Interface between African's Concept of Death and Afterlife and the Biblical Tradition and Christianity

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Preliminary Remarks

From whatever perspective one approaches it, death is a mysterious reality that is certain in human existence, though humans battle with its unpredictability and inevitability. This unpredictability and inevitability of death fascinate and frighten the broad range of humanity. There is an ingrained denial of the gruesomeness and finality of death. Despite its ambiguity, it is a phenomenon, conceived differently depending on cultural, ideological, or idiosyncratic orientation. In the medical world, death is defined as a cessation of breath and heartbeat whereas as a philosophical reality, death is seen as the cessation of the integrated functioning of the human organism. In short, death from whatever perspective is hard and challenging project. This study is an attempt to understand death and afterlife according to the African traditional world view and how it relates to the Biblical and Christian traditions.

The African Understanding of Death and Afterlife

Religion permeated all aspects of life in Africa. What was common to various tribes were their beliefs in God, in good and bad spirits, in ancestors, in magic and traditional medicine/medicine men and diviners. African worldview, hence, was a spiritual worldview where various spiritual forces coexisted with the living. African spirituality, with God being its source, was enabling people to look for spiritual meaning in every aspect of life. African worldview, which was in its essence, a religious worldview whereby physical and spiritual world are one and the same, developed as a result of reflective thinking about various elements of nature, such as water, thunder, sky. That reflection spread among people and was expressed in art.

God was at the top of African hierarchy. He was the source of vital power. His existence was unquestionable. He was all-knowing and all powerful. He was the Creator of everything that existed. He was followed by the *orisha* who could be great patriarchs or special spirits endowed by God to take care of certain aspects of life, like fertility and war. Then there were the ancestors, the living dead and the living. At the end there were animals/plants/minerals and land.

The way to communicate with the Supreme Being and the spiritual world was through ritual and sacrificial worship. It would usually consist of two elements: prayer and sacrifice. Worship could be regular, take place during the rites of passage, during planting and harvesting, during calamities and in times of personal need. It took place in natural locations such as certain caves, hills or mountains. There were no permanent structures built by people for worship. It was usually done by certain special individuals in the

community who were doing it on its behalf. At the same time, there was worship in the family, in the clan and even on a national and international level. In all these elements, we see an agreement in the way how the Africans think and the way the bible understands reality.

Another element we discussed in class about the African world view in relation to the biblical story is the fact that in Africa, community/society was more important than an individual. One was defined through the community, rules of which he was supposed to follow. The sense of community was creating good interpersonal relationships: there was mutual help and interdependence. Community was a large unit consisting of many people and spiritual beings such as God and ancestors. Therefore, any community was a religious community. The ancestors were the link between the living and God. Anything that was weakening either the horizontal or vertical relationships within the community was considered as wrong, as diminishing the vital force. All were supposed to contribute to the maintenance of the neutral ritual status, which was making all beings happy.

Basically the African concept of death is different from the Western concept in that generally Africans have an optimistic view of death probably because of their belief in the life after death. For the Africans unlike some westerners, life has a meaning, it has a purpose, it is a sacred and precious institution and hence life is an appreciateable gift from the creator. Everything that happens is supposed to be in consideration for life either in this physical existence or in the spiritual form of it. Anything that does not support life, anything that is against the principle of life is therefore dreaded, unwished and indeed punishable. Consequently, death in the African world view considered part and parcel of

being in harmony with the principle of life, nature and God. Life is hence it a part of God's providence.

Death is one of the essential rites of passage in the African mind and it is u understood as a transition which involves transformation from the physical existence into the spiritual as the departed are considered to continue their existence in the ancestral world. Death is a transition from this earthly manner of being to the spiritual realm. In Africa, the reality of life does not terminate with death; death is not considered the end of life. With death, life takes a different form existence which is in no way opposed to the previous form neither is it totally detached from it. This idea is in resonance with what Gehman (1989). He says about the life after death that: "Wherever the living dead are, their abode is modeled after the pattern of the living. The herd-boy herds the goats and sheep, the women hoe their gardens and reap the crops, the men delight in their cattle, the villagers gather for discussion in the evenings… There is no division of the dead on the basis of character. Apart from witches and outcasts, all the living-dead, good and bad, live together in the world of spirits. Their character is much the same as in this life, partaking of jealousies and offended feelings like the living. Although the ancestral spirits partake of increased power and knowledge, the state of the ancestors is nothing to be desire… A Tschwi proverb states 'One day in this world is worth a year in Srahmandazi (the underworld)" (p. 140).

There is thus according to the African understanding a great sense of life that survives death in the African world view.

The understanding of death is manifested in many narratives and mythical stories of different African societies. Many African myths describe the origin, meaning and

purpose of death. In most of them death is conceived as something that came as a result of some mistake (cf, Mbiti, 1975, p. 110). Death was not supposed to be a part of human life. The blame for it is laid on some animal, on people or on some spirits (Zahan, 1979, pp. 36-43). In general death is not considered as a natural event but tends to be seen as 'caused' by some external forces such as witches, spirits or curse (Mbiti, 1975, p. 118, Gehman, 1989, p. 54). Some other narratives associate the origin of death with God. The Yoruba people of Nigeria for instance understand death to be a creation of the creator God, "Olodumare" who made death for the purpose of recalling any person whose time on earth is fulfilled. This is consistent with the belief that God is the origin and sustainer of life as well as the one who has the right to withdraw one's breath whenever he so wishes. Death happens gradually, starting from the time of one's departure from the earth physically, to the time when the last person who knows the person physically dies off. Accordingly, death is an investable lot of every person who comes into the world and it removes people from the world after a specific time. As Kirwen clearly puts it (2008, p. 208) death is "an inevitable event in the personal history of every living person…" Though inevitable, death does not terminate human existence, but is a moment of passage to the afterlife.

According to Mbiti, "death is a process which removes a person gradually from the *sasa* period existence to the *zamani*. After the physical death, the individual continues to exist in the *sasa* period and does not immediately disappear from it. He is remembered by relatives and friends who knew him in this life and who has survived him" (1969, p. 24). For Mbiti, the *sasa* period means the time of physical existence on earth and the period after death within which the departed is remembered by relatives and friends who know

him. When the last of these survivors die off, the departed now enters the *zamani* which is complete death.

Death is a moment when the spirit, often associated with breathing, separates from the body and goes into hereafter. Some understand the hereafter as a distant place. The deceased then, equipped with food and weapons, has a journey to make before he arrives to the hereafter. For others, it is 'here', though it is invisible to human eye (Mbiti, 1969, pp.162-165). Necessarily connected with the concept of death in the African world view is therefore the notion of afterlife. There were a number of rituals to be performed surrounding death. Those rituals were to facilitate the passage of the dead person between this world and the next one. If those rituals were not performed properly, it was believed that the deceased person would become angry and punish the living. After the burial some rituals could be performed to restore order such as sharing a meal, shaving or a sexual intercourse. In the afterlife, the dead are not cut off from the living, for they may reveal themselves in dreams or appear to the living relations in different forms. Among the Luo people of Kenya for example, there is a belief that the spirits of the dead appear in form of some animals like a "snake" to give instructions, warnings or information from the ancestral world.

As such in the African mindset, after death human person continues to live on as a spirit. The network of relationships that characterizes human existence is not interrupted. Gehman (1989, p. 54) summarizes it saying that "death is a necessary door through which the living pass in order to take up the inevitable role as the living dead. Death is transition to the final destiny of all men and women". Mbiti affirms that "life goes on beyond the grave" (1975, p. 119). Birago Diop, quoted in Taylor (2001, p. 107) endorses such a

view claiming that "Those who are dead are never gone: they are in the thickening shadow… they are in the wood that groans, they are in the fire that is dying… they are in the forest, they are in the house, the dead are not dead".

One of the ways of ensuring the continual living of the departed members is through naming children after the departed member of the family. While the departed person is remembered by name, he is not really dead: he is alive, and such a person is a living dead. The dead person becomes a living dead. A living dead is still considered as a member of the family. He is in the state of personal immortality (Mbiti, 1969, p.163). It can help the family and the community in times of trouble and it can also cause trouble if certain rituals have not been performed properly or if there are some violations of community laws. It remains in such a status for about four to five generation during which he can partially be reincarnated in a new born child. After that period, when nobody among the living remembers him by naming children after him or pouring libations, it becomes a ghost of an unknown person. A spirit becomes 'it' and enters the state of collective immortality. It is one of the many spirits who lost their humanness. Such spirits are usually feared by people (Mbiti, 1975, pp. 122-126).

This notion of personal immortality in Africa explains why marriage is such an important institution in Africa. In order for the departed to remain alive, children have to be born who will bear their names; otherwise the departed will simply vanish out of human existence. That is why marriage in Africa is a duty. It is through procreation among the spirits, the ancestors create a special category on their own. They are those who have died long ago, have lived exemplary life and who fulfilled all social and religious duties as understood by their community. Because of their good life they are remembered by the

living. Ancestors are the guardians of the family traditions and life, receive requests from the living, can serve as intermediaries between God and people and can communicate with the living through various means such as dreams, possession, and divination (Gehman, 1989, pp. 140-143, Magesa, 1997, pp. 77-81). As ancestors they have some extra powers. To become an ancestor is the best one can expect after death.

Although death is inevitable and integral reality of human life in the African cultural context, it is not always a desirable thing because the life here on earth is at the center of human existence as such incomparable with any other form of existence. Indeed for Africans, life on earth was of crucial importance. Death and life after death were seen as unavoidable, but not looked forward to. This world was the best place people could live in. The greatest expectation one would have after death was to continue to participate in the life of the community. A person, who lived a good moral life, went through all rites of passage, died at the old age of natural causes, could expect to become an ancestor, to be asked to intercede on behalf of the community and to expect to be partially reincarnated through the naming process. Morally bad people such as witches, sorcerers, criminals and those who died in a 'bad way' –through suicide or a certain sickness, could not become ancestors because their evil would be perpetuated through the naming process.

When a person dies, he is slowly forgotten, with the exception of great ancestors. The length of time one is remembered depends directly on the quality of life on earth. Nkemnkia (1999, p. 119) says that "the necessary condition to remain always alive and present in the memory of the living is to lead a good and virtuous life. What each African fears most is to be forgotten by the living ones, the parents and the human race" (p. 119). According to Mbiti (1969, p. 163, 165), the moment of death is the beginning of the

process of forgetting about the dead person. In his own words, he says that "Man is ontologically destined to lose his humanness but gain his full spiritness: and there is no general evolution of devolution beyond this point. God is beyond and in African concepts there is neither hope nor possibility that the soul would attain a share in the divinity of God (p. 163)…Death is death and the beginning of a permanent ontological departure of the individual form from mankind to spirithood" (p. 165).

Biblical/Christian Understanding of Death and After Life

Biblically as it is the case in Africa too, life is a very important institution. Life is considered as a gift from God and as such very precious and sacred. Everything that happens is supposed to be in consideration for life either in this physical existence or in the spiritual form of it. In the bible, life is understood to have its sole origin in God Himself, who is its author and sustainer. The God of the bible is the creator of human life and every other forms of life that exists. He is the one who called everything into being out of His own free will and design. After God created human beings, he "breathed" into him the breath of life. After creating human beings in His image and likeness, God places him in the Garden of Eden and provided him with everything he needed to lead a worthy and dignified life. God created animals and plants and so provided a conducive environment for the human being to lead a good life. After creating and placing man in his rightful place in creation, God provided man with moral laws and regulations (the commandments) to protect and safeguard life, to safeguard good and harmonious living relationship between himself, God and other created human beings. One of these

commandments is that "You shall not kill" – meaning that human being has no authority whatsoever to terminate human life. Human life is sacred and it belongs alone to God.

The bible considers any offence against human life as highly punishable. When Cain in the book of Genesis Chapter four became jealous of his brother Abel because his sacrifice was accepted by God and that of Cain was not accepted, God was hungry with Cain for this brutal act against human life. That is why God went ahead to punish Cain for the act. When Abraham, the man who was found worthy and righteous before God wanted to offer his only Son Isaac to God, God stopped Abraham from this act and provided him with for sacrifice. This was a strong message to Abraham and others that human life is sacred and precious. On many occasions in the New Testament, Jesus upheld respect for life. Jesus promoted people's life especially the poor and the marginalized. He cleared identified with those who were denied life like the Samaritan woman, the woman caught committing adultery, (John 8: 10-11) the raising to life of Lazarus (John 11: 1-44) etc. On many occasions he said that "I came that they may have life and have it in abundance" (John 10:10).

In biblical Christian world view, death is an important moment in life of an individual and community as well. According to the biblical narrative and the Christian understanding, there is life even beyond death. In the Bible, the reality of life does not terminate with death. Death is not considered as end of life. There is a great sense of life that survives in the biblical tradition.

The Biblical - Christian view of the afterlife has as its foundation the teaching, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ whom the Christians believe to be the

messiah which literally means "the anointed one". He is taken to be the Son of God incarnate, whose teachings, suffering and death were meant to absolve mankind of its original sin and make possible salvation and eternal life.

There are two nearly universally accepted destinations, and a third that is widely (though not universally) accepted. Christians believe that those who have accepted Jesus as the Son of God, and sought salvation through Him will be destined to dwell in the Kingdom of Heaven. Heaven is considered by Christians as a place of peace and eternal communion with God. The second destination for those who are resurrected but were not believers, or who did not seek forgiveness for their sins (i.e., those who are not redeemed in God's eyes). This destination seems to have evolved from the Jewish notion of Hell.

Finally there is a third destination for the resurrected, a place called purgatory although it is not universally recognized as a place of existence. There is a fairly clear division between Protestants (who do not recognize purgatory) and Catholics (who do) in this regard Purgatory is an intermediate state between heaven and hell. It is here that, "A process of cleansing and purifying takes place by way of the pain of fire…mortal sins lead on directly to hell, venial sins are dealt with differently. They are to be expurgated in purgatory so that one may be purified enough to be ready for admission to heaven." (Obayashi, 1992, p.117).

Areas of Continuity and Discontinuity between the Bible and the African Culture:

As for convergence, there is convergence point between the biblical Christian tradition and the African traditional understanding in the death and life after death is understood.

Continuity between the Bible and the African Culture

When Christianity encountered the African culture, there were moments of "soft landings" when a number of African cultural and religious values were in agreement with the biblical Christian values. These moments are called moments of continuity and are many in the history of this encounter. There are however moments of near total disconnect of the biblical revelation with African traditional worldview, circumstances of conflict and disagreement between the two establishments when the two did not agree on fundamental principles and values. This is what we mean by continuity.

The following is a treatment of these convergence points but also the points of divergence.

African culture manifests continuity with many elements of the Hebrew culture. The Old Testament has a powerful appeal to Africans because of so many similarities in cultural and religious beliefs and practices. Many rules and regulations in the Old Testament are similar to the African Traditional emphasis on the ritual, taboos and regulations. Both African Traditional Religion and the Hebrew faith were holistic, with religion pervading all life, sacrifices and libations are central acts of worship, prophets and spirit possession are a means of revelation in both, the Hebrew rural settings with common social customs, such as polygamy, levirate marriage, bride-price, and a communal based society is similar to Africa

The main of these are for instance the fundamental belief in the Supreme Being, spirits, life after death, sacrifices, ritual defilement etc. Both in the Bible and in the African traditional world view, the belief in God who is considered as a spirit-creator and

sustainer of everything that exists is fundamental. There is no conflict between the biblical God and the God of the Africans; there is agreement, there is convergence and this makes it very easy for an African to embrace Christianity. The belief in the role of mediators and mediation, the cognizance that there is need for intermediaries, the mediums or "mediators" between God and the people, the spiritual and the physical world is common to both the biblical revelation and the African religion. The Africans who recognize the presence of ancestors will find it easy to belief in Jesus Christ as the mediator between God and humanity. The Christian concept of saints and holy men and women is in line with the African understanding of ancestors.

The concept of life as a gift from God and hence precious and sacred is common in both Christian revelation and the African traditional religion. God created human beings and everything that exists and He is the one which keeps everything in "existence" "alive". Both affirm also the immortality of life. Life in both the Bible and African culture survives death. The idea that death is not the end of the story for the Africans convergences with the Biblical narrative which affirm that death is not in no means the end but an entry into eternal life in the resurrection. Affirmation of life after death is therefore not only a Christian affirmation but also a fundamental part of the African narrative.

The notion of abundant life in Africa is in agreement with the biblical salvation-motif. However, while for the biblical tradition, salvation is considered mainly as an escape or relieve from the world entangled with suffering and pain, salvation in African mind is understood as a state of wellness and wholeness which does not necessarily mean escaping from the world which is prone to evil and suffering.

Discontinuity between the Bible and the African Culture

In Biblical tradition in contrast to African world view, salvation means to be in full communion with God and through God with others. Instead of understanding salvation as a good to be possessed, the relational aspect has to be underlined. By exchanging the heart of stone with a heart of flesh (Ez 36:26) God enables men and women to live in true and loving relationships with him and with each other.

The Bible claims that human initiatives can't reconcile us with God. Salvation is a one way movement from God towards the lost (Mt 9:9; Lk 19:10). Humanity is passive like the deceased Lazarus had to be called out of the grave (Col 2:13). Crucial in Christian soteriology is the belief that God entered history in Jesus Christ. Only by identifying himself with the fallen human race, God broke the power of sin and death. He acted in Jesus for all humankind (Rom 5:15-21). Christianity emphasizes on God's sovereign intervention for the salvation of a helpless humanity. God offers transformation as a free gift. There is no ritual that could oblige him to act on demand. Salvation is first of all reconciliation and communion with God and then, as a consequence, reconciliation with oneself and other people.

Synthesis

When one looks at the information gathered through the interviewing process, the data from literature review and the class notes, the researcher believes that there is a basic agreement about what life after death stands for in African Traditional Religion. Generalizing, one notices that all sources of data are in unison that life after death exists because life here on earth is not seen as an end of someone's existence. Life continues

beyond physical death. The ancestors play an important role in that concept because their status was the best one could hope for after death. They are also involved in the community by helping people as intercessors. Being a good person in this life by behaving according to moral values of a community was important because it ensured the status of ancestors after death.

One difference that the researcher noticed is between the description of the quality of life after death in books and the class notes and the research. The researcher believes that the interviewees had a more positive view of life after death than the other sources of information. In the view of the interviewees, life after death was more fulfilling that one could conclude from the descriptions provided by Gehman (1989, p. 140) and Mbiti (1969, p. 163) which were quoted in this work (pp. 13, 14). A further research would be necessary to clarify the issue. One of the reasons that could explain the difference might be the impact of Christian beliefs about life after death that intermingled with the traditional understanding of life after death.

This integration paper would like therefore to draw some conclusions based on the research findings, class presentations and the literature review, of course without any claim to be exhaustive.

Firstly, the notion of life after death played an important role in the overall system of beliefs of African Traditional Religion. It affirmed the inner coherence of African religious worldview whereby man was its center in the life on earth and remained also its prominent figure after death as an ancestor. Such a notion stressed also the role of the community: one's life on earth was defined through his belonging to a community. As an ancestor, one continued to be useful to the community as an intercessor, because he

remained a part of that community, even as a dead person. The communitarian aspect of African worldview continued even after death. The ancestors, within this concept of life after death, made communication between people and God possible because it was believed that ancestors were closer to God;

Secondly, it is evident from the information given that the understanding of life after death was crucial in the context of African view about the cyclic nature of life. Only life after death conceived not as the end, but rather as a passage to a new stage, with its notion of partial reincarnation through the naming process, could ensure that there was no logical contradiction with ATR, concerning this particular aspect;

Again it is very clear from what we have seen that life after death and its understanding had a lot of implications for the maintenance of social order in the community. To become an ancestor one had to be a morally upright person, following the laws of the community, and having gone through all the rites of passage. Following the laws was helping to maintain peace and stability in the community. It was advantageous to one to be a morally behaving person because of what he was to gain after his death. Hence, both, the community and individuals were benefitting from such a concept.

It is quite certain that procreation was crucial in order to become an ancestor. Hence, the notion of life after death ensured the physical as well as religious survival of the community through the religious meaning attached to bearing children.

The understanding of life after death was stressing personal responsibility in this life. Even though that responsibility was exercised within a community, one had a choice of

not exercising it. As such it was providing a kind of counterbalance to the prominent importance of community in the African worldview.

Conclusion

Death is a significant rite of passage in the African culture and religion and as such it is treated with a lot of sensitivity and respect. The Kamba as the many other African communities consideres death as ultimately part of the harmony of nature which is a departure not a complete annihilation of a person but merely a passing into another state of existence. It is a threshold of human life towards acquiring the existence in the invisible world. In the African worldview, the reality of life does not terminate with death; death is not considered the end of life but an opportunity for one to become a living dead. The concept of life after death played a crucial role in African Traditional Religion. Beliefs and practices centered on death were numerous and central in many cultures and societies of Africa.

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