

FORMATIONS AND MOVEMENTS OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY IN URBAN AFRICAN CONTEXTS

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Abstract

This paper attempts to define African spirituality as being imbedded in cultural-contextual settings, and uses three keywords to do so: ubuntu (community), ubunye (holism) and amandla (vitality). Some African art works are introduced as aesthetic embodiments of these concepts. A short account is given of the three keywords, coupled with an indication of certain indigenous connections with Christian spirituality. There is also a discussion of some movements that have taken place in African Christian spirituality as a consequence of urbanization.

1. AFRICAN (CHRISTIAN) SPIRITUALITY?

It is impossible to even begin to talk about African *Christian* spirituality without trying to say something about *African* spirituality. The dynamic interaction between *African* and *Christian* in this regard indeed provides much food for thought. But it is no easy task to try and define *African spirituality* as such. As a matter of fact, it is near impossible. It is certainly impossible to do justice to the richness of this concept within the limitations of this paper.² Actually, one cannot speak of African culture and spirituality in the singular. Africa is a vast continent, incorporating a wide variety of cultures and ethnic groups. Northern Africa differs totally from Southern Africa. The term “Africa” does not denote one homogenous group.

In the previous paragraph I have already made a link between culture and spirituality, as the two cannot be separated. Spirituality is always culturally formed and informed. The formation of spirituality is always cultural-contextual. Culture could, of course, be defined in many ways. According to Raiter and Wilson, it is “*those ideas, beliefs, feelings, values, and institutions, which are learned, and by which a group of people order their lives and interpret their experiences, and which give them an identity distinct*

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² I am in the curious position of being a white, Afrikaans-speaking (South) African. I am part of Africa and all that is African. But my religious and theological tradition is also Dutch Reformed, still operating with many Western and specifically European presuppositions. Therefore my attempt to describe “African spirituality” must inevitably be biased and could even be construed as arrogant. This endeavour should, however, not be seen as judgmental, originating from an “outsider”, but as an effort to learn once again from the wisdom and richness of the continent that I am part of.

from other groups” (2005:122). Other definitions of culture: “*Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society*” (Sarpong 2002:40). Webb simply compares culture to the air that we breathe or water that surrounds a fish: “*We live and move about in the culture with which we are closely and invisibly enmeshed*” (2001:21).

The word *culture* comes from the Latin *colo*, which means to nurse (take care of), or to transform the earth through a plough (an instrument) in order to live. Culture therefore refers to the human achievements and endeavours which try to “cultivate” creation and the cosmos into a human space for living through symbols, metaphors, language, instruments (*techné*). Culture is the human attempt to “re-create” creation through spiritual-religious articulation (transcendence); ethically-driven actions (norms, values, taboos); aesthetic imagination (art); technical intervention (technology); dialogical verbalisation (language and speech); and social/political/judicial restructuring into a humane environment. Religion can therefore also not be understood apart from its situation within culture (cf. Louw 2008: 153).

Religion (with spirituality an important component), being imbedded in culture, is as difficult to define as culture. Religion is co-determined by the perspective of the religious person and his or her situation within (a specific) culture. Religion could be defined holistically as the acts, rituals and ideas of individuals and societies in which the relationship between the immanent reality and the transcendent reality (or aspects of it) becomes visible through word, image and acts (cf. Hacking 2005: 6). Religion also harbours within itself the dimensions of spirituality and (the search for) meaning. The term “religion” is unfortunately often associated with rigid structures within which religious experiences and rituals are set. Perhaps the term “spirituality” offers a wider lens to evaluate certain (religious) phenomena taking place in culture. Spirituality can also be strongly linked to the search for meaning and the creation of “spaces” within which meaning can be nurtured (cf. Cilliers 2007: 1-19).

The concept of *spirituality* is of course also complex. For the purposes of this contribution I understand spirituality to be the “spirit” (life force, energy, essence) of a specific culture, expressing the most basic values of that culture. “Spirituality means that

which influences a person to live in a mode that is truly fulfilling” (Skhakhane 1995: 106). Culture captivates and forms spirituality, for better or worse.³

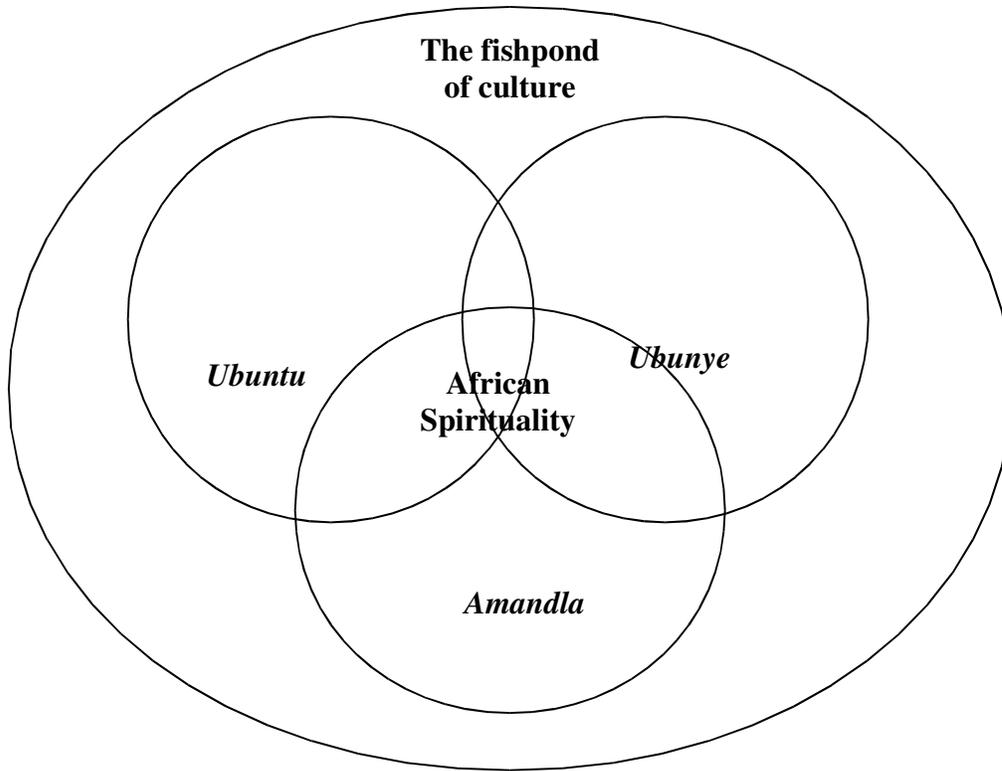
Perhaps the link between culture, religion and spirituality lies exactly in the *common search for meaning*. The meaning of religion has been traced back to the linguistic roots of *ligature*, which basically means a *tying together of significances*. In culture, religion and spirituality we find various attempts to do exactly this (cf. Louw 2008: 49).

If culture is indeed the air that we breathe and like the water that surrounds the fish, it encompasses spirituality, breathing life into it, and continuously nurturing this life. How could this “life”, this “essence” of African spirituality, be described? In this paper I am limiting myself to only three components, knowing full well that this delimitation is also a reduction. The three components are distinguished, but can in fact not be separated – they breathe the same cultural air and share the same fishpond. I call these three components (or fish swimming in the pond!): *ubuntu* (community), *ubunye* (holism) and *amandla* (vitality). I will give a short *introduction* to these terms, coupled with some *indigenous connections with Christian spirituality*, as well as some movements that have taken place in African Christian spirituality through *urbanization*.⁴ Perhaps the basic structure of what I am proposing here could be illustrated graphically as follows:

³ Could one say that from time to time spirituality also needs to transform culture? Would, for instance, the “culture” of apartheid society have changed if it had not been for the contributions of truly “spiritual” people?

⁴ Millions of black South Africans live in so-called “townships”. Townships could rightly be described as in-between places, inhabited by people coming from rural areas and with rural customs, who are *en route* to the city. They no longer belong to the past, but they have not yet arrived at the promised land of the future. The reality of this intermediate state is, furthermore, that it has been forced upon the majority of people living in these townships, firstly by the policies of apartheid, and secondly after the dawn of democracy (1994), when even more people flocked to the townships in search of employment. It could therefore rightly be called a “coerced in-betweenness”, which could also be described as “marginalization” or “being coerced to remain on the edge” (cf. Lee 2001: 98).

A township is not the same as a “normal” *urban* area. It is even further removed from being a *city*, although some of them, like Soweto (south west of Johannesburg), are massive in terms of population and dimensions. Soweto is however also not a *megapolis*, with skyscrapers, tarred roads and modern infrastructure. It is simply a massive township, where contrasts have been condensed to form a unique blend of “urbanization”.



2. UBUNTU

Briefly put, *Ubuntu* could be called the belief that one is a human being through others (“I am because you are”). The term *Ubuntu* comes from the Zulu and Sotho versions of a traditional African aphorism, often translated as “A person is a person through other persons”: *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu. Motho ke motho ka batho*. It articulates a basic respect and compassion for others. As such, it is both a factual description and a rule of conduct or social ethic, both descriptive and prescriptive (Ramose, 1999:49f; Shutte, 1993:46).

It has been described as a way of life, a universal truth, an expression of human dignity, an underpinning of the concept of an open society, African Humanism, trust, helpfulness, respect, sharing, caring, community, unselfishness, etc. In short it means: *humanity*, or *humanness*. *Ubuntu* is a combination of *Ubu* and *ntu* – the latter being a common root in most Sub-Saharan African languages, resulting in variations like *shintu*, *muntu*, *Bantu*, *wuntu*, *kantu*, *buntu*, etc. *Ntu* as such simply means “human” (Van Binsbergen 2003: 428).

Ubuntu does not only describe humanity as “being-with-others”, but also prescribes what the relational ethics of this “being-with-others” entail. It takes as point of departure the systemic inter-connectedness of a society and is often defined in terms of its moral structure, ritual embodiment and ideological usage (cf. Louw 2002: 7, 8; Van Binsbergen 2003: 450 f.). It does not only entail relationships within families, but also extended families, which constitute society as a whole and, ultimately, humanity as such.

Ubuntu defines the individual in terms of relationships. It represents a sort of *web of reciprocal relations* in which subject and object are indistinguishable. Therefore not: “I think, therefore I am”, but rather “I participate, therefore I am.” Or even: “I dance (with you), therefore I am” (cf. McGann 2002:19) We dance ourselves into existence, together. This is true of all human activities: eating, drinking and working. Indeed, in this understanding of *Ubuntu* we do not find the competitiveness that often characterizes the Western search for meaning, but rather *shosholozza* (“work as one”). In one-ness lies meaning. This web of reciprocal relations implies a paradigm shift “*from solitary to solidarity, from independence to interdependence, from individuality vis-à-vis community to individuality á la community*” (Louw 2002: 15).

In this sense, knowledge and meaning in Africa are always in progression and linked to a concrete, cultural context. Therefore there can be no universalistic epistemological claim, as knowledge and meaning are found within a cultural relativistic-epistemological position. In Africa “ontology” and “epistemology” are essentially relational⁵ and communicative notions. Pobee describes African ontology and epistemology as “communitarian” (1992:16). *Exactly this – community – forms the core of African spirituality* (Skhakhane 1995: 110).

Ubuntu has its origins in pre-colonial African rural settings, which not only operated with the moral values of caring and compassion within community, but also acted out these values through certain ceremonies and rituals. These ceremonies and rituals in fact not only embodied morality, but they also created identity.

Although *Ubuntu* has to a certain extent lost its connection with pre-colonial rural origins (cf. Van Binsbergen 2003: 437 f.), it still is a popular notion in view of the restructuring

⁵ Cf. Punt (2004:89): “*The communal aspect often pointed out in reference to ubuntu seems very important... In many endeavours to define and apply ubuntu, the corporate, collective or communal emphasis of African life is often ascribed to ubuntu.*”

of post-apartheid South Africa. It has seemingly found a wide spectrum of ideological, economic and political usages.

The notion of *Ubuntu* has, of course, also found its way into African art. The following depiction (of which there are many variants) illustrates something of *Ubuntu togetherness*:



Family (Ukama) of Five by Daniel Chidoti, in opal.

The link between *Ubuntu* and the Christian notion of *koinonia* seems obvious. If the essence of *Ubuntu* is community, the same could be said of Christian spirituality: it is primarily about a body of people, one could say about systems of relationships. The word *spirituality* – which is of Christian origin – should not be allowed to be devalued to imply a primarily interior or inward emphasis (cf. Shorter 1978: 4). It is not difficult at all for African Christians, living in an *Ubuntu* culture, to understand and practice *koinonia*. One could say that it comes to them *naturally*, as there are distinct *continuities* between the two concepts.

It is important to understand that Christianity did not create community in Africa, as if for the first time. Rather one could say that the Christian spirituality of *koinonia* found a

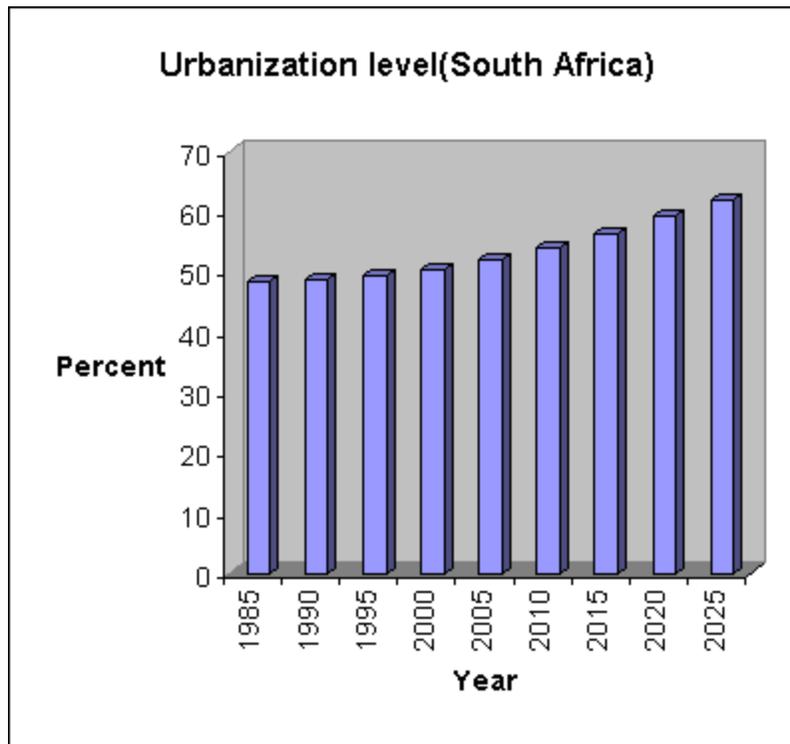
remarkable and formidable ally in *Ubuntu*, contributing towards furthering it, but also being enriched by it. Within this *spirit of collaboration* between *Ubuntu* and *koinonia*, it is accepted that *koinonia* as a Christian phenomenon is not a pure entity that is void of external religious and ritual influences. The concept of *koinonia* (as is true of Christianity as such) was also moulded by, *inter alia*, Hebrew, Greek-Hellenistic, Canaanite-Persian, Medieval Coptic and, of course, the Early Christian Church's customs and traditions.

But it should be noted that there are also distinct *discontinuities* between *Ubuntu* and *koinonia*. *Ubuntu* is not simply a synonym for *koinonia*. Whilst, for instance, the principles of *honour and shame* are strongly adhered to in African culture – resulting in, amongst other things, the syndrome of secrecy and silence surrounding HIV and AIDS – *koinonia* should, at least idealistically speaking, offer a space within which issues such as confession of guilt, forgiveness and hope are intrinsic. *Koinonia* expresses on an inter-human level that which is eschatologically true on a “transcendental” level: Christ in our stead (“for us”), so that we can be there “for others”.

It would also seem as if the Christian understanding of *koinonia* has at least contributed towards the nurturing of *Ubuntu*, which has been adversely affected by the processes of *urbanization*.⁶ In many instances families and societies have been torn apart through urbanization, aggravated by the policies of apartheid. The rate of urbanization in South Africa has been very rapid since the 1950s. Today 57% (or 21 million) of all South Africans live in towns and cities, which is an average level of urbanization for a Third World country. Rapid urbanization brings with it many problems, as it places huge demands on land, water, housing, transport and employment. In South Africa apartheid made the problems of urbanization more complex. For generations, urbanization of black people was made difficult by forcing them to live in areas far from the main cities, in so-called “homelands”. As employment opportunities remained in the “white” cities, many black people, mainly men, moved to the cities in search of work, leaving their families in the “homelands”. Separation of families created many social problems. In addition, pass laws made it illegal for many black people to live in the white cities. Their illegal status made it impossible for them to rent a house, so they often lived in a shack in the backyard of a friend. With the lifting of racial restrictions on where people may live and work,

⁶ For an analysis cf. Gelderblom, D and Kok, P 1994. *Urbanization: South Africa's Challenge. Volume 1: Dynamics*. Pretoria: HSRC Press.

many unemployed people in the homelands migrated to the major South African cities in search of work, bringing their families with them. The shortage of accommodation in cities has forced them to live in shack-towns or squatter camps on open land. Recent statistics illustrate the problem of rapid urbanization facing South Africa:



there needs to be a space between “level” and “(South”

Africans are remarkably resilient. Through many years of oppression and the ravages of colonisation; through major geo-social upheavals, including urbanization, some sense of community has remained - even in the townships of today. The Christian church, with its practices of *koinonia*, has also contributed towards this.

Perhaps this is depicted in the work of the South African protest artist, Willie Bester. In an art work entitled *Township Plight* one sees depicted in a colourful way the harsh realities of the township, the fragile houses, the culture of violence (gun with bullets), the bulldozer that can flatten shacks, a tin of fuel that can be used to start a fire, faces filled with fear, etc. But in the centre of the painting you also see a fish – symbol not only of nutrition, but also ancient Christian symbol of peace and life. There is a cloth – does it symbolize the warmth of family and human compassion? There is also a book. Is it the

Bible? Is it chained? This art work depicts the catastrophic effects of apartheid, but also the triumph of the human spirit, the (colourful) transcendence of the harsh realities of the South African history (cf. Cilliers 2007: 101-102)



3. UBUNYE

Coupled with *Ubuntu*, Africans also adhere to the spirit of *Ubunye*, which literally means: we are one.⁷ This has to do with the *integration of life*, which also includes the spirit world and the departed ancestors. In Africa life is not divided into compartments, with separate “spiritual” and “secular” components. Life as such is spiritual. Life is perceived as a wholesome, holistic experience.

Africans, indeed, have a more systemic understanding of life. Life is a dynamic space for holistic relationships, an integral whole of cosmic and social events. Africans adopt a non-analytical approach to our existence on this planet, epitomized in the words of AA Berinyuu (1988:5):

⁷ Of course, one must not forget that the African paradigm in which *Ubunye* operates is also hierarchical and patriarchal and that the notion of *Ubunye* could not prevent many incidents of ethnic conflict and even cleansing on our continent. *Ubunye* should therefore not be romanticized.

In Africa, there is no division and/or differentiation between the animate and inanimate, between the spirit and matter, between living and non-living, dead and living, physical and metaphysical, secular and sacred, the body and the spirit, etc. Most Africans generally believe that everything (human beings included) is in constant relationship with one another and with the invisible world, and that people are in a state of complete dependence upon those invisible powers and beings. Hence, Africans are convinced that in the activities of life, harmony, balance or tranquillity must constantly be sought and maintained. Society is not segmented into, for example, medicine, sociology, law, politics and religion. Life is a liturgy of celebration for the victories and/or sacrifices of others.

This differs quite considerably from a Western approach to life. Whilst analyses, solutions and consumerism are typical of the latter, myth and symbol, ritual and rhythm determine everyday life in the African context.

The way people relate to the environment and the nature of inter-personal relationships are all part of the spiritual make-up of Africans. Issues of moral behavioural patterns; natural plagues and disasters; familial inter-connectedness; domestic animals; fields (the land ethic) and several rites directly linked to particular events in the life of the individual and the community together belong to the African religio-cultural substratum. Social and economic relations, especially in traditional societies, continue incessantly to pervade the spiritual realm of the African. Mtetwa (1996:23) formulates this spirit of *Ubuntu* as follows:

The conclusion we arrive at with regard to what does and what does not belong to African Spirituality is the fact that there exists a very thin line of demarcation between the religious and the cultural phenomena in African cosmology. Religion and culture are inextricably intertwined. Most of the religious rituals are appropriated into the cultural scheme of things and the cultural domain shapes and influences the religious philosophy and practices. It is in this context and against that background that any attempt

to dichotomize African Spirituality into the sacred and the secular; the physical and the spiritual; the individual and the corporate, results in gross distortion and misconstrual of its theology and its praxis.

This sense of *unity with(in) the universe* has been imbedded in African spirituality since the dawn of time. It is depicted on many of the rock paintings that can be found throughout Southern Africa. In the example found at Lonyana Rock in KwaZulu-Natal the community is dancing around a sick person lying under a *karos* (animal skin). But the living animals are also there – the food stock. They seem to be moving in and out of the circle. Here, in one artwork, we find community, child care (women accompanying children), religion (expressed in the dance), medicine, work (hunting), etc. in an intertwined spirit of holism. This is indeed African spirituality.



Again, there seem to be some logical links between *Ubunye* and Christian spirituality, this time in terms of its understanding of the *Kingdom of God*. Again we find continuity and discontinuity between these two concepts. In terms of *continuity*: both *Ubunye* and the concept of the *Kingdom of God* stress the fact that all of life is important and meaningful. “Spirituality” is not something “out there”. It is situated in life, and *life* is to

be lived. Life is a gift of God (Creator). Therefore African Christians, operating within the spirituality of *Ubunye*, can also operate comfortably within a spirituality that confesses that the Kingdom of God has come amongst us, permeating every fibre of our existence, including our (ancestral) past. In this sense there can once again be a *reciprocal and collaborative enrichment*.

But there is also *discontinuity* between these two terms. The concept of the Kingdom of God implies an *eschatology* that hinges on God's acts in history, his presence now, but also his coming in the future. The integration of life may therefore never become a closed system, but is always provisional and preliminary – open towards the future and therefore continual transformation. These elements do not seem to function that explicitly in *Ubunye*. Some African scholars point out that Africa's understanding of time is cyclical, with past events returning eternally in the memories of communities. Time could therefore consist of the present, the experienced past and a very short future (cf. Bosman 2001: 105).

The spirit of *Ubunye* has also been affected by the processes of urbanization. The process, which has been accelerated after the demise of apartheid, has been accompanied by the exposure of the country to the international world, and therefore the technological mass media and the impact of globalization – which were artificially kept away from the population by the apartheid government. It would seem as if especially *Americanism* has exerted its grip on African spirituality in the sense of the integration of life, threatening to shatter and fragment it.

Americanism could perhaps be described as the ideological movement from democracy to democratism; from moral-ethical stances to the prescriptive morals of achievement ethics; from systemic concepts to the networking of mega-companies and imperialistic economic strategies. The essence of *Americanism* could probably be best summarized in terms of its keyword: *consumerism*. Behind this keyword lurk a number of intertwined ideological paradigms, for instance the frenzied search for so-called “quality”. Materialism here takes on the form of a pathological competition to own the right “brand” and “label”. The sole object is to surpass normal consumption and to reach the highest peaks of luxury: always bigger and better. Mass production follows and creates

the latest trends in order to rake in the profits. For this, of course, you need an effective advertising machine, supplied by the technological mass media.

Globalisation takes on the form of a materialistic imperialism, a market-driven economic manipulation that networks in such a way that a new “McWorld” is created, a world within which particular cultures are denied their regional and national features. E Zwingle (1999: 12-13; cf. also Louw 2002: 340) characterises this brand of globalization as the “cultural assault” of McDonalds, Coca-Cola, Disney, Nike, MTV and the English language.

One of the hinges on which Americanism turns is the privatised and individualised democratization of all spheres of life. The American dream breathes the expectancy of a “good life”, the fulfilment of all needs and, in the end, the satisfaction of the self. Human rights become “my rights”, the freedom to do and to possess and to experience within the paradigm of a “me, I and myself” generation. The whole notion of unity and community is reduced and trivialized in favour of the individual in the grip of global consumerism.

This form of *Americanization* influences every nook and cranny of the globe, flattens every cultural crease, and indeed produces one big “McWorld”. Hollywood, which represents the glitzy side of Americanism, seems to be hovering everywhere – for instance, on the mural paintings to be found throughout South Africa (especially in the so-called townships) who is it that keeps on popping up amidst the African figures and typical African settings? To name but a few: Conan the Barbarian, the Incredible Hulk, the Simpson Family (which both epitomizes and caricatures the American way of life), the Ewing family (from the television series *Dallas*), and apparently an all-time favourite: Mickey Mouse! Compare the difference between the following murals and the “ancient murals” of rock art:



4. AMANDLA

This brings us to our third “fish” in the African “cultural fishpond”, called *Amandla*, which literally means: power or energy or life-force. It is not that easy to describe. In Africa this power or *force-vitale* is directly linked to Divinity⁸ that rules over humanity and determines our fate (Setiloane 1989: 34). This Divine Force penetrates all of reality as a cosmogenic presence, but is not necessarily understood in terms of personhood. It is rather the all-penetrating force that enables individuals and communities to receive and

⁸ Of course there is no homogeneity in terms of the understanding of “Divinity” in Africa. It is impossible to go into detail concerning all the nuances you find on our continent in this regard. For a good overview, cf. Smith, EW 1966. *African Ideas of God*. London: Edinburgh House Press.

experience life. This ever-active, penetrating force initiates existential experiences of *force-vitale*, even to the point that humans in turn strive to exercise power over any force that is perceived to endanger society or the individual's wellbeing. The (divine) Power empowers.

This explains Africans' quest for power-charged objects (cf. Kriel 1989; 198), and the fact that the "craving for power is the driving force in the life of African religion" (Smith 1966: 328). *Ubunye* (the unity of all reality) is kept intact through *Amandla* (power), which in turn operates within *Ubuntu* (community). In African spirituality it is all about the maintenance of equilibrium and therefore guarding against the loss of power. The specific understanding of the Divine, or God-image, that forms the background for this quest is somewhat paradoxical: on the one hand this God penetrates all of life and is therefore near; on the other hand the Power stands aloof, not touched by the events of humanity. God is powerful and provides all that is needed for life, but at the same time is distant and remote. Smith (1966: 27) expresses this paradoxical God-image as follows: "*At times the impression is gained that God appears to the African as the complete Other, the absolute sovereign, external to his own creation, so far remote in his solitary glory as to be unapproachable save through intermediaries; but at other times he is thought to be immanent in man.*"

The point is: African spirituality is about power and empowerment, and often also the disempowerment of your enemies. This can also clearly be seen in African art. In the Congo, for instance, there are sculptures called *nkisi nkondi* (power figures). An *nkisi nkondi* serves as a container for potent ingredients used in magic and medicine in judicial and healing contexts. To make an *nkisi nkondi*, a carver begins by sculpting a male human or animal figure with a cavity in the abdomen. Then a ritual expert completes the work by placing ingredients with supernatural powers on the object and in the cavity provided. He activates the figure by breathing into the cavity and immediately seals it off with a mirror. Nails and blades are driven into the figure, either to affirm an oath or to destroy an evil force responsible for an affliction or disruption of the community. The pose, with hands on hips, symbolizes the *nkondi's* readiness to defend a righteous person and to destroy an enemy.



Power Figure (Nkisi Nkondi). Democratic Republic of the Congo. KaKongo Kongo artist, 19th century. Wood, iron, glass mirror, resin, pigment, 33 7/8 x 13 3/4 x 11 in. (86 x 34.9 x 27.9 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Museum Expedition 1922, Robert B. Woodward Memorial Fund, 22.1421

How does African *Christian* spirituality cope with this notion of power? Again there are *continuities and discontinuities*. In terms of *continuity*, it is clear that the *mystery* of God is understood and honoured in African spirituality: He rules supreme, has insight into all of reality, and is the giver of all life. He remains the all-pervading, numinous Force behind all that is. God is not our playmate. He is the transcendent *mysterium tremendum et fascinatum*.

This understanding of a Divine Being that empowers has always been instrumental in the survival of Africans, especially also in catastrophic times. Africans are fundamentally and deeply spiritual (cf. Nwachuku 1994: 81), and in times of colonization and through the experiences of urbanization this deep spirituality has not waned. On the contrary, it has contributed to the legendary resilience of the African people.

On the other hand, it should be said that the disruption that has been imposed upon Africans, also through urbanization, has often lead to experiences of dis-empowerment and powerlessness. In many instances the disruption of the holistic and communal system of life (*Ubunye* and *Ubuntu*) has lead to existential despondency, to loss of *force-vitale*, in keeping with the systemic understanding of African spirituality. In this regard the Christian perspective has made a fundamental contribution, as it also has a different approach to issues of power. In this lies the *discontinuity*.

As far as this *discontinuity* is concerned, the African notion of God's *immanence* finds it difficult to incorporate the Christian understanding of God's compassion, up to the point of His being vulnerable. The idea that God has given up his power, as embodied in the crucifixion of Christ, is difficult for Africans to grasp, even more so than for non-Africans. Concepts like *kenosis* and the *cross* may indeed be stumbling blocks for the African understanding of power and empowerment. This struggle to reconcile powerlessness with power can even be seen in some African depictions of the crucifixion. The following crucifix from the Republic of Congo, dating from the seventeenth century, offers a striking example of this:



Origin: Kongo (Bakongo) peoples in the Atlantic Coast region of Zaire, Central Africa

Material: Bronze, old lost wax casting of copper/tin alloy

Period: 17th century, conservatively

Dimensions: 8.5" height, 4" width, 5/8" depth; weight is 10.8 ounces

This is indeed an art work with splendid symmetry and form. Verdigris at the very end may suggest that this cross was 'planted' upright in the earth for use and/or display - clearly intended for ritual tribal use. The style suggests a profound assimilation of the cross with local idioms. In this work Christ's facial features and hair are those of a Congolese subject. His hands and feet are flattened and the feet are joined into a single five-toed limb which, according to interpretations of Congo gestures, affords heightened spiritual power. The large protruding oval eyes, a common motif in Congo art, represent the supernatural vision of a human who is possessed by an ancestor or deity. Below Christ and above his shoulders are four small, highly stylized orant (praying) figures, whose role and identities are thought to be those of mourners, ancestors, angels, saints or even apostles. Considered an emblem of spiritual authority and power, the Christian cross was integrated into Congo ancestral cults and burial rituals, and was believed to contain

magical protective properties that could intervene in matters ranging from illness and fertility to rainfall.

5. CONCLUSION

It is clear that African spirituality, as well as African Christian spirituality, represents a fascinating space to enter. I am of the opinion that Africa has much to offer the world, also in this regard. Concepts such as *Ubuntu*, *Ubunye* and *Amandla* form creative partners for dialogue, even if it is not always that easy to define and understand them. Even though these concepts (fish) are contextually part of Africa, and would probably die if you placed them in an alien pond, it would at least be interesting to see what they could contribute, if this were done. Vice versa: it would be enriching to let loose a few alien fish in the African pond! Actually, I believe that we need one another if we hope to progress towards a more responsible, that is, a more humane form of spirituality.

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