

## PRAY UNCEASINGLY (1 THESSALONIANS 5:17): A REFLECTIVE NON-COMMENTARY

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### Abstract

*Africa is like a punching bag. It does not matter how hard you hit it, the bag will swing away, but it will always come back to you for more punches. Africa is being hit very hard. This paper attempts to break Africa's commitment to embracing views of the world which are foreign to Africa. Focusing on prayer in Africa, and using historical and descriptive methods, I argue that the European perception about prayer in Africa has been misleading since Europeans first intruded. Because the African way of communicating with God is different from, and more efficacious than the prayer of Western counterparts, European church leaders have never understood African prayer, which is rooted not only in reason but in African traditions and cultures, and the very basic of human needs and capacity for transcendent harmony, fulfillment and balance. I conclude by suggesting that the African way of praying is a legitimate way of being in communion with God. Instead of ridiculing it, church leaders should be investigating it, to see what Africans can offer through prayers to the rest of Christianity.*

**Key words:** prayer, African Christianity

### Introduction

Let me begin this article with a short anecdote about Sydney Morgenbesser (1921-2004), the famous American philosopher of language, who was asked by his student whether he agreed with Mao Zedong's assertion that a statement can be both true and false. Morgenbesser replied (2004), "Well, I do and I don't." I believe a similar response can be given to the question about the existence of 'prayer' in African spirituality. There is a sense in which it does exist and a sense in which it doesn't. Let us examine these two positions in turn beginning with its alleged nonexistence.

### Africans cannot pray

The claim that Africans do not have prayer originates in Western scholarship but its implications lay in Africa, realized by Christian missionaries from Europe. There was a time when Western scholarship and Christian missionaries alleged definitively that Africans could not pray, let alone have prayers. In the estimation

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of scholars such as Levy-Bruhl (1975) and G. W. F. Hegel ([1837] 2001), reason is an essential element for all human beings. To be human is to be rational. It is to have the capacity to think. Reason is the engine of creativity: history, culture, civilizations and above all religions, prayers, and spirituality all depend upon reason.

With this characterization of human beings, however, there comes a caveat. Where Africans were concerned Hegel ([1837] 2001: 109) suspended the category of universality for reason, saying, with reference to Africans, “we must quite give up the principle which naturally accompanies all our ideas – the category of universality.” Consequently, Hegel (2001: 110-111) characterized Africans as people whose “consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence – as for example, God or law.” For Hegel, Africans had not yet reached the level of consciousness necessary for knowing God; part of the explanation for this was that for Hegel (2001: 111), Africans still “exhibited the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state;” and as such Hegel called on his fellow Europeans to “lay aside all thought of reverence and morality” among Africans and to understand that religion among Africans is a form of ‘sorcery’, ‘fetishism’ or ‘magic’ (2001: 111-112).

Religion, in the analysis of Hegel (2001), begins with consciousness of a Superior Being, but that is precisely what Africans lacked, so they could not have regard for a Superior Being nor conceptualize its existence. If Africans did not have a conception of God and if they did not have religion, then it follows that they did not have spirituality and prayers. Prayer was a prerogative of civilized people. A primitive people did not have that privilege and because they were a *tabula rasa* in terms of prayer, they had to be taught prayers and how to pray effectively.

The perception of early European missionaries did not significantly differ from the conception of the European scholars and travelers, having learnt from the latter that the ‘dark continent’ was inhabited by primitive people who have no reason, history, culture, religion, God, and spirituality. Following the teaching of St Augustine, whom Okot P’Bitek (1970: 28) quotes as saying that “all the gods of the gentiles are demons (Omnes deos gentium deamonia),” missionaries arrived on the African continent in order to exorcise the demons and civilize the African people.

With time, missionaries came to learn at least theoretically that Europeans and Africans have the same intellectual qualities, in practice. However, European missionaries did not believe that Africans were sufficiently developed, intellectually and spiritually, to have a deep relationship with God. In his study of

the Dutch missionaries to Africa, Albert de Jong (2001: 56), a well-known ecumenical researcher and an expert in missiology, confirmed the existence of such attitudes with these words:

In principle Europeans and Africans ...had been created with the same intellectual qualities. The difference exists more in a different use of the brain, highly developed in the whites, but still present as a fallow field in the blacks. Even if now theoretically one was convinced that in the intellectual field the African was not inferior to the European, in daily practice one had to deal with Africans who still remained at the level of a child. They stood on the lowest step of development and were still children in their mentality”.

What this meant in terms of prayer and spirituality is that Africans did not have prayers, did not know how to pray and above all they did not have spirituality, no deep relationship with God. If such a relationship ever existed at all, it was a child-like relationship, not sufficiently mature to stand on its own; and therefore it was purported to be a relationship in need of guidance from the bearers of the Gospel, the missionaries. Basing themselves on such a conception of the African person, many missionaries set out to introduce education systems through which Africans could be instilled with discursive reason, which would inevitably lead them not only to the conception of the Supreme Being, the one true God, but, also to a rational, deep, and mature relationship with the Christian God.

### **Africans can pray**

The days of being considered as people with no reason and ultimately with no spirituality appear to be long gone, although some elements of that attitude still remain. But generally the assumption today is not that Africans cannot know how to pray but, that they do have their own prayers, and that they do know how to pray. In fact, the knowledge that the African God can bring salvation and that Africans can pray, however, is not new. Our forefathers believed in the ability of their god(s) and although they were shaken by the experience of the ungodly slave trade and colonialism, they still managed to pass on that faith to our elders through oral traditions.

The earliest well-known literary work to confirm the existence of African god(s) and religion(s) is often traced back to Placide Tempels' seminal

work *Bantu Philosophy*, first published in 1945. Although Tempels did not explicitly set out to explore the question of African prayer and spirituality, he was able to affirm the existence of reason, the element that Hegel and Levy-Bruhl both considered essential for a people to have a history, a culture, religion and above all prayers and spirituality.

According to Tempels ([1959] 2006: 22), talk of primitive people having no logic is “simply to turn one’s back on reality.” The reality in Tempels’ (2006) consideration is that so-called ‘primitive’ people have logic and a philosophy that is anchored and sustained by the principle of vital force (*élan vital*). Thus, to Tempel (2006: 44-45), Bantu behavior, Bantu ontology, Bantu wisdom, Bantu psychology, and Bantu ethics and religion are all based on the principle of vital force, the principle of life. And if Africans have the capacity to think logically, then they can acquire supernatural as well as scientific knowledge. Precisely because they have the capacity to think, it follows then that the African people have a history, culture, religion, and can conceptualize the Supreme Being and relate to that Divine being intimately.

While Tempels (1959) emphasized the capacity of Africans to think (African philosophy), John Mbiti in his widely read book, *African Religion and Philosophy* (1969), emphasized the existence of African religion as well as philosophy. Rejecting the missionary conception that African did not have religion, Mbiti (1969:1), argued that Africans do not only have religion but they are also typically religious. His words are to the point:

Africans are notoriously religious and each people have its religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it.

To Mbiti (1969: 2), Africans are notoriously religious because:

The African carries his religion wherever he goes, he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician, he takes it to the house of parliament.

For Mbiti, therefore, talk about Africans having no religion does not correspond to reality. The reality, as Mbiti conceives it, is that Africans

have their own religions and the god or gods of African religions are not demons – as St. Augustine described them – but beings to whom one can be intimately related. And if Africans are religious, it follows that they have their own way of communicating with God (through prayers), and their own spirituality (a way of living out their relationship with God). The existence of African religions is, for Mbiti (1969:1), so obvious a reality that its study is crucial in understanding the way Africans think, that is, African philosophy. He makes that point when he writes:

Philosophy of one kind or another is behind the thinking and acting of every people, and a study of traditional religions brings us into those areas of African life where, through words and action, we may be able to discern the philosophy behind.

According to Mbiti, therefore, Africans have both religion and philosophy. Of the two, it is religion that can be easily perceived through rituals, beliefs and ceremonies. Philosophy, on the other hand, is not easily discernible. To understand African philosophy, it is necessary to study African religions, because they lead us into the domains in African life where philosophy can be detected.

### **Unresolved tension**

The tension between those who believe that Africans have their own logic, gods, religion, prayer and spirituality and those who say Africans have no logic, gods, religion, prayer and spirituality specific to them, has not yet been completely resolved even after such a lucid and unambiguous endorsement of African religion and philosophy from the pioneers in this field of study. The legacy of these two diametrically opposed views about African personhood is still with us. That is perhaps one reason why meaningful steps towards proper inculturation and liberation in Africa have stalled. It should not surprise anyone to learn that there are people who still harbor serious doubts about the intellectual capacity of Africans, the efficacy of African religion(s) and even the ability of Africans to govern themselves.

In his book, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire*, the British historian Niall Ferguson has argued that it is good to impose on all rogue states some kind of imperial government or to suspend their national sovereignty for some decades so that the empire, the United State of America, can construct the basic institutional foundations that are

indispensable for economic development. Is Niall Ferguson speaking for many in the church when he argues for the Americanization of Africa, the continent with rogue states? Perhaps not, but when discussing African issues in general, and African spirituality in particular, it is important always to remind ourselves about how far, and from where, we have come. This is critical for understanding where we are now, where we are going, and how to get where we want to go.

It may be anachronistic to point out, but without a sense of history, it is very easy to lose track of what it is that we want to achieve and we may run the risk of committing the same mistakes as the early European scholars and missionaries, only that this time the perpetrators would be Black missionaries and intellectuals themselves! That, however, need not be. We already have the lessons of the past which, given good will, are sufficient to guide the African people in the present and in the future.

In light of the two diametrically opposed views described above, this paper takes the position that Africans have their own prayers. This will be demonstrated by showing how Africans actually pray. This will not be an easy task because it involves answering questions such as: What is prayer? When do Africans pray? Why do they pray? To whom do Africans pray? What do they pray for? It is a tall order, but before answering these questions it will be necessary to make some assumptions about prayer, which will help to make this discussion relevant.

## **Prayer**

The term ‘prayer’ is usually used to designate the act of praying to God or to any superior being. Prayer is a form of worship and according to Mbiti (1969: 61) “it is the commonest act of worship” in Africa. Sometimes the term “prayer” refers to a form of words (spoken or unspoken) used in praying and these can be requests or petitions to God.

At its most basic level, however, prayer is often described as the most direct way to communicate with God. Christians have two kinds of prayer: formal and informal. Informal prayers include meditation, and contemplation. Formal prayers include the Mass and other liturgical celebrations. In the Christian tradition, in order to have an intimate relationship with God, it is necessary to pray. Mbiti (1969: 61) has observed that praying is “reported among practically all African peoples.”

This implies that prayer is an act that is performed by practically all Africans. If that is the case, the question for us is: How do the Africans

understand prayer? Put simply, what is prayer for them? In his study of African Religion, Magesa (1997: 196) discovered that for Africans, prayer is an act that usually happens when the individual and the community open themselves to the realities of the divine and the ancestors. He cautions that without such openness, there can be no prayer, for prayer takes place when the individual or community place themselves in the hands of God and the ancestors.

Prayer is not a privilege reserved for the developed or the civilized. Everyone can pray. Prayer releases the inner tensions and provides a person with solace in times of distress. Although no previous experience is required, we become more adept and comfortable with practice. Prayer comes naturally because most people recognize that there are some things in life over which there is no human control. Against this background, Magesa (1997: 196) is correct when he describes prayer as one of the ways by which the living in Africa express their dependence on God and the ancestors. Prayer, as Magesa conceives it, is a way of admitting that in life there are moments when the restoration of order and harmony in the individual person, in the community and in the world at large has to depend on powers greater than us.

When human potentials and abilities are exhausted, Africans turn to divine help and assistance. They let go and let God and the ancestors provide the needed assistance and help. In that context, prayer becomes an exercise not only of drawing on the grace of God but also of expressing oneself in an uninhibited way, an opportunity to let go of one's whole being, to be more forthright and honest than usual. In light of this, it is legitimate to ascertain that in the African worldview, prayer is a moment of absolute freedom of expression, absolute honest, truth, and above all, it is the moment of absolute dependence on God and ancestors. Unlike in the West, where according to Ladislaus Boros ([1965] 1969), death is the moment of truth, the moment when a human being makes first fully personal decision for or against God, in Africa the decision is uncalled for because the orientation towards God, is taken for granted and prayer is the moment of truth, the moment of absolute honest before God and ancestors and not the moment of death. In other words, prayer is that kind of act which cannot take place if the decision for God is not there. The fact that it takes place is an indication that a person has already made a decision for God; and that is why prayer, in the African way of thinking, is the absolute moment of truth.

Many prayers of the African people have no formulas; African prayer is as varied as human creativity itself. In order to communicate with God meaningfully, individuals adopt a style of their own. In this way, prayers are according to Magesa (1997: 196), uttered, “to fit the occasion and the current frame of mind of the one who utters it.” It should not, therefore, come to us as a surprise, when African Christians, shout, cry, fall down, dance, or become ecstatic.

### **Reasons for prayer**

It has already been pointed out that prayer is very frequent and widespread among acts of worship in Africa. In fact according to Mbiti (1975: 2), the practice of prayer “is one of the most ancient items of African spiritual riches”. The question then for us is, why is it that from time immemorial Africans have been praying? What exactly motivates prayer? Put simply, why pray at all?

One of the reasons that make Africans pray is pain. Referring to ritual, Malidoma (1993) argues that the human body is like a territory. When this territory is invaded by new experiences, the old ones resist and try to repel the new ones. According to Malidoma, then, pain is the outcome of the conflict between new and old experiences in a human body. It is a result of a resistance to something new, something with which an old dispensation is at odds. In the words of Malidoma (1993: 21) “[pain] is our body complaining about an intruder.” When, for instance, a member of the community registers pain, it is a sign for the elders that the “soul is in need of some communion with its spiritual counterpart” (1993: 21). In this context “a body in pain is a soul in longing” (1993: 21). In Malidoma’s estimation, to shut down the pain, which is the expression of the soul in need, without bringing it into communion with its spiritual counterpart, is to disregard the call of the soul and this can have very bad consequences. The experience of pain, therefore, motivates people, especially Africans, to enter into communion with something higher than themselves, for fear that if they do not do so, something horrible will happen. It is this communion with God or a divinely superior being which was described earlier as prayer.

According to Malidoma, however, the soul communicates not only pain but also other things that the body translates as a need, want or an absence.



So, sometimes people enter into prayer in order to respond to the call of the soul, whatever that call may be. Prayer can also happen without someone feeling pain. Among the Zaramo and Makonde, for example, a good harvest cannot be celebrated by the human community or individual alone. Celebrations of harvest, initiation, marriage, naming, and so on are always celebrated with the gods. If it is celebration for a good harvest, the whole community chooses one day in a year when samples of harvest are brought to the gods along with the sacrifices of chicken and goats. At that moment prayers are said to show oneness with the divine as well as to avoid to having to face a later ritual based on pain.

In addition to pain and warding off misfortune, Africans also pray because of dysfunctional relationships between the living and the dead. For most Africans, for example, culture and tradition are cherished as the most important legacies that ancestors bequeathed the living. The task of the living is not to destroy their cultural heritage but to protect and maintain it. When the living fail or refuse to protect it, the dead become angry and ills befall the individual or the community that has destroyed this covenant. Paraphrasing Ali Mazrui, Malidoma (1993: 17) makes this point when he writes:

The ills of the continent of Africa nowadays are the result of the anger of the ancestors in the face of the general desecration brought about by modernism... [T]hrowing away one's culture for another is an insult to the dead and can result, as in the case of Africa, in a lot of unresolved ills.

The point here is that most Africans pray because of misfortunes or problems they face as a result of their failure to abide by the norms laid down by the ancestors.

Further, people pray because of the diminishment or destruction of the force of life. Wherever and whenever there is a breach of order in the universe as established by God through the ancestors, Africans do everything to make sure that harmony is restored. In the words of Douglas Thomas (2005: 9), "African religion is premised upon the idea of harmony, and any breach in the order among the creator, divinities, ancestors and nature must be avoided at all cost." Those who defy the cosmic and

communal harmony that binds African communities together will suffer in consequence. Thus to avoid such sufferings and disharmony, believers of African religion perform the necessary sacred functions to maintain the harmony that is crucial for communal and cosmic happiness. And one of those sacred functions is prayer. Prayer is a means of restoring wholeness, of establishing harmony, and of restoring balance in life. It is in this connection that Raul Ruiz de Asua Altuna (1985: 424), a well known Angolan anthropologist, describes Bantu prayer as, “a cry of man in his struggle for life, *um grito do homem na sua luta pela vida.*” The human person is life and the enemy of life is death. In the midst of situations which threaten to destroy life, an African person feels helpless and thus turns to the divine God, in prayer, asking for the prevention, or destruction of forces which threaten life.

Motivations for prayer are sometimes expressed in terms of what prayer can do. According to Altuna (1985: 422-423), prayer re-creates the desired harmony because it prevents danger, consolidates life, corrects disorder, repairs offenses, and arbitrates needs. That is why, according to Altuna (1985: 423), instances of prayer can take place anywhere and at any time. Any place can be a place for ritual, and any moment can become a moment of active faith. The individual and the community always pray because of the need to take care of life.

But perhaps what is the most important accounting for prayer is that it cannot be helped; it is a felt need, it is something that human beings have to do. Malidoma (1993: 24) expresses this so beautifully in a dialogue with his grandfather:

*Malidoma asks:* why do people do rituals? They kill chickens, goats, and all kinds of animals, and they eat some and throw others away. Why?

*Grandfather responded with a question:* Do you know why you go to the bathroom? Do you know why you urinate?

*Malidoma:* Of course I know. I can't help it.

*Grandfather:* Well then, you know why we do rituals.

What is true of ritual is also true of prayer. Prayer is a kind necessity that cannot be avoided. The human person is oriented towards prayer, towards communion with the divine. It is as if the human person is born with a

God-shaped hole in the heart. It is a space for God alone. And until we recognize what it is, we always try to fill it up by stuffing a lot of things into it (possessions, activities, self-importance, gratification). It is like trying to force the wrong piece of a jigsaw puzzle into a space not meant for it. We do not know why we are unsatisfied, so we search for novelty in the things we cram into the hole. It does not work. Nothing but God can fit into that hole. Prayer is the piece that completes the puzzle of life by placing God at the centre of our life. When, then, is that done?

### **Moments for prayer**

Almost all students of African religion agree that in Africa, there is no important moment in life that passes without prayer. When Mbiti (1969) says that religion permeates all the departments of life and that Africans carry it along everywhere they go, even in examination rooms and parliaments, he is in effect saying that there is no activity that is not accompanied by prayer. Expressing the same idea, Magesa (1997: 195) writes:

Rarely does any important moment pass during each day of an adult's life without a verbal or mental recollection of the power of God and/or the ancestors. An accidental bruise or a gift received evokes a prayer. Sickness or good health in the morning, a feast or a funeral, good or bad news – all are recognized by appropriate prayers.

I will say simply, borrowing from Malidoma's (1993: 24) characterization of ritual, that for Africans the presence of the supernatural is always immanent and proximate. African people always carry the supernatural along in all affairs. So the general impression one gets from the practice of ritual is that ritual, for most Africans, precedes their involvement with the world and with each other.

The truth expressed by Malidoma with respect to ritual is also the truth about prayer. Prayer in the African set-up precedes any activity or event. In the rural areas, for example, where farming is the most important activity, the clearing and cultivation of fields, planting of crops and harvesting, all begin with prayer. Even where a ritual precedes these activities, prayers are always uttered. The implication that Malidoma (1993: 24) draws from the practice of starting every activity with a prayer ritual is that for

Africans there is nothing that happens on earth, in the natural world, without first happening in the supernatural world.

In addition to farming activities, there are the journeys that people make to different places. According to Malidoma (1993), when one embarks on a journey, one must first ritualize the journey by praying at the shrines of the ancestors, or at the graves of the ancestors. The act of placing oneself in the hands of the ancestors before even starting the journey is an indication that the journey itself has already happened in a metaphoric world and that the actual journey is a just a translation of that metaphor. Yet again, when a person gets ill suddenly, the first reaction of the elders is, according to Malidoma (1993: 24-25), not to deal immediately with the sick person. While the sick person lies in bed, the head of the family first goes to the diviner to find out what went wrong in the ancestral world as well as to find out the appropriate rituals that must be performed. The head of the family comes back home, finds out the elements that must enter into the ritual and performs it. It is only when all this has been done that it becomes necessary to deal directly with the sick person. By that time the illness has been dealt with symbolically and what remains is the actualization of that which has already been performed.

As these instances show, Africans normally deal with the physical world at the last stage of any endeavor or initiative. Malidoma (1993: 25) describes the reason for this when he writes:

What goes on in the physical or visible world is only the tip of the iceberg. So to correct a dysfunctional state of affairs effectively, one must first locate its hidden areas, its symbolic dimension, work with it first, and then assist in the restoration of the physical, (visible) extension of it.

This of course requires ritual but there is no ritual without prayer. It is both the ritual and the prayer that uproots the dysfunction.

It follows from the above considerations that prayer in African spirituality is not like a school uniform, something to put on routinely at specified times, certain places, and in particular formal circumstances. Prayer in African religion permeates all human activity, and there is no specific moment or event that can be said to be outside the realm of prayer.

Thus, in response to the question “when do Africans pray?” one can say that Africans are inclined to pray all the time. They have the propensity to

pray all the time, on any occasion and at any significant event in life. And if they are predisposed to pray all the time, it can be said that, for Africans, prayer is a way of life. It is that which they tend to do all the time. They tend to pray unceasingly (1 Thessalonians 5:17). But if Africans have the tendency to pray all the time, the question then arises: How do they pray? We shall attempt to answer that question in next section.

### **How Africans pray**

Since prayer in African spirituality happens anywhere, at any time, and for any important event in a person's life, it is not easy to capture in a formula and say this is how it is done, for it varies according to the person and community, and according to the place and event. However, considering the reasons for prayer given above, it can be said that one of the basic forms of prayer in African spirituality is petition. One prays by offering one's petitions to the god or divinities. This is done when individuals or communities lift themselves up and place themselves completely through faith in the hands of the divinity. This aspect of placing oneself completely in the hands of God is premised on the belief that petitions to God are heard and that God responds to them. The belief that God answers human petitions is what gives power to prayer, in the sense that it is what makes prayer a credible, trustworthy, and sustainable practice. If human petitions to God were not rooted in such a belief, prayer would not have the power and the strength it has among Africans.

Prayer, according to Altuna (1985: 423), is the principle means through which the human person communicates with divinity. Through prayer, an account of what is possible is given in a dialogue between the two beings, the divine and the human. The dialogue through prayer testifies that the divinity is active and personal, a living being that can hear and respond to the needs of the human person.

In African traditional religion there are two categories of prayers or petitions. In the first category are petitions for protection from all afflictions, and in the second category are petitions for evil, better known as curses. These categories of petition will be discussed in the order that they were just mentioned.

First then is the category of prayers for protection from all afflictions or the removal of them. Here the individual or a community asks to be protected from all evils. These include evil spirits, witches and ill wishers. As a corollary they ask for a long life, abundance of food and drink,

animals and above all children. Magesa (1997: 197) provides a typical example of an African prayer that highlights the element of petition:

Kirinyaga [God], owner of all things, I pray to thee, give me what I need, because I am suffering, and also my children, and all the things that are in this country of mine. I beg thee, the good one, for life, healthy people with no disease. May they bear healthy children? And also to women who suffer, because they are barren, open the way by which they may see children. Give goats, cattle, food and honey.

It is important to note that this prayer is not a request for the Holy Spirit but a request for very practical needs: children, goats, honey, life and so on. Those are the things that promote life and make it worth living.

In the second category are petitions for evil, or curses. Here the individual or the community asks divine powers to inflict pain or something unpleasant on another person or outside community. A typical example of this is when a young person misbehaves towards his or her elders. About two or three years ago I was involved in a research project about inculturation in East Africa. One of my respondents, called Sokoni, told me a story which I think brings out very well what is intended to be said here.

In Mukuranga, a town on the outskirts of Dar-es-Salaam city, a young lady saw an elderly lady with a hunchback walking with a help of a stick. The young lady laughed and was mocking her and making fun of the old lady. Then when the old lady noticed that the young lady was persistent, she stopped, looked at the young lady and said: "Do you think I asked to be like this?" The young lady did not answer and kept on laughing. In the end the old lady, spit saliva down on the ground and pointing the stick to the young lady she said: "May you live to have children who will also laugh at you."

This is a very simple prayer to correct an attitude and the behavior of the young lady. However, in terms of prayer, it is worth noting here what is happening before the request is pronounced:

- First, the venue is the street (not in the cathedral or chapel or basilica).
- Second, the old lady stops.
- Third, she looks at her tormentor.

- And fourth, she initiates a dialogue, presumably to begin a “catechesis” of the girl.

When the occasion for catechesis is lost four things happen simultaneously:

- The old lady spits saliva on the ground.
- She points the stick directly at her tormentor, who in this case is the cause of her suffering.
- She utters the prayer (or curse).
- She walks away disgusted.

Not all private prayers follow this pattern because individuals are different and use their freedom of expression to convey their intentions differently. Thus, attempts to impose a structure on private prayers cannot be very fruitful or accurate because there are as many structures as there are people who pray.

In this connection it is also important to note that prayers, whether private or communal, spontaneous or formal, are always related in one way or the other to real life. Faced with a certain need in life, prayer emerges spontaneously and takes various forms. It can be a brief invocation, a hymn, a canticle, or offerings and sacrifices. In addition, it can also take the form of a monologue or conversation, a series of questions to the divinity, registration of complaints, demands, or simply gestures of profound humility and respect. It all depends on the creativity of the faithful, the circumstances in which they find themselves, and the mood of the persons involved.

The Bantu, according to Altuna (1985: 425), pray with energy, inspiration, in a loud voice, and are free in expressing their gestures with profound faith and confidence in God. Again, attempts to impose a structure, and say that they employ energy, loud voices and so on *in such-and-such a particular situation*, are not very fruitful. The truth of the matter is that energy, inspiration and loud voices are frequently used in almost all prayers, in different places and circumstances. Prayer in African spirituality is a practice that can be expressed in different ways: Africans pray while standing, sitting, kneeling, prostrating on the ground, dancing, and singing, gesturing, and crying or shouting in low and high pitches. Singing and dancing (the most common elements in African prayers) prepare and accompany ritual and make it livelier. In addition, they help to consolidate the faith of the community, and can easily lead the faithful to communion with the ancestors and God.

Apart from the prayers of the individual, which are spontaneous, short, and on the spot, all other prayers are public or communal and accompany ritual and sacrifices. Sacrifices in traditional society were, in effect, sacred offerings aimed at restoring and maintaining cosmic balance and restoring or maintaining the power of life. Sacred offerings consisted of animals, birds and food products.

Douglas Thomas (2005: 19-20), has shown that there are four types of sacrifices and offerings in African traditional religions. The first involves meal and drink offerings. These are given daily at shrines and on sacred days to a specific deity. The second type is thank-offerings; these are daily rituals that express one's appreciation to the deity for bringing success to one's family. In the third category are propitiatory offerings or sacrifices; these are sacrifices conducted to avert catastrophe or major crises in society. Traditionally a human being was usually offered. The sacrifice is either burned or covered in oil in order to bring harmony in society or the community. The fourth type includes vicarious sacrifices, which were made to avert curses.

Prayers accompanying rituals and sacrifices are many and varied, but because they are public and communal it is possible to discern certain elements that are constant. In his study of rituals, Malidoma (1993: 68) has identified four essential elements in the structure of rituals: they are *invocational*, *dialogical*, and *repetitive*, with an element of *closure*.

For each of these elements of the structure of ritual there is always a corresponding prayer. There can be no ritual without prayer. The element of invocation, which according to Malidoma (1993: 68) invites the spirits to come and join the community in an important activity, is in itself always a form of prayer, a form of petition. It is during the invocation that the person who leads the community in the ritual asks the spirits or the gods to come and join the living in the performance of the activity that has brought them together. In Altuna's (1985: 426) estimation, prayers of invocation generally begin with the solemn pronouncement of some names of the divinity or the ancestors, followed by the titles of the spirits or gods that are invited, the relationship between the ancestors, spirits or gods and the community or individual for whom the ritual is performed and finally the words of welcome.

### **A Wafipa petition**

It is helpful at this juncture to cite a ritual (recounted during a research project on inculturation in East Africa by a respondent named Themista Kafwa, from Sumbawanga, Southern Tanzania) that highlights the four elements of ritual and



their corresponding prayer. This is Wafipa ritual for a young man who could not find work. It illuminates the theology and basic structure of prayer in African spirituality. The young man convinced that he couldn't find work because of something wrong he did to his father, is advised by the elders to go the grave of his father to perform a ritual. The whole exercise is full of prayers and it is possible to determine how these prayers are structured.

1. Father.
2. It is me your son Sikazwe Fungameza Kapufi.
3. I am here with my Uncle, your brother, Kuntonyongo, and my son, Kasalanga, Champitipunda, your grandson.
4. We are here because I have a problem. I cannot find work, I am jobless for a very long time, and everywhere I go nobody is willing to employ me in spite of the fact that I have qualifications. If it is because of something wrong that I did to you, I ask you to please forgive me. Please forgive me; please forgive me because if I do not get a job my life and the life of your grandchildren will be ruined.
5. Accept these offerings (*cow or goat meat slaughtered for the purpose and a drink kimpumu is put on the grave of the deceased*) and bless me your child and all my offspring, so that I may find a job and be able to live in peace.
6. And you, wherever you are, live in peace and pray for us. (*Then they leave the graves to continue with the celebration at home where some of the meat is eaten and some is thrown away to the spirits of the dead. The same is done with the local brew. Some is drunk and the rest poured down.*)
7. (*After eating and drinking, the elder member of the family sends the spirit and visitors away by pouring a bit of maize flour on the ground, saying:*) We have left food for you so that you may also eat and continue to walk in the right paths.

The first thing in the prayer is the invocation. In this case, the invocation stresses the relationship, which is the father-son relationship. That invocation is in itself a prayer because it is a petition for the dead father to pay attention to the people who are present. It is, in a sense, a way of inviting the spirit of his dead father to be present in their midst. Failure to draw the attention of the dead father would mean that the young boy, his uncle and grandson are there on their own without the company of spirit of their dead father.

When the prayer of invocation is finished and they are convinced that they have the attention of the spirits, a solemn dialogue begins with the spirit of his father that culminates in a prayer, a petition for forgiveness. But before the petition for

forgiveness, the problem or the reason for their presence is stated and the possible cause of that state of affair is explained.

It is worth noting that because the cause of his joblessness is hypothetical, the prayer also takes the form of a conditional: if I did something wrong, then I ask for your forgiveness. This means that the forgiveness depends upon the reality of the offense committed. Paraphrasing Awolalu Omosade, Douglas Thomas (2005: 20) has noted that some tribes in Africa, like the Yoruba of Nigeria, do not use the occasion of prayer to confess offenses. That claim, however, has to be understood in its own proper context because, as can be seen here in this ritual, confession is not a practice that takes place by itself in isolation from prayer. Confession usually takes place in the context of prayer because it is an admission of guilt that seeks healing or forgiveness, which is a petition or a prayer for healing.

The dialogical element of prayer is followed by the act of libation, which is also accompanied by two types of prayers: the first is the petition for the acceptance of the offerings and the second is a request for the blessings of the dead father. These two prayers, though we have identified them differently, are not different in reality because they are inextricably connected in such a way that one cannot exist without the other. The point is that for the young man to succeed in his request, the sacrifice or offerings must be accepted. It is only when the offerings are accepted, when the spirits are happy with what has been offered, that they can now intercede and bestow the required blessings. The final two numbered items (5 and 6) belong to the element of closure. That element too is not devoid of prayers. Closing prayers are usually brief and to the point. The final acts of throwing meat; alcohol and maize flour on the ground are accompanied by prayers for the peace and safety of the deceased.

## **Conclusion**

The declared intention of this paper was to show how Africans pray. I demonstrated that by describing their understanding of prayer, their motivations for prayer, and the moments they pray; and I indicated in rather general terms the spontaneity and creativity involved in private prayers, as well as how communal prayers are conducted.

Our depiction of the African way of praying is not an invention of some academicians in clock towers. This vision of prayers already exists among the ordinary people and among African elites in their moments of crisis. The best thing to be done is for the official leaders of Christianity to stop condemning it and begin recognizing it, as authentic means of communicating with God and obtaining grace.

Finally, there must be recognition that there is no pure Christianity and there never has been. God's salvific message is always expressed in a culture, yes, even in African culture. Paying attention to African culture, even in prayer life, can only be a good thing for Christianity in Africa.

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