

MYSTICISM AND SPIRITUALITY IN AFRICAN TRADITION

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Very little has been written on mysticism in African tradition. A cursory look at African traditions shows that the term mysticism does not seem to fit African experience and sense of divinity. That is especially true when mysticism is considered from the common practices of meditation and, or higher contemplation, study of a sacred text, an ascetic or monastic life, personal or individual journey towards esoteric spiritual experience, or union with transcendent reality. Contrary too, to African tradition are some of the exercises of mysticism often practiced to varying degrees and styles in different traditions: diet, posture, breathing, or controlled intellectual concentration. Mysticism viewed from these experiences seems an oxymoron to African tradition. These practices are antitheses to the exuberance of the African and his or her bondedness to social and this worldly life.

Mysticism as a way towards absorption into ultimate reality or a union with eternal reality, or a way towards personal liberation, enlightenment, or salvation is incongruent to African tradition which structures itself for a celebration of life in this world. In African tradition the divine is infused with everything and every aspect or dimension of life so that there is no leaving this world for eternal bliss; there is no salvation, no liberation, and no enlightenment in African tradition. African tradition is a religion of structure, a contrast to religions of salvation of the Middle East and Asia.¹

You will have noticed that up until now, I have chosen to use the word tradition for religion. Tradition is a comprehensive term that includes modes of thinking and a way of being in the world that is fused with the divine to the degree that there is no department of life that is not

sacred, so that there is no bifurcation of the world into sacred and secular. Such a dichotomous world view does not exist in African cosmology.² John Mbiti points out that no African language has a word for religion.³ Instead, other words such as worship, reverence, sacrifice, etc., are used, as I have indicated in my book *Drums of Redemption*.⁴ I prefer then to use the word tradition for religion because the term includes the philosophy, knowledge, ethical and ritual practices of African life. Tradition expresses much better the totality of African life by demonstrating that there is nothing that is not spiritual or does not have spiritual implication; nothing is secular.

The word tradition portrays much better African knowledge, sensibility, and experience of divinity and life than the term religion. I have pointed out in *Introduction to Religious Studies* that the Latin origin of the word religion, *religiō* was about rites, “a careful performance of ritual responsibilities.”⁵ From *religiō* derived the Latin word for “to tie, to fasten, or to bind” *religāre*. All these Latin words refer to performance of ritual. Ritual performance is indeed an important aspect of every tradition and more so in African tradition where life is full of rituals.⁶ Jomo Kenyatta in *Facing Mount Kenya*, shows that all stages of life are marked by rituals of liminality to heighten awareness of the initiate to the responsibilities of the new stage of life.⁷ However full of rituals as African life is, religion understood as the performance of ritual, does not describe the essence of African life in which the divine is infused through and through.

Rituals are performed among Africans as outward expressions of the transformation of inner being and its orientation towards fullness of life, but not only as a way of experiencing divinity.⁸ Ritual performance alone does not constitute the whole of African world view, or of experiencing ultimate reality and meaning. It is for this reason that I prefer to call the experience with divinity tradition and not religion.⁹ The term tradition includes cosmology or cosmogony and the whole structure of thought system and life and organisation of life in the world. Tradition includes the thought, arts, and the practices of daily living without separating things of God and things of the world, or sacred and secular. Indeed, I believe all religions should be considered, for they encompass the whole of life and simply as a system of faith practices.

African Cosmogony

The African is fiercely an earthly being, a creature whose whole being is oriented to fulfillment of life in this world. The African is not bound to heaven; the African glories in having his or abode on this earth to realise the fullness of life as the creator intended it.¹⁰ The African takes earthly life seriously as a place for the totality of his or her being: body and spirit or soul. Africans reason that if the earth were not important, divinity would not have made humans and instructed them to live on it.

The whole cosmos is for the African a workshop for realising fullness of life, or personhood, which Malawians call *umunthu*.¹¹ This Malawian term for fullness of life, *umunthu*, derives from the word *munthu*, person, whose ontology is grounded in Being itself, or divinity itself. This means *munthu* is not simply matter, flesh, and blood, but a being beyond matter who shares his or her essence with divinity, the divine Being. This does not mean that the African sees himself

or herself as divine, but that his or her being partakes of and participates in divine essence, the being of divinity. This is to say, humans are divine albeit not to the status of divinity itself.

Realising personhood is not an individual task, but the responsibility of the community. According to African thought, society has a moral and divine obligation to enable individuals to live fully on earth. I have argued elsewhere that a community can affirm an individual, thereby allowing him or her to realise fullness of life, or that a community can prevent an individual from reaching his or her potential.¹² A community can provide opportunities for self-realisation, but a community can also destroy or break an individual. Elsewhere in my writings I distinguish between communities of life and communities of death.¹³ We are our societies; it is society that humanises individuals, thus making it possible for them to realise fullness of life: *umunthu*, personhood. Hence, John Mbiti's dictum, "I am, because we are" which is in stark contrast to the Cartesian, *ego sum cogito* (I think therefore I am). No-one is self-made. Neither does one live for oneself nor die for oneself.¹⁴ One's life or death affects others. Fabian Ebbousi Boulaga says it best: "Death is the business of the living."¹⁵

Many cosmogonies in African tradition maintain that once divinity dwelt on earth, but retreated into the heavens above because of human greed, or some other unbecoming human action.¹⁶ Nevertheless, Africans do not aspire to go to heaven to be with divinity. On the contrary, Africans want to realise their divine nature right here on earth and in this life. African orientation towards life is not to seek salvation, or flight from this life and the earth; rather to develop structures of life so infused with divine presence so that there is no human act that is outside the sphere of the divine in which humans seek flight of their soul from the earth to heaven to be with divinity. Even in death, the African spirit does not go to heaven; it joins the ancestors here on earth and together they belong to realm of spirits in which divinity is the head. The African wants body and soul to achieve their highest on earth. It is important to point out that Africans emphasize the eminence of divinity. The divinity who retreated to the heavens above, the transcendent divinity, is always eminent on earth.

Mysticism

Mysticism in African tradition must be understood from the background of African cosmogony, especially its conceptual view of community, or of individuals in relation to their communities. In its original use, mysticism derives from the Greek *muo*, meaning to keep the mouth shut, or to conceal. The word was used in connection with Greek secret religious ritual in one of the Greek religions such as the cult of Demeter, based at Eleusis in ancient Greece. To join the cults, one was initiated. The word for to initiate in Greek is *myein*. An initiate in a mystery religion was a *mueo*, also referred to as *mytikos* because of the sacred oath, *mystes*, that he took to conceal or keep secret the inner dynamics of the religion, *musterion* (mysteries or secret teachings).

Over the years the concept of *mytikos* as an initiate in secret teachings of a cult came to mean many things, among which is communion with deities through intuition and conscious awareness. The idea of a deep awareness or knowledge of divinity is universal although

mysticism is always given as of Middle-eastern and eastern religions. Since the desire to know divinity in a deeper way is universal, it is only logical to assume that other societies also have the experience of intimate knowledge or experience with divinity, however they describe it and whatever they call it. Although mysticism is a particular religious experience, in the Western world it has developed as a subject of philosophical interest, especially after William James published his Gifford lectures as *Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1902. James discusses mysticism in terms of the experience of conversion to Christianity. He considered ineffability or indescribability and noetic quality as the highest marks of mysticism.¹⁷ James cites transiency, that a mystic experience does not last; it is temporary. He also points out that there may be some fixed preliminary bodily exercises or performances; the mystic experience itself becomes a passive experience, and that the mystic has no control over what is experienced and the status of the experience itself.

Without getting into the philosophical arguments about the four characteristics James mentions, and in particular the term ineffability, namely, that to say something is indescribable is already describing it, there is no doubt that James put his finger on the nature and essence of mystical experience. Mystics find their union with divinity, or their knowledge of divinity as indescribable. So the Bambara of Mali, Africa, say, “those who know do not say anything, those who know remain silent.”

Mysticism is often presented as an individual quest for union, communion with divinity, or as a search for esoteric knowledge of the divine. Mysticism is often described as a supra-sense perceptual experience, or as nothingness or emptiness of an individual in union with nature or divinity, or still, an absorption of an individual into nothingness. While mysticism is presented in theistic religions as a seeking of divinity, or a unity with universe in non-theistic religions, it is also viewed as a way to activate divinity for divine favour or grace, as in Christianity, or to activate the inner-self to experience the divine.

James, as other writers on mysticism, shows that there are various ways or methods of mysticism. So too are varieties of mystical experiences which include: (1) a vision of unity with divinity or the universal principle, (2) experience of the holy, (3) a sense of objective reality, seeing reality as it truly is, in itself (4) a much deeper understanding of one's inner life, (5) a feeling of satisfaction, joy, and peace, (6) indescribable experience. Mysticism may result from contemplation or meditation, a systematic quest in advanced knowledge and experience of ultimate reality or divinity, or spontaneous awareness or consciousness of the beyond, spirit(s) or divine beings. However experienced, mysticism leads to ultimate transformation of the individual, or the world, or both.

The description of mysticism in both theistic and non-theistic religions is about individual experience and for the benefit of the individual. It is the emphasis on the individual that one looks for in vain in writing on mysticism in African tradition. An African reads the literature on mysticism with a lot of surprise at the emphasis and priority of individual religious experience over the community, or the idea of acquiring knowledge for one's own benefit or salvation. The

idea of individual salvation was so alien to Africans at the planting of Christianity that many of them refused to join the religion on the account that they would forever be cut off from their family and ancestors. The anxiety and the fear of being cutting off is expressed very well by Jean-Mar Ela who writes:

Here we catch the agony of the old wise men who, before they pass over into the beyond, learn that their children on being converted to Christianity, will pray to the God of the white men who brutally abrogate to themselves all the veneration which the tradition has set apart for them. The renunciation of this supreme form of filial piety plunges the older inhabitants of the village into bleak prospect of total extinction: they see themselves as forever cut off from all communication with descendants¹⁸

For the African any experience, religious or not, that does not include the individual as a member of wider community is unacceptable. The African is stubbornly communitarian, socialised from early childhood to such a degree that any display of idiosyncratic behaviour is discouraged. Given the communitarian nature of African society, it is no wonder that there is a dearth of literature on mysticism in African tradition. The attributes of mysticism are not absent in African tradition, nor is the desire for union with divinity or the beyond. The reason there is limited literature on mysticism in African tradition is because of the emphasis on individual experience and benefits, letting the individual come before society.

There is mysticism and several types of mystical experiences in African tradition. Mysticism in African tradition is radically different from its counterparts in the Middle-East and in Eastern religions. In Africa, mysticism retains the communitarian character of African society. African mysticism is social, this worldly, for the purpose of affecting change of society than individual benefit, and more often than not, mysticism occurs within the context or structure of communal ritual process. In brief, mysticism in African tradition lies within the understanding of African cosmology world view.

To understand mysticism in African tradition, one begins by exploring African metaphysics concerning the nature of persons, that views person as a dualistic being, body and soul or spirit. In the body and soul unity, or matter and spirit union, matter is perceived as rising from spirit, the first principle.¹⁹ Spirit is therefore given permanence and continuity while the body is assigned temporality and nothingness. From this it follows that humans are spirit; they come from spirit and return to spirit after their bodily existence. This metaphysical view in no way diminishes the body's importance, for all experience is received through and by the body. So the body is not secondary, but co-equal with the soul. This means things of the body are matters of the soul, or that mystical experience is only possible through a sharpened sensitivity of the body to orient the mind towards inner life, the soul, to experience ultimate reality and meaning, divinity. Although mystical experience comes through the body-soul union of an individual, the individual is not isolated because often the act of sharpening sensitivity of the body takes place within the context of ritual celebration --initiation ceremony for example. The African mystic is

not a private contemplator seeking heightened individual perception of reality. No. The African mystic is an earth-bound individual with loyalties and social responsibilities to family, clan, and to larger society. A quest for individual mystical experience for self-interest is abhorred and characterised as witchcraft (*ufuti*); the individual is called a witch (*mfiti*), that is, an individual with antisocial behaviour, a good-for-nothing person. In sum, in African tradition, mystical experience is a social phenomenon that gives the mystic social responsibilities.

There are three main manifestations and ways to mysticism in Africa: through initiation, the priesthood, and ecstasy. Contrary to the general understanding of mysticism in other religions, in African tradition mysticism is often, although not always, a public event. The mystic gains deeper insight or knowledge of divinity, or ultimate reality, not in private, but in the presence of people and with their participation in raising the mystic to the level of self-interception and cognition, leading to awareness or absorption into ultimate reality and meaning.

Initiation and mysticism

The most fundamental pedagogical method and preservation of knowledge in African tradition is initiation. It is through initiation that the time-honored principles of life and knowledge are passed on from one generation to another. Without initiation one is not integrated into the fabric of the knowledge and mysteries of one's people, hence the fabric of life itself. Initiation ceremonies are social-religious institutions for ethics and morals, individual and social roles and responsibilities, culture, beliefs, and knowledge of the mysteries beyond life. As we say in Malawi, an uninitiated uses the back of the hand instead of the palm for eating. The implication being that the uninitiated lack knowledge and understanding of how things work in the world, or that uninitiated are too naive and stupid as not to realise the difference between what is proper, namely, using the palm, and what is wrong, i.e. using the back of one's hand. Thus, the Alowe of Malawi call the an uninitiated *alukhu*, the uncultured, who do not know any better. To be initiated then is to be immersed and integrated into the culture of one's people.

Throughout African a variety of initiation ceremonies prevail, with some of them leading to basic knowledge about life while others are ways towards esoteric knowledge and mystical experience. Ritual ceremonies lead to varieties of cognition and knowledge, some controlled mode of knowing in which the initiate is fully aware of his or her surrounding, while in other rituals the initiate receives knowledge through ecstasy having been caught in the spirit, or in union with "the beyond," or ancestors. Initiation celebrations are important because it is in and through such ceremonies that initiates get in touch with their inner self, through the pain of mortification, or other ritual practices that make one self-introspect and get in touch with one's inner self.

Africans believe that it is through valorization of the inner self that individuals raise themselves beyond their natural limits to the level of the spirits or divinities. In other words, it is only after transcending self that individuals can be in touch with the ultimate, or that through transcending the limits of physical being in mortification and pain one gets in touch with one's soul which

transports him or her beyond the material world into the realm of the spirits. It is by going beyond oneself that one discovers the true self, spiritual being that he or she is. This transcendence does not leave one unchanged. Of course not, for one is transformed by the new knowledge or revelation so received or discovered. The transformation so gained changes the personality of the initiate. It is for this reason that the novice is no longer called by the old name, for he or she is a new being, a new person through a physical, personality, and spiritual metamorphosis experienced in public before one's own people. It an insult and a contempt of the highest degree to call a newly initiated by his or her old name.

A novice never answers when called by the old name because he or she is not the old person. Not only does an initiate not respond to the old name, but he or she no longer associates with the uninitiated, never joins them in their activities, never takes pleasure in things of old, for as the elders instruct, "dead people do not smile," signifying death of the self to the old life. Initiation is about death and resurrection to new life.

There are simple and complex initiation ceremonies in Africa, but whatever the case, initiation rituals throughout life and to death engage initiates on a journey of self-discovery, a never-ending dialogue between one's physical being and the inner self. It is noteworthy that the dialogue with the inner self and the search for the invisible, or dialogue with divinity, occupy Africans throughout life, or through the various stages of life and the accompanying initiation rituals: entering adulthood, parenthood, leadership, or eldership.²⁰ Here, we see that though an earth-bound being, the African is spiritually oriented, always in dialogue with the self and divinity. Initiation is a progressive course of instruction and dialogue with one's physical and spiritual self and or the spiritual world, or divinity. So Mbiti describes the African as:

notoriously religious . . . Religion permeates of departments of life so full that it is not easy or always possible to isolate it . . . wherever the African is, there is religion. He carries it to the field where he is sowing, or harvesting a new crop or to attend a funeral ceremony. And if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament. Although many African languages do not have a word for religion as such, it nevertheless accompanies the individual long before his birth and long after his physical death.²¹

Most of the initiation ceremonies are short--a week or a month--but the rituals leading to the almost perpetual life of a "the wise one," as the mystic is called in Africa, take much longer. Examples of such initiations abound in West Africa. For instance, the Fon of Benin and Yoruba of Nigeria have "convents" for training initiates towards higher knowledge (mysticism). The Bambara and Dogon in Mali also have an elaborate initiation ritual lasting as long as seven years to become wise people. In all the long training initiation rituals, the neophytes practice the imitation of death and resurrection: "they shave their heads (and hair is at the end gathered and burned), take part in sacrifices, drink from earthen pots, eat communally from one dish according to their sex, using the left hand (which belongs to the divinity concerned), and seriously refrain

from sexual relations.”²² Among the Bambara, the initiate in the *Kore* ritual may leave wife and family during the three-year period of initiation towards a mystic. The initiates:

...sleep on sacred wood with a bed of green leaves between them and the ground... Their meals are regularly brought to them by their families, but are handed over to their senior initiates, who act as intermediaries. The seclusion signifies the existence of a corpse in the tomb and also the wait of the fetus in the womb... In some, the spiritual gestation of the neophytes “in the womb” corresponds to a transformation: they withdraw from humanity by acquiring a kind of divine nature. Endowed with such an ‘assent’ they are ‘reborn,’ or resuscitated at the end of their spiritual seclusion... for the Bambara, the acquisition of spiritual knowledge is fundamentally linked to the complex notion of the acquisition of personality.²³

Whether a mystic goes through a short or long initiation ritual, the objective is the same, namely, to gain a deeper knowledge and understanding for the benefit of their people. The mystic’s desire is sharpen his or her sensibility of divinity or the spiritual realm to articulate them to the people, to instruct people the ways of divinity so that they too can be in union with divinity. This is why a mystic is called a “wise person” because he or she knows the right and proper things in relation to divinity and ancestors, or he or she knows the things that will mediate community. The mystic’s initiation is to attune him or her to divine things and to become a messenger of divinity.

Priests and Mysticism

There are different types of priests in Africa with various ways of preparation for their office. There are priest kings who serve as both political and religious leaders of their people. Those are most common in West Africa although they are also found elsewhere in Africa such as the priestly king of the Baganda in Uganda. There are national priests such as among the Lozi in Zambia who make offerings in times of national crisis. Shrine or cultic priests are responsible for the services of a particular shrine. There are clan priests such as the master of the fishing spear among the Dinka in Sudan. Among some Africans such as the Lugbara in Uganda²⁴ and Igbo in Nigeria they have lineage priests who pray for their lineage and offer a sacrifice every morning.²⁵ There are village priests who are also political leaders of their village such as the Rukuba in Nigeria. Village priests intercede for their people before divinity and lead their people in libations and sacrifices in various seasons and for different reasons. Elsewhere in Africa there are different types of family priests. While most priestly offices are inherited or are by default because of one’s place in society, such as becoming an elder, there are priests who are called to the office by divinity, like those among the Ewe of Ghana who after their calling are trained, initiated, cleansed and ordained.

Whatever the nature of their call or office, all priests are initiated, and the initiation training of priests is very lengthy since they serve their people in the capacity of a religious functionary whose role is to preside over acts of divination (worship) and ritual ceremonies, libations,

offerings, and sacrifices, act as intermediaries between the living and the living dead (the dead still remembered by name up to the fifth generation), ancestors or the spiritual realm. The responsibilities of a priest include interceding on behalf of the people before divinity. Priests are not mediums, but intercessors, pleading with the ancestors and divinity on behalf of their people. It is in their roles as intermediaries and intercessors that priest need to be wise people, individuals with the “all seeing eye” as they say in Ethiopia in describing people with deep wisdom and heightened spiritual awareness.

Priests are well-trained and well-informed in the traditions of their people, of the mysteries known to their people. While drawing from the wisdom and spiritual powers of the past, priests engage in spiritual journeys to better themselves in the mysteries of the present life and of the spiritual world. It is through introspection and dialogue with themselves and with the spiritual world that priests become wise people or what we are calling here mystics. Priests are the moral, ethical, but also social guardians, on behalf of the ancestors the real “guardians of the land”. By the example of their own lives, priests keep the purity of the land. In times of crisis, drought, or any occasions when they may need to intercede on behalf of their people, priests will refrain from sexual acts, drinking alcoholic beverages, or engaging in any physical pleasures and may go into seclusion, pour a libation, or offer a sacrifice to sharpen their spiritual sensibilities in preparation for their engagement the spiritual realm or with divinity for their people.

Medium Mystics

Mediums are in places where traditional culture is maintained. Mediums are like priests, except that they do not preside over ritual celebrations. In some shrines mediums work side by side with priests because of their special training and skill to communicate with spiritual world and to relay messages to the living. The ability of mediums to communicate with the beyond allows them to take several roles in society: as revealers of secrets, fortune tellers, counsellors, advisors, even judges. Mediums play an important role in the life of the people so much so that individuals will travel distances to consult a medium at a particular shrine or in his or her home. People consult mediums for various reasons: the sick consult for healing; business people for good business transactions, etc. In the 1950s Zimbabwe nationalist leaders consulted mediums at Mwari shrines for guidance in the struggle against colonial rule.²⁶ The word *mwari* is a Shona word which means “the one who is.”

Men and women can become mediums as among the Tonga of Zambia. Among some ethnic groups, medium is a women’s position, as among the Ga in Ghana among whom mediumship is a prestigious position.²⁷ Some Western scholars have concluded that women become mediums as an outlet, a “safety-valve” for their oppression under a patriarchal system; that under a trance they can say things they would not in a normal state. We might characterise gender related mediumship as “the drug made me do it” kind of idea. The question is: How does the gender-spirit possession concept--the “the spirit made me say it” --idea explain mediumship among women in matrilineal societies? Do males who fall into a trance in a matrilineal society do so because of oppression under that system?

There are different standards for acceptance of mediums based on the nature of their calling, the believability of their message, and, or training. Mystics receive their calling through a variety of ways: through dreams, a trance after having suffered illness or during illness, during a ritual ceremony. Mediums may have training, but that is after they have demonstrated their calling. Mediums in Zimbabwe must pass accreditation tests set by senior mediums. In some countries, such as Zimbabwe, there is a nation-wide medium system.²⁸ To receive a message only a few times is not enough to be certified as a medium. Mediums must receive messages for at least two years. In some countries mediums are trained for two to three years following strict physical and spiritual discipline. A life of strict bodily and spiritual discipline goes on throughout the medium's life, often leading them to refrain from food, alcoholic beverages, sexual relations, watching their speech to maintain open the channels of communication with the spiritual world.

Seers and Mysticism

There are two types mediums: (1) those who receive messages from beyond without falling into trance and sometimes in private; (2) those individuals who activate a union with the ultimate by themselves, or by community ceremonial acts. The two divisions made here are not based on rules of classification mediumship, rather on observation of the mystic phenomenon in Africa. Just as the wind blows wherever it will, so too there are no rules or methods for predicting through whom divinity or spirits will speak to the people.

The mediums who receive messages from above without activating the spiritual realm or entities, the ancestors or divinity itself are sometimes called prophets. This does not mean that the messages they deliver are about the future, near or distant, but often about present circumstances or historical realities. They provide counsel and guidance in addressing present realities as in the case of Zimbabwe mediums mentioned above who were consulted for counsel on political matters. More often the "prophets" speak against the moral acts or character of an individual or a community and call on them to change their ways, because they are causing ancestors to be unhappy or sad. Sometimes such mediums deliver messages on family matters or marriage relationships. For example, my wife's paternal aunt whom I knew very well was a medium who delivered messages on a range of issues to individual, family, or clan matters. She would be having a normal conversation with family members, then all of sudden, she would stop and gaze, transfixed and silent for a few minutes and she would announce that she had received a message, or a "prophecy" about something or someone. Everyone believed her messages as true for she never said anything that was wrong or contrary. Her prophecies, which were about real life and the immediate future, all came to pass. It was not always that she received her revelations, but when they came, they were to the point.

Mediums may have access to the spiritual realm for healing powers such as my wife's maternal aunt. Unlike her paternal aunt, the maternal aunt had continuous contact with the beyond for abilities for therapeutic touch. In moments of healing, she would let her feet touch the feet of the sick and then she would contact the spiritual realm for diagnosis and healing. The sick did not

have to tell her their ailment. She would find out herself the sickness by being in touch with the spiritual realm, and she touch the diseased area for therapeutic touch, after which she would pray.

Such mediums are all around Africa. A long-time friend, fellow Malawian philosopher and theologian, and a former colleague, Rev. Dr. Augustine Musopole, in a response to an essay that I sent him for his comments, wrote me about a man he would describe as a prophet. The essay was on the development of the Hebrew prophetic tradition. He wrote me about a man that he and his wife knew who would interrupt a conversation to communicate with the beyond. Often the man received his messages while having a normal conversation with others. Then, suddenly, he would engage in a conversation with the beyond about the message he was instructed to deliver, how, and when. My friend wrote me that the man would say such things, "I understand Lord . . . I know . . . I will say it."²⁹

Ecstasy

A lot has been written about ecstasy in general and in African tradition in particular, often under the rubric of spirit possession. Ecstasy is a psycho-physical condition that accompanies a mystic union with ultimate reality or divinity itself. In moments of ecstasy the individual experiences a union with divinity or the ultimate, resulting in a heightened consciousness and apprehension of the ultimate. In the West, ecstasy has been a topic of great interest--from the fifth century great north African theologian, Augustine of Hippo, through Thomas Aquinas. Ecstasy is a trance which causes the body to go through visible physical changes: lower breathing, rigidity of the limbs and sometimes total forgetfulness of self, temporary loss of sensation, energy and even memory loss so that some mystics are unable to recall all the details of their experience. It is common to observe that during ecstasy the mystic does not respond to external stimuli; all the five senses shut down as the mind is transfixed on the object of its apprehension, namely divinity or agency of the spiritual realm. In that moment of being transfixed, the mind gains noetic experience, arriving at deeper knowledge and awareness. However, the knowledge so gained leaves the percipient immediately after the ecstatic experience. This why the mystic is unable to describe mystic experience in its fullness. The feeling of the mystic experience, however, remains, and it may be described variously as fulfillment, joy, peace, union. The clarity of the message so received also remains. Ecstasy may follow contemplation, meditation, an intense moment of deep reflection, or--as in African tradition--ecstasy may be activated by a ritual ceremony, initiation ritual, for instance, but also by singing, clapping, dancing, and the tom-tom beat of the drum. Mbiti writes about an ecstatic experience that he observed that illustrates the nature of mystic experience discussed here.

Ecstasy is a deep spiritual experience, a mystic union that comes without seeking it, but that is sometimes activated by the spiritual environment, i.e. a ritual ceremony. Ecstatic experience has been described as the "frenzy" of spirit possession, on the level of medical-psychological disorder for which treatment is to be sought. In Africa, however, ecstatic experiences enable individuals to access divinity, or for ancestors or divinity to relay messages to the people.

Ecstasy, as all medium experience, is a passive and one-way communication from beyond to the living.

Other Mediums

There are other cases of mediumship that do not belong to the category mysticism described in this essay up to this point. The mediums in the category that is excluded here are not usually identified as mystics even though they arrive at what they do through a trance or some esoteric knowledge gained through years of training and practice. Those mediums are discussed below as related cases, although not contrary cases to mysticism, even though they are contrary in their method and practice. These related cases should help the reader get clarity of what is distinguished as mysticism, or what is included or left out in mystic experience in African tradition. The difference between the categories is not a matter of semantics, but a real genuine difference in classification or categorization of mysticism.

Spirit Possession

Often the discussion on mediumship in Africa centre on spirit possession. While the cases presented above do indeed indicate the presence of supernatural power, or spirit power, the individuals involved are not “troubled” or engaged in repeated bizarre behaviour, or a disorder in need of medicinal help or therapy. Such things happen only in spirit possession cases in which the incipient of such possession is calmed down by a group dance therapy with the dancers form a ring around the possessed individual who lying or sitting at the centre of the ring. The possessed individual may go into a “frenzy” as the spirit is expelled or exorcized by a diviner. Mbiti gives an account of spirit possession medium. He writes about the experience in much detail.

I recently witnessed and tape-recorded one such case twenty kilometres from Kampala [in Uganda]. A young man was dressed in a backcloth, put in a ring made of a creeping plant and he held another plant half a metre long in his hands. He sat down in a diviner’s room where a crowd of twenty-five to thirty people gathered. One of the men started to sing a highly rhythmical song, and the rest of the crowd joined with the singing, clapping and rattling small gourds. The medium to be sat quietly on the floor without even turning his head. The singing and rattling went on for about thirteen minutes when suddenly the young man’s hands began to tremble. Three or four minutes later he started talking in an entirely different language. The singing stopped and the diviner could then talk with the medium for about fifteen minutes in the middle of which the medium (or spirit in him) requested another song to be sung. At the end, the medium jumped about like a frog, banged hard his head on the floor and with his own fists his chest twice or thrice. Then he was “normal” once more. When I “cross-examined” him afterwards, he assured us that he was not aware of what he had said, or did during the time he was acting as a medium. My colleagues and I got the

impression that he was in his right mind and that he told us the truth about what he felt while he was in that trance.³⁰

Cases of possession such as this example are not included on the list of “the wise” or mystics discussed in this essay, because while the possessed may utter something insightful, the torment they go through causes people to think of ways to appease the troubled spirit(s) rather than to take the messages seriously. People do not consult such mediums for they are simply tormented people.

Diviners

There are types of mediums in African tradition known as diviners who function more within the realm of health and healing. These mediums, as their title suggests, are seers who function by use of the tools of their trade: “divination stones, gourds, numbers, palm reading, ‘forming’ or seeing images in pots of water, interpreting animal marks, listening to and interpreting sounds, and using seances by means of which the diviner (or another medium) get in touch with the spirit world.”³¹ While some diviners inherit or learn the trade from their parents, grandparents or some close relative such as an aunt or an uncle, most diviners have to go away to a renowned diviner to learn the trade. The training period varies, but often it is more than a year up to three or more years because they learn the intricacies of divination, and they also learn disease diagnosis and treatment, and memorize all the types of medicinal plants, roots, barks, or leaves, etc. Diviner training is wide and more involving. The point to underscore here is that diviners are people who belong to a trade, and more often than not, they are paid for their services.

Diviners have been described by people of other traditions and cultures as cheats, and diviners have been grouped together with robbers, magicians, sorcerers, and other evil people. While a diviner may mis-diagnose a case or so, prescribe or offer wrong treatment, generally however, most well-trained diviners mean well and do well. I have a brother (a cousin in Western view) who is a diviner. I have observed him perform his services many times. He arrives at a diagnosis without being told, or shall we say, he contacts the spiritual world for insight about why the client(s) have come. He has a good reputation. People come far and wide to seek his services. It is wrong to identify diviners such as my brother as cheats or devils because of the secrets of their trade.

Conclusion

Mysticism is a very complex subject that has not been given much attention except in traditions that dominate the world. Mysticism has often been presented as a phenomenon of traditions with practices of self-denial and sacrifice. As this essay demonstrates, perhaps there is a need for further inquiry into the nature and function of mysticism in order to broaden the scope and understanding of mysticism. Further inquiry in the nature of mysticism needs to be given to cultures that celebrate this life and are “this-world” oriented traditions. These are the cultures

that I have described as traditions of structure as opposed to traditions of salvation. Mysticism need not be considered an experience that enriches an individual's journey through life, or faith, but also as an experience for enhancing the common good, bringing blessings to the people.

Mystic experience in Africa is informed by the concept of life, which in African thought never ends. This is the message that all rituals processes deliver, namely, that where is birth, there is resurrection. The initiation ceremony itself is a drama in birth, death, and resurrection; a going away in order to return to the people in a new life. As a process of birth and the renewal of life, ritual process brings joy to the whole community assuring it continuity of its values and norms that mediate the community. So too, is the going and returning of a mystic who experiences a rapture that gives him or her a noetic experience, to bring back to the people knowledge and messages from beyond. This essay demonstrates that in Africa, mysticism includes a wide range of individuals representing all the main and necessary functions of community life and organization: kings, chiefs, and local leaders on one hand, to religious functionaries on the other: priests, seers and prophets, and ecstatic mediums on the other.

A mystic or a reader in mysticism will be uncomfortable, to say the least, with the description of mysticism presented in this paper. Mystics of other traditions will be unhappy because some important attributes of mysticism are missing. Such attributes as love, affection, faith, etc., are not part of the expressions or language in African tradition. The sentimental and emotional expressions are outside African thought and experience of, or with divinity or the spiritual realm. Love or affection of divinity is a given, an axiomatic truth that is neither debated nor raised at all because of the spiritual nature of the African cosmos. Faith is simply not connected to God and neither is there an equivalent for it in most African language. Where the word faith exists, its usage in relation to divinity is because of the influence of foreign religions in Africa. At the core, however, the absence of these important words in other traditions in no way signals the absence of mysticism or mystical experience in African tradition.

Ecstatic mediumship, as the other forms of mystic experiences explored in this essay, is a cultural mystical experience in which the mystic is simply a medium of messages from beyond. There are no universal ways of being a mystic. Divinity or ultimate reality speaks, or is revealed in ways that individuals can apprehend. Theologically, it would be inconsistent for divinity to communicate in unknown ways and unfamiliar language. All divine or supernatural messages are culture-specific and in a language familiar to the people. This is why it is important to familiarize oneself with the cosmology or world view of the people in order to understand the nature of their mysticism.

NOTES

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 2. Harvey J. Sindima, "Elements of Achewa Spirituality," *Ultimate Reality and Meaning: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Philosophy of Understanding* (1990),
 3. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd. ed. (London: Heinemann, 1989).
 4. Harvey J. Sindima, *Drums of Redemption: An Introduction to African Christianity* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994).
 5. Sindima, *Introduction to Religious Studies*, 22.
 6. Evan M. Zuesse, *Ritual Cosmos: The Sanctification of Life in African Religion* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1985).
 7. Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1965.
 8. Throughout the paper I will use the word divinity to refer to the Divine Being and the common English word God, because of its narrow and exclusivist Judeo-Christian theological understanding and prejudice over the notion of the divine in other religions.
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 22. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 170.
 23. Dominique Zahan, *The Religion, Spirituality, and Thought of Traditional Africa*. Kate Ezra and Lawrence M. Martin, trans. (Chicago, MI : Chicago University Press), 63–64.
 24. John Middleton, *Lugbara Religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 13.
 25. Christopher Ejuzi, *Ofo: Igbo Ritual Symbol* (Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1986), 61.
 26. Guerillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1985), 237.
 27. Marion Kilson, “Ambivalence and Power: Mediums in Ga Traditional Religion,” *Journal of African Religion* (1971); J. M. Fiebig, *Religion and Medicine of the Ga People* (1931; reprinted 1961), 100–109.
 28. M. C. F. Bourdillon, *The Shona Peoples* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1976), 243.
 29. Augustine Musopole to Harvey Sindima, personal communication, 2009.
 30. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 167–168.
 31. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 173.