower (okoo-pi-gangmo). She is designated for this office in the community. She performs many rituals of peace making and 'cooling' of people. Thus, for example, she "cools people who have been in prison or war. When such people return to the village, the peace-thrower meets them on the path outside the village. In her hand she carries a soré branch, which she uses to rub soré on them, saying, 'May you be cool!' After this anointing, the branch is discarded and they are once again welcome in the village."4. For building peace in the community, the woman peace-thrower is very active. So it is reported in one account, that: "The village chief keeps a kpana-zona, clay water pot (or calabash), designated for various ablutions, on the floor of his house under his bed. The leaves of several trees are kept in this ritual pot, especially soré leaves. The water in this port is never allowed to evaporate, nor must this pot ever come into the light or heat of day. A kpana-zora may be used by an okoo-pigangmo (woman who throws peace) for many ablutions including one in which she washes her vagina over the pot {calabash}. The water is then used in the preparation of a special meal offered by the chief to his elders, the purpose of which is to assure peace and well-being."5

Some comments:

1. The Gbaya seem to integrate a peace mentality culture and worldview in the totality of life. 2. The Gbaya have isolated one item, the soré tree, to symbolize peace and wellbeing of society. 3. They have developed countless rituals of using the sore tree to protect life, to heal, to reconcile persons with persons and persons with nature. 4. The people put a lot of meaning and respect into these rituals, which in turn makes the rituals very effective in bringing peace, cleansing, and coolness in individual

and community life. 5. The woman who throws peace (okoo-pi-gangmo) symbolizes and embodies not only the search for peace but also the realization of peace. The most powerful act of her peace-production is the washing of her vagina, collecting that water in the pot, and cooking a meal with it for the elders of the people to eat. I wonder if, after such a meal, there would be persons in the community that may want to break the peace.

"Go back, and fetch what is left behind!" These examples of concrete Rituals of Peace from across Africa have brought out, a number of important observations.

1. The women play an outstanding role in the rituals for peace. This comes out in action, in symbols, and in bringing about positive results.

2. Rituals speak more effectively than merely the words of political and religious oratory.

3. The rituals do not shed human blood, and if they involve blood, it is animal (or bird) blood, which substitutes for human blood.

4. Public and family rituals of peace and "cooling", are for community building, for renewal and reconciliation, and for cleansing impurities brought about by fighting and quarrels or breech of rules and

taboos.

5. Rituals form a valuable supplement to other measures of building peace and harmony in society, at family, community, national, and international levels. According to the purposes for which they are carried out, rituals that incorporate the solemnity of religious values, seem to be more effective than the dry secular rituals.

Traditional African Spirituality

Several elements comprise traditional African spirituality. These include: dance, music, prayers, rituals, songs, and symbols. They are exercises of community spirituality, but some are also personal. Prayers are at the centre of traditional African spirituality. We find them all over Africa. I want to quote half a dozen voices from traditional prayers, to put us into the feeling, the intensity, the sincerity, and openness of the spirituality they embody or transmit.

Please note the movement of the person or community in the direction of the other world, the invisible and intangible world. In the prayers, it is the spirit of the humans addressing the spiritual realities. These include uppermost God, but may include spirits of the departed (especially the living-dead) and some divinities. My investigation in this respect showed that with at least 90% of their prayers, people directly address God the Creator and Sustainer of all things. In the remaining 10%, they may mention some living-dead (or recently died ancestor so- called), some divinity, and some national (tribal) heroes. However, many of these request the departed to convey the concerns of the living to God, who then is the ultimate Recipient of the prayers. The spirits, if any are regular humans, they, are like conveyer-belts and are thought to be “closer” to God. This kind of prayer and feeling generally comes up in crises such as sickness, threats to life, and death.

3. Thomas G. Christensen, An African Tree of Life, Orbis Books

Maryknoll, New York 1990, p. 108.

4. Christensen, op. cit. pp. 106 f. et passim.

5. Christensen, op. cit. p. 19.

Therefore, we hear the voices in the prayers conveying the feelings, the hopes, the confidence, the cry, sometimes the anger, and the candid heart. The Shona of Zimbabwe and South Africa heap praises upon God and pray in the context of creation:

“Great Spirit! /

Piler-up of the rocks into towering mountains! …/

Creator who sews the heavens together like cloth…/

You have filled the land with people…/

You give rain to us people. /

We pray to you, /

Hear us, O Strong One!”6

This prayer is like a creed of the people’s faith in God, through which they speak directly with God, acknowledging His work creation, His power, and Greatness. These are common elements of traditional belief all over Africa, declaring God as the Creator, as the All Powerful, as Great over all.

From the Samburu of Kenya, we hear a personal prayer asking for harmony with God, for rain, and for long life. Note the powerful symbols from Nature.

“May God agree with us. /

Yes, my God you will save us, /

Yes, my God, you will guide us, /

And your thoughts will be with us night and day. /

Grant us to remain a long time /

Like the great wing of rain, like the long rains. /

Give us the fragrance of a purifying branch. /

Be the support of our burdens, /

And may they be always untied, /

The sheds of fertility and mothers and children. /

God be our safeguard, also where the shepherds are. /

God, sky, with stars at you sides /

And the moon in the middle of your stomach, /

Morning of my God that is rising, /

Come and hit us with your blessed wind: /

Flood us with waters. /

And God said, ‘Allright’.”7

In this prayer, God has the final word, accepting the request of the petitioner.

A hungry hunter from the Barolong in South Africa commits himself to God as he lies down to sleep, but with the trust that God will feed him. Those of us, who have experienced famine, can feel with this hunter, the pain of an empty stomach. He tells what the famine means for millions of other people in Africa. He declares openly their “spirituality of famine”.

“God of our fathers, I lie down without food, /

I lie down hungry, /

Although, others have eaten and lie down full. /

Even if it be but a polecat, or a little rock rabbit, /

Give me, and I shall be grateful! /

I cry to God, father of my ancestors.”8

A childless Banyarwanda wife cries to God, from the depths of her heart, pleading that He would grant

her a child. She articulates the cry of millions of such women in the world. She is very bold and daring,

not at all afraid of God. In utter desperation, she even challenges God to a dual, and is ready with her

sword to fight God.

“I don’t know for what Imana {God} is punishing me:

If I could meet with him, I would kill him.

Imana, why are you punishing me?

Why have you not made me like other people?

Couldn’t you even give me one little child, Yo-o-o! {Woe is me!}

I am dying in anguish!

If only I could meet you and pay you out!

Come on, let me kill you!

Let me run you through with a knife!

O Imana, you have deserted me! Yo-o-o! {Woe is me!}.”9

This is an extremely powerful prayer. Not many people would dare to challenge God like this woman. She is fully on the spiritual offensive, and confronts God directly with her need, using material objects – the knife – to threaten God, the spiritual Being, if she would. We feel very much for her and on her side, even if we may not dream of raising the sword towards God. It is a good example of what could be called “the spirituality of combat in desperation”.

6. Smith, Edwin W., ed.: African Ideas of God, Edinburgh House Press, London 1950, p. 127. This is said to be “a Rozwi hymn”.

7. Gittins, Anthony, compiler: Heart of Prayer. African, Jewish, and Biblical Prayers. Collins Liturgical

Publications, London 1985, pp. 39 f.

8. Mbiti, John S., The Prayers of African Religion, SPCK London ;Orbis Books, Maryknoll NY 1975, pp. 84 f.

9. Mbiti, op. cit. p. 86.

The Baluba in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, call upon their drums to praise God.

“I shall sing a song of praise to God: /

Strike the chords upon the drum, /

God who gives us all good things --/

Strike the chords upon the drum -- /

Wives, and wealth, and wisdom, /

Strike the chords upon the drum.”

This is a very open, indeed universal call, to all people to beat the drum to God, to sing to God, to dance to God, to praise God, to thank God, to confess God as the Giver of all good things. Everything – human persons, material things, mental abilities, body, mind, and spirit, is invited and able to sing songs of praise to God. In this prayer, it is the persons that give to God, without asking God to give to the persons. It is an intensely inclusive prayer of praise calling on behalf of the individual, the community, and the material objects to praise and thank God.

Following the death of someone, the Ovambo of Namibia would pray addressing both God and the departed. The prayer penetrates directly into the other world, and they speak face to face as if there were no boundaries between this and the next world, between them and God, between them and the departed. This is a very bold prayer, very personal, embracing the now and the hereafter, this and the next world. The prayer conveys the tender feelings of love and care, with food and water and warmth, extending from the living to the living-dead. The people appeal to

God to provide for the welfare of the departed. The prayer embraces us as well and we feel with the bereaved:

“Would it were not today! /

God, you have called too soon! /

Give him water, he has left without food;/

Light a fire, he must not perish.

And then addressing the dead person, they say:

“Prepare a place for us, /

In a little while we shall reach, /

Let us reach each other.”10

Blessings are a favorite element in the spirituality of African peoples. It is the older persons who bless the younger, or persons in a higher status who bless those on a lower status. Chiefs and rulers also give blessings to their subjects or communities, and even to the whole world. Elders, priests, ritual leaders may invoke God’s blessings upon the community, or the land, especially with regard to rain, or war, or threats to the welfare of the people. Blessings are for the provision of children, getting enough food or harvest, good fortune, health, longevity, peace, prosperity, riches, protection, security, and success.

Formal curses are the contrary to blessings, and these can come from parents, or offended members of the community, or on request from medicine-men /medicine-women, or ritual elders. People fear formal curses very much, and will endeavor to avoid them or get them revoked or cleansed, though formal rituals. Some examples of blessings include the following11:

Go nicely: may your path be swept {of danger}. /

God go with you, and may you be left {escape from} the mishaps ahead! /

May God bear you in peace like a young shoot! /

May God give you a clean face {good fortune}! /

May God give you many children!/

May God guard you! /

May God make your feet light! /

May God make your forehead big! /

May God preserve and keep you until you see your children's children!

May you meet with the Kindly-disposed One!

A Baronga (Mozambique) curse against thieves can find many candidates all over the world, when it says:

"O Heaven, Thou hast two eyes that see well both by day and by night.

They have stolen my goods and deny it.

Come and reveal them.

May they be destroyed!"

As Africans, we are very sensitive to curses and fear them. So, in our African countries, such a curse can shake many hearts, both big and small, if it would be directed at them, and I would rather that they be spared.

10. Mbiti, op. cit. p. 98.

11. Mbiti, op. cit. pp. 161 f., and (curse) p. 157

Christian Spirituality in Africa

On this theme, I will be very brief, since discussions of Spirituality have recently become very popular all over the world. In the last one hundred and fifty years, the religious landscape of Africa has changed tremendously, and the change continues to accelerate. Statistics, however inaccurate they might be, point to this quantitative change. According to the statistics assembled by Professor David B. Barrett, in the year 1900 the religious distribution of Africa's population was: African Religion 63 million (58% of the total population), Muslims 34.5 million (32%), Christians 10 million (accounting for 9.2%), and other religions 1 million (1%). In the 1984 population estimates, African Religion accounted for 12%, Muslims 41%, Christians 45%, followers of other religions (Atheism, Baha'ism, Hinduism, Judaism, Sikhism, etc.) 2%.

A possible estimate today (2012) would put Christians at around 50%, Muslims 41%, African Religion 8%, other religions 1%. Individual countries show the religious distribution more strikingly, according to David Barrett. For example, in 1900 of Kenya's population there were 5,000 Christians (0.2%), who 100 years later numbered 23,860,000 (79.3 %) in 2000. In 1900 Muslims numbered 100,000 (3.5%), and 2000 they numbered 2,187,000 (7.3%). In 1900, adherents of African Religion were 2,780,000 (95.9%); in 2000, they were 3,462,000 (11.5%). In 1900, there were 100 Jews and 1790 in 2000. In 1900, Hindus were 10,00 and in 2000, they numbered 146,000. Other religious traditions had very small numbers, but these also showed subsequent small increase.

This statistical picture from Kenya is closely paralleled (with variations) by that of other countries (except Ethiopia) in the southern two thirds of the continent (and Madagascar). Projections show continued increase except a decrease of pure adherents of African Religion.12

12. Barrett, David B., ed.: World Christian Encyclopedia, Second Edition, Volume 1: The World by Countries: Religionists, Churches, Ministries, Oxford, University Press, 2001, passim; and Internet:http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csrc/PDFs%20and %20Jpgs/marshall-africa.pdf.

The most dynamic religious change has been the Christian expansion in the southern two thirds of Africa. Statistically viewed, these have become predominantly Christian while the northern one third has remained predominantly Islamic. This rapid Christian expansion has taken place in the largely spiritual territory that African Religion had hitherto occupied since time immemorial. In reality, the encounter between the two religions has been rapidly welcoming (on the part of African Religion), and gradually tolerant (on the part of Christianity). In simple terms, African Religion has spontaneously said, “Yes” to the Christian Faith; and unofficially Christianity has hesitatingly said, “Yes” to African Religion. Many factors have contributed to this rapid process of Christianity occupying in full force the territory of African Religion. The two religious systems have intermingled and fused into each other, so that in practice they are inseparable.

While statistics tell about 50% of Africa’s population as being Christian and 8% as following African Religion, and 41% being Muslim, this is only a mathematical facade. Most of the Christians in Africa, apart from those in Egypt and Ethiopia, belong to the first to third generation of Christians. These converts do not go with a religious vacuum to embrace the Christian Faith. They take with them consciously and unconsciously the traditional religiosity of their culture and worldview. They do not eradicate it, but keep it with them openly or secretly and unconsciously.

Western Christianity has initially been responsible for the introduction of the Christian Faith to the southern two thirds of Africa. It brought with it, naturally, all its rich Christian heritage of traditions, culture, experience, values, theology, and the

institutions of Church life. The strongest feature of both Western and Eastern Christianity is its Spirituality, which developed and evolved throughout the History of the Church. It took shape and is practiced in all Church families including Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Protestants in the West, and Orthodox in the East and South. All these branches of Christianity have strong and deep forms of Spirituality, which has nourished and sustained the Churches throughout history – in spite of religious and political controversies and fights. Largely the Western Spirituality has accompanied this expansion of Christianity. In some respects we can say, that it has 'monopolized' African Christianity, apart from the Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.

I feel that it is high time we began to scrutinize how this very rich Western Spirituality is applied and functioning in the context of African life. That is not to criticize Western Spirituality as such, but to explore how it is settling down on the African religious soil. How far has it cast roots in local Christianity?

How far has African Christianity embraced Western Spirituality?

Many elements make up Western Spirituality. We look briefly at four of them in the African context: Liturgy, Hymns, Christian Art, and the Scriptures.

Over the millennia, the Christians and Churches have developed these elements to a very fine degree and beautiful forms. The Liturgy has its own component elements, according to the different Church traditions. African Christianity has received these liturgies and has endeavored to keep and promote them, as far as possible. They give spiritual support to billions of the faithful throughout the world. However, I have the impression that, at least two barriers make the liturgies into largely foreign elements for African spiritual use.

Firstly, being written in books and therefore having to be read by both the leader (priest, minister, pastor, teacher, catechist or church elder) and the congregation, this shuts out the millions of Christians that cannot read (fluently) or write, although there is a growing literacy rate on the continent.

Secondly, the liturgies were developed in response to the spiritual needs of the people in different places and at different historical times. They are in European languages, which most of the African congregations may not understand. Even where some liturgies are translated into African languages, they are wrapped up in theological language that does not always make much sense in the translation. For example, the Nicene Creed was formulated at the First Ecumenical Council in AD 325 at Nicea which is today Iznik in Turkey, a small town south-east of Istanbul, with no Christians. The Creed is theologically solid and beautiful. However, translate its phrases like: “Very God of very God, Begotten, not made, Being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made”. I do not think that an African congregation that recites this ancient Creed on Sunday has clear ideas what it is proclaiming as its Confession of Faith. The prayers in these liturgies are in beautiful language, profound in spirit, and theologically correct. They are also “frozen” in Western time and place, even though Churches revise some liturgies from time to time. Many of their prayers hardly speak to the soul of African peoples, even when translated into African languages. They hardly speak the language we have heard from traditional prayers. They overlook prayer concerns like hunger, peace, rain, food, fees, land, praise, sickness, death, security, contact with the departed, witchcraft and sorcery, cattle, children, and blessings. Here, the Akan proverb would do well to say to these liturgies: “Go back and fetch what was left behind!” from

the African scene. The convergence of African spirituality with Western spirituality could result in a dynamic African Christianity.

Liturgists please work on this area and integrate into it something from African religiosity.

The Hymns:

Christians sing Church hymns during services or at other Christian gatherings, or privately at work, or home, or when travelling. These are nearly all translations of Western and Eastern hymns, dating from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. In course of history, Churches have composed beautiful music and written some great hymns that served the taste, the need, the occasion, and the time of the Christians concerned. It was necessary as a start, for Christians in Africa to use translations of these hymns and the music that went with them. We still sing them well, with even more delight than one sees in Church services in the West. They have contributed much to local Churches by way of their 'Christian education' and piety.

For example, in Ukambani, Kenya the Kiikamba hymnbook that most of the churches use contains 523 hymns and choruses, practically all of which are translations from British (with few European) and American hymns. Even a casual glance at these translated hymns, shows how miserable their 'Theology' is, and how remote they are from the traditional spirituality of the people who sing them. Naturally, their music is also foreign, even though many people learn to sing them. In many (or all?) schools and universities in Kenya where Christian services are conducted, the hymnbooks in English (or a few local African languages) perhaps contain only hymns exclusively from the Western Churches, though there may be some modern hymnals with a token of African and ecumenical hymns.

However, we take note with joy, that increasingly, young people in many places at least in Kenya, compose their own hymns and music. They sing them sometimes during Church services and on the radio or television. Nevertheless, the indigenous hymns are

yet to be integrated into (official) Church hymnbooks. As well as responding to the spiritual needs of the youth, they are pointing to people's growing restlessness with imported hymns. With admiration, we also take note that, the Independent (Indigenous) Churches have their own hymns, music, and hymnals that answer more directly to their Spirituality. African Christianity has enough poets and musicians that can flood the continent with Christian hymns and music. Nevertheless, perhaps they need more institutional backing and encouragement from the Churches, as well as moral support from theologians.

Christian Art:

With its beautiful objects and items has made and continues to makes outstanding contribution to Spirituality. These include Crosses, Icons, book illustrations, paintings, colored Church windows, monuments, plays, films, statutes, Christmas displays, wood carvings, etc. Western and Eastern Christianities have brought these items to Africa, where there was already the rich Christian Art of Coptic and Ethiopian Churches. African and expatriate artists are active, producing Christian art, much of which attempts to capture "African" appearance, while some only copies styles of Western Art. Churches are moving increasingly into using modern media (photographs, videos, films, radios, televisions, computer generated audio and visual objects, telephones, mobiles, faxes, twitter, etc.). This is a powerful area of communication, which has great potential for Christian communication. Churches would do well to exploit and use these modern facilities.

However, I do not feel at ease about two aspects of depicting (would be) Jesus in Art whether it is Western, African, or Asian. 1. Jesus was a living and historical person, with His own unique physical appearance and features. Any drawing or painting or other depiction of Jesus as Jewish, European, African, or Asian man, is to a certain degree a distortion of what Jesus was

(physically). That is not fair at all, to turn a historical person into an imaginary figure. Many (African) viewers take such drawings or paintings at face value, like a photograph, and thus form a fake or false image of physical Jesus. My speculation: Most likely, or certainly, Jesus was of medium stature, and not a giant {cf. how Zacchaeus (also short) had to climb a fig tree to see him going by, as He was surrounded by some taller persons in the crowd; He may not have been very strong (cf. being unable to carry the cross, died 'surprisingly earlier' than the other two), was crucified between two criminals (fitting probably the small space between them), a Roman soldier easily pierced the middle part of His body on the cross), Mary could have carried his dead body away.}

I find it distasteful to display drawings, paintings, and statutes showing an imaginary and disturbing image of Jesus hanging on the cross – often naked, with blood gushing out of His side, looking very pathetic, and completely dead. What is the point of exposing openly the naked body of Jesus (or of anybody else), slashed, whipped, dead, abandoned, and displayed for public view? How can such an ugly display of anybody really appeal to the onlooker, the sinner, or the sick person?

The Cross has become the central Christian symbol. It is a beautiful object and it inspires deep Spirituality to millions of the faithful (believers). However, the Jesus who gives life in fullness, should not be drawn, painted or featured hanging dead on the Cross.

I visualize and prefer a much more acceptable and pleasant Jesus – while taking little children in His arms and blessing them, preaching on the mountain side and in the synagogues, eating fish and drinking wine, holding a theological conversation with the Samaritan woman, raising the dead son of the widow of Nain, going to the mountains to pray, teaching with parables, and being guest of friends, feeding thousands of hungry crowds, healing the sick and exorcising the unwanted spirits.

This is the image of Jesus that readily fits into and mainly appeals to (traditional) African life. The real features of Jesus (which we do not know what they looked like) cannot be reduced to the drawings and paintings of artists who leave a (supposedly) Jesus hanging on the Cross. Some of these artists may not even believe in Him. Some such paintings are undoubtedly beautiful as works of Art. No doubt, they also inspire expressions of Spirituality and piety for many persons. They support the spiritual care of the Churches. However, I find them to be theologically brutal and shameful, if not masochistic.

The life of Jesus had many and attractive scenes, and it was His life (not death) that He came to give to the world, as He said: “I am come (came), so that they may have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). As an African, I do not want to be confronted with an imaginary image of Jesus hanging on the Cross – that image does not attract me. Instead, it repels and frightens me; and furthermore, I find it to be theologically unpalatable (to me).

The Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper or the Holy Communion:

The Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper or the Holy Communion, is the central Act of Christian Spirituality. Everywhere in Africa, except in some Independent Churches, Christians celebrate the Eucharist with due respect, according to the Church traditions they have received from the West and (Orthodox) East.

Two features seem to characterize the celebration of the Eucharist in African congregations. One: St. Paul’s instruction about not receiving the Eucharist in an “unworthy manner” seems to be blown up to the point where it turns the Eucharist into a danger object. By falling into the African mentality, which is very sensitive to magic and witchcraft, this “warning”, makes the Eucharist sound “magically” dangerous. It seems, to make some people fear it the way they fear taking bewitched food and drink.

The second feature is the use of the Eucharist as an instrument of Church discipline or punishment. The institutional Churches punish some members by barring them from taking the Eucharist. They do so on the grounds that the offender has committed a particular sin, for which he or she is then punished harshly that way. That is very painful for the person concerned, it lacks pastoral care, and does not follow the way Jesus treated people.

I mention these features from observation, without carrying out any scientific investigation. To whatever degree these features may be the case, they point to the need for more and better education about the Eucharist. In particular, it should be prominently featured as the Sacrament of spiritual nourishment and sustenance. It should not be elevated as a weapon of punishment. Our Lord Jesus instituted it as His body and blood, for nourishing the followers, so that they may have life in Him. St. Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35 – ca. 107) rightly called it ‘the medicine of immortality and the remedy against death’. It is in anticipation of the eschatological meal of the Kingdom of God.

Therefore, in African Christianity, the Eucharist should be displayed and experienced as the feast of joy, the feast of life and not a threat to life. It is the natural complement to the Sacrament of Baptism, which marks the new birth in Jesus Christ and incorporation into the Church as the body of Christ. As birth, Baptism is a once-for-all event; but as nourishment, the Eucharist is a necessary and repeatable act for spiritual health. Such an understanding and experience of the Eucharist would enhance Christian Spirituality in Africa.

The Bible

The Scriptures are the central core of Christian Spirituality. The Bible is the most widely translated and used book in the world. In 2011, it was translated in full or in part, into 739 African

languages. This is a tremendous and admirable achievement, thanks to the Bible Societies at work in every African country.

The Bible exerts a great impact upon African Christianity, and the people take it very seriously. They see it as the “Word of God”, and find in it many parallels to their lives in religious, social, cultural, and even political considerations. The Bible is the most responsible tool in the spreading and sustaining of African Christianity, and in the multiplication of Independent Churches. It is crucial therefore, that these hundreds of Bible translations be scrutinized carefully, to find out how true they are to the original Hebrew and Greek texts. I allow myself to illustrate this point from a personal experience.

In 2003, the Bible Society of Kenya published a translation of the New Testament in Kiikamba, and the whole Bible in 2012. I read the New Testament and compared it with the original Greek text. I was shocked and became angry, to see that this translation is full of mistakes, from the very first word to the last sentence of the New Testament. I calculated that these amounted to over one thousand mistakes. It means that this translation distorts many parts of the New Testament, and is therefore not fit for public consumption. When I pointed this out to the Bible Society of Kenya, the leadership dismissed it and accused me of interference with the work of its chosen team of translators, for which it was paying millions of Kenya Shillings (1 U.S. Dollar equals approximately Ksh. 83.00 today).

I decided to make my own translation of the original Greek New Testament into Kiikamba. It was very hard work, but I put into it my energies, learning, scholarship, and physical facilities. I felt confident to undertake this work alone and privately, as a New Testament scholar and having sound knowledge of Kiikamba my mother tongue that is spoken by about five million persons in Kenya and (a small part of) Tanzania. As I went along, I compared my translation with some twenty other translations in nine African

and European languages. Naturally, I consulted dictionaries, commentaries, and the critical apparatus (apparatus critici) of the Greek text with its innumerable variants. The translation required a lot of concentration, sometimes my working up to fourteen hours a day, seven days a week, and sitting at the desk so long that the bottom nearly got glued to the chair. I checked the translation for correctness of language use and readability, by consulting Akamba speakers, who ranged from school children to old people including my late mother (Velesi Mbandi Mutuvi 1908-2010) who helped me most both directly and over the telephone from Switzerland. They were very enthusiastic about it. I employed current use of the language.

In addition, I used an orthography that is slightly different from the inherited missionary orthography, which has foreign accent and incorrect renderings of some words. I paid attention to Anti Semitism and gender considerations. Since most people encounter or experience the Scriptures through hearing them read aloud at Church, at home, or in market places, I addressed that need by making appropriate length and rhythm of sentences and articulation of words, that would best facilitate the reading and hearing of the Kiikamba New Testament. I often tested this by reading the translation aloud to myself, and asking people to read and listen to texts from it.

I completed (in 2005) the first draft within two years, but the actual work took 224 days (nearly eight months), allowing for family, other duties, and overseas visits. I travelled to geographical regions of the New Testament associated with the life of our Lord Jesus Christ and the work of His apostles, including Israel, Greece, Rome, and Turkey. This enabled me, at least to get the feel of the geography of the New Testament, and I took photographs, which I have inserted in my translation. After the first draft, I waited one year, and then made up to eight revisions over the subsequent years, an exercise which was also quite

demanding in its own way. I felt very happy and satisfied with this translation, the exercise of which enriched me spiritually, so that I gained new horizons of the Faith and built a closer bond with my Lord Jesus Christ.

So then, I looked for a publisher in Kenya, America, and Europe, but this became very difficult to find any. One publisher refused, because I am not a member of their Church! Another refused, because I had made a private translation, without being sponsored or commissioned to do it! Finally, this year (2012), thanks to Professor Jesse Mugambi, I could find two publishers in Nairobi, Acton Publishers jointly with the Kenya Literature Bureau. The publication will depend on finding enough funds to cover the costs, to give out some free copies, and to enable people to afford buying copies. Professor Mugambi and I had dreamt of having this Kiikamba New Testament out by the time of our Conference and launching it here.

However, that has not been possible. We look forward to its publication maybe later in 2012 or 2013. It is said that this will be the first ever translation of the Scriptures by an African theologian directly from the original languages (Greek). However, I do not intend to translate the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament).

Conclusion

I wonder about three things. One: to explore the viability of setting up in our universities, projects for: (a) Collecting African riddles (of which there may be four million) and proverbs (of which there are about ten million); and

(b) Offering university courses on them?

Two: whether it would be possible, for the AASR to constitute a team of scholars to draft two rituals of peace making, prominently featuring the role of women. One ritual would be for national use, and the other for international use. The AASR could forward these

rituals to the African Union, to implement them by recommending them to different member states.

Three: would there be a mechanism of persuading or challenging African Bible scholars to check on the Bible translations that are currently being used in African Christianity? My modest wish would be, that some such scholars might emerge, to do translations of the Scriptures from the original languages of Hebrew and Greek.

We owe it to this dynamic Christianity on our soil, to have good, exceedingly good, translations of the Scriptures in our languages. So, if it were possible, this or subsequent Conferences of the African Association for the Study of Religions, could explore this triple undertaking.

Two proverbs paradoxically challenge us to the nature and scope of that task:

“Go back, and fetch what was left behind!” and “The horizon will not disappear as you run towards it!”

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The speaker presents selections from the lecture, since it is available in print

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