

WATER AND SPIRITUALITY IN SOME AFRICAN CULTURES AND TRADITIONS

Author: GEORGE PANYIN HAGAN

Introduction

An Akan proverb says, “When the chicken drinks water, it shows it to God (*Akoko nom nsu a, odze kyere Nyame*)”. The Akan people of Ghana use this proverb not only to say that it is God that makes it possible for the chicken to drink water – without raising up its head to the sky the chicken cannot drink – but also to declare that for the gift of life and what sustains life, all creatures, and human beings in particular, need to lift up our heads to God in grateful acknowledgement of his power and goodness. This iconic expression of a creature’s dependence on God cryptically and directly captures the theme of this paper: the place of water in African spirituality, the place of water in the relationship between human beings and the omnipotent God. It is living by the obligations that this relationship implies that constitutes the foundation of African spirituality.

African spirituality has a number of clearly discernible tenets. African cultures share a common belief that whatever exists, visible and invisible, is spiritual in nature and is endowed by the Supreme Being, the Creator of all things, with intrinsic dignity, special attributes and distinct power. It is also a common African belief that the Creator had a purpose for creating everything; and gave each entity a definite place and mission in creation. On the myriad entities in creation, Africans also posit that all existents have mutual spiritual relationships and interact according to a principle of cosmic order.

In this regard, Africans believe not only that human beings interact with each other and with other existents in the world in a way that can maintain their integrity and dignity or degrade them and disturb the harmony of nature; but also that the need to protect and preserve the integrity and dignity of created things and the harmony among them, imposes on human beings, as individuals and communities, obligations that find expression in moral norms, customary rules of behaviour, ritual observances and avoidances breach of which carry severe, inexorable and ineluctable repercussions. In the collective consciousness and lived experience of the African, security and fullness of life for each human being to pursue the destiny the Creator gave them requires awareness of and adherence to the spiritual as well as the physical rules of nature. In the African world-view, the spiritual realm is not cut off from the physical realm – it is the laws of the spiritual realm that explain events in the physical realm.

The ideas and norms of African cultural spirituality subsist in many forms of expression in African communities. They can be found in myths of creation, legends, folktales, aphorisms, proverbs, libation prayers, sacred songs and dirges. They subsist in well-established rules and taboos for the protection and conservation of nature, in clearly defined cultural values, moral norms, social norms, attitudes, etiquette, traditional rules of conduct, in established patterns of behaviour and in ceremonial and ritual acts and processes. These varied forms of expression constitute a rich source material for the study of the commonalities and

divergences in African cultural spirituality. And it is in these forms that we also discover the place and utility of water in African spirituality.

African cultures characterise water, by virtue of its life-giving nature, as both physical and spiritual in essence – but even of greater spiritual utility than physical. Water is used in important prayer forms in various acts of libation. It is used in ritual acts of purification, sacralisation, reparation and revitalisation – and both for blessing and cursing. Water is used in social interactions, and in the making and breaking of social relationships. As in life we cross many rivers to reach various destinations; water and water bodies also play a role in rites of individual and collective transitions from the profane to the sacred state.

Nowhere, however, is the spirituality of water more evident than in the general mind-set and conviction that water connects all living things directly to the Supreme Being making manifest the importance of the divine in human survival. In the African mind, drought, unfavourable patterns of rainfall, famine and the conflicts that result from these are the consequences of the individual and collective moral and spiritual offences that humans commit against nature and the Supreme Being. In all African cultures, droughts and famines bring communities to reflect on their state of spiritual pollution, degradation and weakness due to various acts that offend the Supreme Being.

Given this spiritual connection that Africans make between human conduct and survival on the one hand and the quality of rainfall and the health of the environment on the other, in many African communities, assuring regular rainfall and the health of the environment becomes a categorical imperative of governance. In cultures where individual personal acts are deemed to impact rainfall patterns and the environment, the enforcement of rules of customary behaviour, especially those about the environment, is regarded the collective responsibility of the entire community. The ruler or leader is held responsible for enforcing the rules, sanctioning individual spiritual and moral offences, and, more importantly, performing annual rites of purification, reparation and restoration of the spiritual state of nature. By contrast, in cultures where the spiritual state of the political community is accounted the responsibility of the supreme ruler, because the ruler embodies the spirit of the community, it is the ruler that bears the blame when droughts and famines occur. Thus, in polities headed by rulers that ethnologists and social anthropologists have described as Divine Kings or Queens, it is the Sovereign alone that incurs blame when droughts and famines occur and may be called to purify and enhance the royal spirit or commit suicide for a new person spiritually stronger to take their place and bring new vitality to the people and to nature.

Because this belief is rather strong among Africans even today, an elected President of an African state might find that he or she receives blame for droughts and famine. Droughts and famine impact the dynamics of power and politics in many contemporary African states, not least because droughts and famine, plagues and pestilences, cause distress in a population, disrupt economic life, engender conflicts and destabilise government. In the seventies in Ghana, a military leader whose tenure was marked by a long spell of drought and famine and

persistent widespread and bitter personal criticism among the people was compelled to ask Ghanaians “Am I God?”

As a cultural ideology, therefore, African spirituality is total in scope. It is multi-dimensional and holistic, all encompassing, compelling and enduring. Even as modernity and foreign religious beliefs attack it on all sides, African cultural spirituality persists; and water – especially lack of rains, dying rivers and lakes, collapse of eco-systems and spreading desertification due to the impact of human activity on the climate – yearly keeps reminding us that we need to take care of nature so that nature might take care of us.

The following presentation is in two parts. The first part expatiates on the metaphysical premises of African cultural spirituality; and the second part shows how the tenets of African spirituality manifest in praxis and manifest the place and role of water in African spirituality.

Though there is great diversity in expressions of African cultural spirituality, the similarities, continuities and commonalities among ethnic communities across Africa are easy to recognize. I wish therefore to focus on the Akan of Ghana and a few other African cultures to reveal the typical tenets of African cultural spirituality. Cultural spirituality among the Akan of Ghana has been extensively studied by social anthropologists, ethnologists, students of African religions and philosophies; and, heuristically, the Akan afford me the firm ground from which to identify and map out the dominant features of African spirituality.

Part One: The Tenets of African Spirituality

First Proposition: All things are Spiritual and have Divine Attributes and Power

The Supreme Being created all things in the world and endowed each entity with intrinsic dignity, special attributes and power. Africans believe that individual human beings possess their own special spirits, attributes and dignity; plants and animals possess individual properties, spiritual essence and vital energy; and all inanimate things, from gold, diamond, silver, copper to rocks, mud and sand are all spiritually alive and possess their own properties, intrinsic value and powers. In this belief, such is the spiritual power of entities that it is dangerous to cut down certain trees, kill certain animals or abuse inanimate things like water and fire.

Fragments of any entity created by God have as much power as the whole. Thus human body parts are charged with the spirit and power; and human spittle, urine, faecal matter, menstruum, hairs and nails are deemed full of power. Leaves, branches and roots of plants are deemed full of spiritual power and healing properties; and skins, bones, horns, even droppings of animals, are sought for their powerful spiritual properties. Animal species are endangered today, because of the demand for their parts. It is in recognition of this spiritual essence of things that the Akan drummer always starts a performance by drumming salutations to the elements that make up the drum: the spirit of the Cedar tree, the spirit of the elephant, the spirit of the fibre *Ampasakyi*, the spirit of the pegs, made from *Afema* tree,

ending with the spirit of the Earth in whose bosom all of these survive (Rattray, 1954, 1969; Busia, 1954, 1960; Nketia, 1963).

In many African cultures, drums and other musical instruments are considered powerful spiritual entities (Hagan: 2015). The sounds and music they produce can agitate spirits, impact living things positively or negatively and also bring inanimate things to life. It is for this reason that many African communities customarily observe periods of absolute silence for nature to rest or for seedlings to grow.

Colours (Whiteley: 1973), shapes and numbers feature strongly in African spirituality. Each colour, shape or number has its own spiritual force and dignity. Some colours and numbers bring good fortune, others bring evil. In some cultures certain numbers are male or female, sacred or profane. Among the Akan odd numbers are female, even numbers, male. Some numbers (3, 4, 7) are sacred and full of positivity; others (5, 9) are extremely unlucky. In the Wenchi traditional area in Ghana, the ninth born was in the past killed, as the ninth born was considered to bring ill-luck to society. Similarly, while many African cultures consider twins a blessing, many others consider twins a great curse.

Space and Time have spiritual power and value in African cultures; and, in as much as specific locations in space and time define the identity of things in nature, they also give individual things and events their spiritual and ritual significance. In Akan culture, days of the week are characterised as male and female, and parts of the day good or evil. The early dawn is propitious; and the proverb says “It is the young girl who would not listen to the advice of her mother that menstruates at mid-day.” Like the Greeks and Romans, Africans consider the spiritual quality of time far more important for decision-making and initiation of action than all other factors. There is a time and place for every event; and in many African cultures, people, especially rulers, would consult oracles to know when to initiate an action or make a deal. In a secular and more scientific world, it is easy to gain the impression that to the African the illogical and mysterious was more important than the rational and empirical or factual in decision-making.

The significance of the spirituality of existents, properties, qualities and space and time is that for each event, occasion and context, Africans consider it necessary to seek the most appropriate configuration of symbolic elements and spiritual forces; and this at times they achieve by surprising symbolic inversions (Peter Rigby, 1968). For the Akan, white stands for good fortune, victory and purity; but it also is the colour that is used at the funeral of people who die in accidents or in childbirth. Black stands for misfortune, but the sacred stools of the Akan are black to represent the presence and dignity of the ancestors – in the Black stools of Akan chieftaincy. Red stands for blood and life, but also stands for danger and uncompromising attitude. The menstrual rag which is generally regarded as destructive is used to destroy bad medicine or check spiritual afflictions like convulsions and possession.

Second Proposition: All Entities relate and interact as Spiritual Forces – The Opposites in the Cosmic Order

In the African world, all existents have mutual relationships, and relationships between entities, properties and qualities reflect their spiritual nature and power. Relationships and interactions, however complex, can be reduced to relationships and interactions between pairs of entities, properties and qualities. Nature itself seems to present existents in binary relationships and interactions, and Africans see duality as a principle in the cosmic order – male and female, left and right, east and west, north and south, good and evil, truth and falsehood..

In this connection, African cultures posit that everything in nature has its opposite with which it is inseparably bonded and yet in constant conflict. A common African proverb says ‘Whatever is sweet has bile attached to it’. And an Akan proverb says: “Good and Evil are twins, there is no space between them, but they are always in conflict.” Life and death are opposites, they are always together but also in conflict.

Africans also speak of the opposites in nature as complementary and reciprocal in function. ‘The right hand washes the left and the left washes the right’. Male and female are opposite, but equal and complementary. And taking this to a higher level of abstractions and discourse, the Akan proverb says “If good is nothing, Evil too is nothing (*Papa nye whee a, bone so nye whee.*). In moral discourse among Akan people, those who persist in doing wrong because they appear not to have the capacity to discern right from wrong would be punished with severity and denied any kindness or mercy to show them that “If one considers good as nothing, then evil too is nothing.” Logically this treats good and evil as equal in status, and it is impossible to conceive what is good without conceiving what is evil. Surprisingly, Africans everywhere believe that one cannot reciprocate evil with evil.

The belief in cosmic dualism is the basis for the organisation of entities in time and space. The conflict of opposites determines the proper alignment of entities in all physical, social and ritual spaces and contexts. Male and female, align with good and evil, right and left, north and south, east and west. The orientation and positioning of objects in space determines direction of movement. Movement from right to left is male and auspicious, from left to right inauspicious. Such is the force of this law of opposites that it gives rise to many rules of ceremonial and ritual acts, etiquette and social behaviour.

The right hand being superior to the left, it is with the right hand that one gives and receives gifts or anything. One cannot gesticulate before the elders with the left hand; and one does not point to one’s father’s village with the left hand. In Akan culture, at a social gathering the seating must be such that one must greet the men before the women. By this arrangement, when one is shaking hands, one must move from right to left. Right to left (anticlockwise) movement is male; left to right ((clockwise) movement is female; and as no one ever forgets that movement from left to right would bring negative spiritual consequences – this has become an established practice in Ghanaian state protocol.

In this regard, in some African cultures, the position of a man and a woman in the sexual act must reflect the right spiritual alignment. A man is required to lie on his right hand facing the

woman who must lie on her left – the man touching the woman only with his left hand, the woman touching the man only with her right hand (Beidelman, 1961, 1964)

In many cultures, the dead have to be buried facing west or south or the opposite. Among some Akan communities, the corpse must face away from human settlement. And some say that as the dead would turn in the opposite direction in which they are buried, to get them to face away from town, you must bury them facing town.

Such is the imperative of cosmic duality that as every entity is alive with internal conflict of the opposites, the Supreme Being is also conceived in some cultures as dual in being – at once Male and Female in nature – positive and negative. Among the Fon of Dahomey, according to P. Mercier, the Supreme Being is dual in nature and is called *Mawu- Lisa*. *Mawu* is female, *Lisa* is male. And he explains this duality thus:

“...their dual and conflicting nature expresses even before the world of men was organised, the complementary forces which were to be active in it. *Mawu*, the female principle, is fertility, motherhood, gentleness, forgiveness; while *Lisa* is power, warlike, or otherwise, strength and toughness. Moreover they assure the rhythm of day and night. *Mawu* is the night, the moon, freshness, rest, joy; *Lisa* is the day, the sun, heat, labour, all hard things. By presenting their two natures alternatively to men, the divine pair impress on man the rhythm of life and the two series of complementary elements of which its fabric is woven (*African Worlds*, 1954, p.219).

The people of Rwanda cannot attribute any imperfection to God, and so make any child born with deformity a product of the evil one who is opposed to the Supreme Being. Most African cultures however see the Supreme Being as One in being, while every aspect of creation reflects the presence of cosmic opposites. The Akan see God as One; but the Akan symbol of *Gye Nyame* which portrays the Power of God, projects two connected horns (symbol of power) arranged as opposites, symmetric and complementary.

Third Proposition: God created every entity to fulfil a divine purpose and so designated a Place and Time for every entity.

The idea that everything God created has a purpose is a common feature of African spirituality, especially in West Africa (Idowu: 1962), The doctrine of fate or predestination enables the African not only to explain and accept inexplicable events in life, but also to be resigned to how a just God could make one person prosper and another languish in poverty.

Akan culture models and teaches the doctrine of predestination with a popular myth in which God assigns to entities their destinies on earth. The myth portrays rivers and lakes and the sea as the first entities to which God assigned individual destinations and destinies. I give here the published form of this myth in K. A. Busia’s publication in *African Worlds* (1954) titled “The Ashanti of the Gold Coast”.

“An Ashanti myth has it that all the rivers, the Tano, the Bea, the Bosomtwe Lake near Kumasi, and the mighty sea, were all children of the Supreme Being. The latter decided to send these children to the earth so that they might receive honour from

men, and in turn might confer benefits on mankind. The Supreme Being himself planned where he would send each of his children. The goat got to know of the plans. He and Bea were good friends, so he told Bea that whenever their father sent for them he should go quickly so that he would arrive before his brothers. One day the Supreme Being sent for his children and Bea ran quickly and got there first; so the father assigned to him the cool and shady forest country which had been intended for Tano, the favourite son. Tano, therefore, was sent to the grassy plains, and each child in turn was given a place different from the original plan, owing to the goat having revealed the plan to Bea. For this reason, all the worshippers of Tano as well as those of the other sons avoid the goat as a hateful creature. As the myth indicates, the Ashanti regard the rivers as having spirits which they derive from the Creator, and many gods are the 'children' of rivers. "As a woman gives birth to a child, so may water to a god."(p193)

In this myth, the seas and rivers and lakes are identified as spirit entities that God sent on a mission and assigned to specific places on earth. Each is thus represented as a *Kra*, a soul, and an offspring of the Creator. Like the rivers, lakes and the sea, all other things in nature that derive from God have each a spiritual personality, and each carries its own message and destiny to fulfil on earth. The Akan proverb that says: '*Oson Dabo ne kra, nna oson Owi ne kra*. (The *kra* of the *Dabo* is different from the *kra* of the *Owi*)', makes it evident that indeed the Akan consider animals to possess each their own *kra* and destiny. Similarly, different plants possess each a spiritual essence and carry their own destiny.

The message or destiny that God gives to individuals only God knows. What becomes manifest to human beings is the particular place and time that God gives to each creature to dwell and accomplish their tasks on earth. Akan use the words *Nkrabea* and *Hyebere* interchangeably to refer to fate or destiny. However, this myth makes it clear that God assigns a place (*bea*) to each individual entity and also a time (*ber*) to each to arrive on earth. While Akan consider the place to which a *kra* is sent – the family into which an individual is born – an important indicator of a person's destiny, they also consider the day of birth a critical index to their destiny. The day of birth of an Akan is called *kra da* and this day gives every Akan a day name *kradzin* (*kradin*). It is the day name that is used to invoke a person's soul and it is on the day of birth that a person can call their *kra* after a serious sickness or accident or some good fortune to receive thanks and honour.

In many myths about predestination in West Africa – among the Fon of Dahomey, Yoruba, the Ibo of Nigeria etc, the existence of evil or uncertainty in human life is represented by a trickster figure that is capable of interfering with the mission that the Supreme Being assigns to each person. To accomplish the mission of the Supreme Being, each individual existent has to struggle against some negative force or forces. It is this negative force that the goat represents in the Akan myth about the water bodies. Thus the myth posits that to each creature there is something that it has to avoid. And such things as can destroy the purpose of an existent, humans have to know and avoid.

Avoidances – General and specific

In all Akan communities, there are taboos regarding rivers, streams and lakes. There are local taboos unique to particular rivers, streams and lakes. Some rivers cannot be fished. Fish from some rivers cannot be fried. Some rivers and lakes are closed to fishing periodically and ritually opened. Lake Bosomtwe in Ashanti hates dugout boats – and so only floating logs are used over it. But there are also general rules about rivers and lakes. It is taboo to cross lakes and rivers with dead bodies – and so at each river crossing, those transporting the dead people must pour libation to the spirits of the rivers to permit the crossing. Women in their menstrual period cannot go near any water body or cross them. A few months ago it came to the attention of the public that girls in a certain town in the Central Region of Ghana were restrained by this taboo from crossing a river to go to school during their menstrual period. Fear of unknown mystical sanction has enabled these taboos to persist – and so tradition trumps modernity.

The Sea has its Rest Day, observed on Tuesday. When a whale beaches dead, it is taken as an indication that the sea is polluted. A ban would be put on fishing till the funeral and burial rituals are performed for the whale. Like the sea, the Earth too has its rest day – Friday in some communities and Thursday in others.

The general awareness of the spiritual obligations that surround water-bodies constitutes the force behind cultural regimes for nature conservation and the protection of special sites across Ghana. Traditional taboos and regulations, ritual cycles and fear of mystical sanctions constitute potent tools for protecting water and forest resources. Ghana has more than three thousand community protected zones or nature sanctuaries; and these have come under serious threat as new religious convictions undermine the indigenous world-view and the crave for money by illegal logging and mining activities destroys pristine forests and water resources in several areas of Ghana.

Fourth Proposition: All Existents interact and Human Beings have a responsibility to ensure the Integrity of Entities and the Harmony of Cosmic Order

The African belief that all entities have spiritual relationships and interact and that, dependent as humans are on both living and non-living things, communities have a compelling need to protect and preserve the natural order can best be elaborated by looking at the ways in which Africans express these beliefs in customary norms and practices in various domains of life. It is in customary practices and lived experience that we see the convergence between divinity and experience – the supernatural and natural, the spiritual and material, the imperceptible and perceptible of life. Africans share spiritual relationships with plants, animals and mineral objects – and identify and name clans after certain animals, plants and inanimate objects – and this kinship with non-human entities forms the basis of how humans interact with these objects.

In the following, I attempt to explore how the cardinal propositions of African spirituality manifest in African customary life and traditions – focusing on the domains in which African cultures bring out the spirituality of water as the means by which humans realise the

existential bond between mankind and nature and affirm the relationship between humanity and the Creator.

Part Two: Divinity and Experience

The African Perception of the World – the Sky and the Earth are the Poles of Human Spirituality – and Water from the sky supports life on earth

African myths of creation and the Akan myth on predestination presented above posit that African spirituality has two existential poles. All entities have their beginning in the Creator in the realms above, and all entities come to dwell and realise their destiny on earth in the realms below. The African therefore relies on the relationship between the sky and earth, the spiritual and the material to explain all events in life.

Many African myths state that the Sky and the Earth were originally very close together. The sky separated from the earth because humans gave offence to God. An Akan myth has it that the sky pulled away from the earth because an old lady kept striking the sky with her pestle when pounding *fufu* (prepared from staples like cassava, yam, cocoyam and plantain). And other versions abound. Godfrey Lienhardt who studied Dinka religion in great detail observed:

“According to the Dinka of the Sudan, the first woman, trying to pound more grain than God had allowed for human requirements, struck God and the Sky with a long-handled pestle. Offended, God withdrew from the earth. And men have since had to propitiate him, especially, in sickness and death, both originally unknown” (Godfrey Lienhardt, 1964: 173).

The Dinka myth would suggest that human greed caused the separation between the earth and the sky.

In spite of the separation, however, Africans see that life is dependent on the interactive relationship between the earth and sky – between God and nature. The earth bears and sustains life only when it receives water from the skies; and it is the rains from above that determine the natural cycles of life and death on earth, the rhythms of the seasons, the cycles of human activities, especially of planting and harvesting, and in many communities, the celebration of our spirituality and our gratitude to the Creator. It is the perception of the sky as the source of water that makes water an ever-present reminder of the divine origins of life and concentrates our minds on our continuous dependence on the Creator above.

In some African cultures, the word for rain is the same as the word for the Supreme Being. According to Mbiti, “the Elgeyo, Igbo, Suk, Tonga and others personify rain as a divinity, a supernatural being or son of God; others, associate God and rain so closely that the same word (or its cognate) is used for both” (p53). The Ga people of Ghana call God *Nyogmo* and the Ewutu, the coastal Guans of Ghana, call God *Nyumpo*. Both cultures use the same words

for God and for rain. So when the Ga says ‘*Nyomo mba*’, it means the rain is coming, but it could also mean God is coming.

Among the Lele of Kasai “Spring-water and rain-water are spirit things because they are essential for life” (p11 African Worlds); and because of the spiritual power of rivers, the Lele also consider fish to be inherently full of power and dangerous. In some cultures, it is believed that it is God who replenishes water bodies with water and with fish. According to Evans-Pritchard (Nuer Religion, 1956: 81), “Rivers and streams have a general spiritual significance for all Nuer because they are associated with *buk man deang*, which is the spirit of all rivers.”

When Africans speak of rivers and streams, lakes and seas as the offspring of God, the reason is not far to seek. Rainfall is the common origin of waters in all water bodies. Oceans, rivers, lakes, waterfalls, wells and springs are all receptacles of water from above; and so as God begets rain and rains give life to water bodies, water bodies are begotten by God. The Akan myth calls water bodies the first born of the Creator clearly to suggest that to create living things God had to create water and water bodies first.

The experience that makes war divine is this. Between the poles of creation, the sky and the earth as the respective abodes of God and created things, humanity perceives water as a sign of God’s continuous and active engagement in an existential struggle of living things to keep alive. Formed above in the skies, water reaches the earth to determine the cycles of growth and decay, life and death. And take away water, no living thing, human, plant or animal can live to fulfil their divine purpose on earth.

The Spirituality of Human Community and Water

The Akan proverb says: “When human beings descend from above, they alight in a human habitation.” It is in a human habitation that each person resides to realise the mission God gave them. Africans therefore perceive a human community – a village, town or a state entity as a spiritual body and explain their spiritual character in a number of ways. First, the community is said to comprise *akra ateasefo* (spirits of earthly existence), *awu ako* (the dead and gone) and the yet to arrive on earth, future generations. Each community has its own spiritual personality and abiding character, name and identity.

Second, every human community has its norms, customs and traditions; and as it is the norms, customs and traditions of a community that enable individuals to live together and support each other for each individual to achieve their divine mission on earth, Africans consider the customs and traditions of their communities as sacred and divine. It is for this reason that no infraction of custom or tradition is too small or insignificant to escape the sanctions of the custodians of the community – the leaders of communities, the ancestors and the Supreme God.

Third, the African community has a spiritual bond with all creation – such while human activities and ways of life impact on nature, nature impacts on culture and human existence. African communities survive on life support systems – the plants and animals and the rivers

and lakes that surround the community. The bond between the community and its forests and lakes is a spiritual one; such that they constitute together a unified spiritual entity that lives and dies together. For each community therefore, the life support system is a sacred heritage received from the past, to sustain the living members of a community to be kept and transmitted undiminished for future generations. The common element without which neither humans nor plants and animals can survive, is water and the water bodies that a community depends on. In African libation, as we pray for life, we also pray for the plants and animals on which we sustain life and pray also for rainfall – a unified spirituality.

In many African cultures, the establishment of a new settlement requires rites to be performed. The community has to appropriate space and resources from the habitat of plants and animals and spirits. Thus, though life in the settlement is dependent on the ecological resources around the settlement, there is always a sense of a mystical confrontation and conflict between the human habitation and the non-human habitation. The struggle persists and intensifies as a settlement expands and pushes its frontiers. It is to regulate this and maintain the dignity and integrity of the physical nature of the niche in which a settlement develops that African cultures reverence, repair and propitiate nature in annual festivals.

The three ways in which African cultures mark the spirituality of community help to explain why in African value systems the material resources that provide the vital necessities of life for a community fall under collective ownership and a communalistic code of ethics. Important as the individual is in society, the African collective holds and distributes the necessities of life in a manner that assures that no individual life is compromised. Collective ownership requires that all natural resources be accessible to all members of a community; and therefore prescribes a culture of solidarity and sharing. In African cultures, to propagate the sharing of resources and distributive justice, individualism, self-centeredness, selfishness and aggressive acquisitiveness are treated as negative or counter-values in consideration of the spirituality of community and of nature's resources.

Spirituality in the Domestic Realm: The *Nyame Dua* (God's Tree) and Water for Protection of life

The household has a special spiritual significance in African community life. It is the primary space for living; and provides security and care for its occupants. Everything in a household has some spiritual essence – the buildings, hearth, knives, mortars and pestles, grinding stones, hoes, bows and arrows, bathrooms, brooms and all cleansing tools, .

The entrance of household is not only the dividing line between the internal domain and the external domain, it is the point of convergence of the sacred and the profane, and of the benign and dangerous spiritual forces. The household is for procreation and for protection of life.

R. S. Rattray and Eva Meyerowitz have left us similar descriptions of a practice associated with Akan households, which, though long extinct, presents a beautiful image of the spirituality of water in the primary domain of life. .

According to Meyerowitz,

“Every compound, apart from the Queen-mother’s, always contained an altar dedicated to the Supreme Being, *Nyame*, and called *Nyame Dua*, literally, *Nyame’s tree*’ (pl. 12). It was simply a wooden post planted in the earth, with three (sometimes four) branches lopped short. In the fork of these three branches stood, and still stands in many villages, a vessel containing water and a neolithic celt, called *Nyame akuma*, ‘*Nyame’s axe*’, symbol of strength and power. The people in the compound bless themselves with this water, praising *Nyame*, and also give her thanks-offering as protectress of their dwelling.” (1958)

According to Meyerowitz, the members of an Akan household erected the *Nyame dua* to protect the household from lightening. The Akan believe that the stone axe, *Nyame Akuma* (God’s axe) is the missile with which God destroys things on earth; and according to folklore this stone axe is found wherever lightning strikes (though scientifically informed people accept that it is a common man-made object found in stone-age settlement sites). Whether a brass pan overflowing with rainwater could act as a lightning conductor, would be worth investigating. The people believed no lightning struck a house with a *Nyame dua* win it. Beyond that, they used the rain-water that collected in the vessel on the *Nyame dua*, to sprinkle on themselves to purify, protect and bring them good fortune. The water came directly from God and had spiritual and divine power.

It is necessary to explain that the food deposited under the tree would most likely have been offered to *Asaase Yaa*, the Spirit of the earth or to the ancestral spirits of the household and not to *Nyame*. Akans believe that God does not need anything from human beings, unlike the minor spirits or divinities whose vital energy can diminish or depreciate and requires restoration or augmentation. Thus the elder who pours libation, lifts the water or gin to the sky and says “We show it to you we do not offer you to drink” – and then pours it to Mother Earth *Asaase Yaa* and the nature and ancestral spirits.

The Spirituality of the Kinship Group

While a household is a spiritual domain, the occupants of a household live together as an indissoluble spiritual entity. Across Africa, family groups express their unity and corporate identity not only in terms of blood relationships, but also in terms of their collective ownership of land, creeks or herds of cattle. In many cultures, corporate lineage groups also claimed to have some spiritual bond to some objects of nature – the expression of the idea that humans have relationships with other created things.

Rev. John Mbiti makes this fascinating observation about the African concept of kinship:

“The deep sense of kinship, with all that it implies, has been one of the strongest forces in traditional African life. Kinship is reckoned through blood and betrothal (engagement and marriage). It is kinship which controls social relationships between people in a given community: it governs marital customs and regulations; it determines the behaviour of one individual towards another. Indeed, this sense of kinship binds together the entire life of the ‘tribe’, and is even extended to cover animals, plants and non-living objects through the

‘totemic’ system. Almost all the concepts connected with human relationship can be understood and interpreted through the kinship system. This, it is, which largely governs the behaviour, thinking and whole life of the individual in the society of which he is a member” (1969: 104).

Through what Mbiti describes as the totemic system, Africans would at times speak of the death of an animal as the death of an ancestor and perform funeral rites for it. And this practice would only have served to engender in the African a reverential attitude towards a diverse range of objects in creation.

In this regard, the Akan trace their blood relations through their mothers; and each matrilineal group identifies itself ‘descendants of the parrot (*Akoo Nana*), the Fox, the Lion, the Dog, Plantain or the Bead. But Akan also believe that they derive their character traits from their fathers – have special spiritual bonds through their fathers to certain spiritual entities. Busia observed that in a list of twelve groupings of these agnatic spirits that Danquah obtained, six are rivers, one is a lake and one refers to the sea (African Worlds p. 1908).

The Spirituality of the Individual Entities implies individual Moral Responsibility – Life Cycle Rituals

The belief that every entity God has created has a divine nature and purpose on earth suggests not only that every creature is worthy of respect, but that for human beings should be obliged as moral agents to respect the integrity of human life as well as the integrity of all other created things. The Akan therefore posits that God has ordained that individuals be morally culpable for their offences. The Akan proverb says: “It is because of Evil (*Bone*) that God gave each person their own name” and how Akan get their names from God is evident in the Akan naming system.

In Akan culture the day of the week on which the child is born is the child’s *kra da* (the soul day) – rites for the *kra* can be most efficacious on this day. The day of birth also gives the newly born its soul name (*kra din*). The male and female names of each day of the week are considered the sacred names to which each individual’s soul responds. This is the name used to call the *kra* of a person for various ritual purposes – to purify the *kra* for some sin committed, to thank God for some good fortune, or to seek support for a venture to be undertaken.

Besides the *kra din*, the Akan child receives another name – the family given name (*Abusua din*). And this too is clearly from God. The family name tells the family into which God sent an individual to live to realise their destiny – and one’s position in a family or sibling group often determines the obligations and privileges that one would have in life.

In recognition of the principle that God gave each individual a name because of good and evil, the Akan naming ceremony makes clear the fundamental moral obligation to distinguish between truth and falsehood, good and evil.

The Akan naming ceremony is performed eight days after the birth of the child. If the baby dies before it is given a name, it is not considered human and it is not mourned. So the

ceremony marks in effect the giving of human identity to the child and the incorporation of the child into human community. The first part of the ceremony is the ceremony of Out-Dooring the child. The grandmother or an elderly woman of the household has to bring the baby out of confinement into the light of day. With the baby in her arms, she has to step across the doorway three times, praying for long life, good health and prosperity for the child. And three times as she does this, she throws water on the roof of the house to drop on the child like dewfall or rainfall, with the prayer that the elements receive the newborn child and make no illness attack it.

The Naming Ceremony then follows. The father of the child invites a family elder or someone of repute in the community to perform the ceremony. To begin the ceremony, the elder receives the child and standing prays asking God to bless the child to grow and realise its destiny for the benefit of the family and the community. He then sits, puts the child on his lap and asks the father of the child to give him the name he has chosen to give the child – and proceeds to perform naming ceremony using two elements, water and gin. He dips his middle finger into the water and touches the tongue of the child saying, “Kwesi Otu, or Esi Otuwa (if this is the name given by the father to the boy or girl), ‘when you say it is water (*Nsu*), it is water’. He next dips his finger into the gin and touches the tongue of the baby and says “Kwesi Otu or Esi Otuwa, when you say it is alcohol (*Nsa*), it is alcohol.” He repeats the act with water and gin three times altogether; and then hands over the child to the mother or grandmother with the advice that it should be accorded respect and raised to fulfil its potential. All adults present then taste the gin and mention the name of the baby saying, ‘Kwesi Otu, if you have arrived, stay alive’.

The Akan naming ceremony confers on the child the dignity of a human being and a moral person. As a moral person possessing the uniquely human capacity to distinguish between truth and falsehood, good and evil, right and wrong, the individual has to accept personal responsibility for all their actions; and it is this capacity to discern right from wrong with the commitment to speak the truth that makes the individual capable of participating in society. The Akan say to a person who appears unable to distinguish good and evil in their actions “*Wo nnye nipa*” (You are not a human being”).

In this connection I find certain Zande customary practices of comparative interest. According to Evans-Pritchard “a pregnant woman blows mouthful of water on to the ground from time to time and tells Mbori that she has not stolen the goods of another and that she is his hands for good for good or for ill”(1962: 168). Also, “When the Zande performs his daily ablutions his final act is to wash his mouth with a handful of water and he expectorates it on the ground nearby, using one of the many variable formulae according to the occasion. ...” And one such prayers goes: “If I have failed in anything, if I have spoken words of anger, all is finished. I blow out water as a sign of my good will” (ibid. opcit).

The connection between water and Akan spirituality is explicit here. Water does not only represent the values of truthfulness and goodness and gin falsehood and evil; water also stands for our higher spiritual state and responsibilities, while gin stands for our humanity, degraded state and lower inclinations. The Akan is called to ensure that his *kra* is pure and his

name is unsullied. This is why the Akan say – *Enim guase mfata okani ba* (The Akan person should avoid Disgrace). To the Akan without the confidence that individual citizens can be trusted to speak the truth, there can be no mutual trust and without mutual trust there can be no communication and social solidarity. This, in principle, is the basis of governance at the level of the citizen – truth speaking should be the basis of all community transactions. This, however, is also the basis of the rule of law, leadership and rulership. Solomon prayed to God to grant him the capacity to distinguish between right and wrong, so he might be able to rule his people well.

Akan Nubility Rites

Whereas in some African societies initiation rites are performed to usher both boys and girls into adulthood, in Akan societies it is for girls particularly that such transitional rites are performed. Akan, strongly matrilineal people, consider the transition of a maiden into marriage and motherhood to require serious instructions about the body, inculcation of moral values, spiritual empowerment and public approval. And it is these ideas that stand out in a detailed account Peter Sarpong (1977) of the nubility rites of the Ashanti.

The nubility rite for the Asante girl takes place only after the girl child has had her first menstruation. Menstruation puts a girl in a transitional crisis. If she becomes pregnant before she goes through the nubility rite, her parents face disgrace and the girl and her partner would be harshly punished and cast out of society. As the public act for admitting a girl into adulthood, the *Bragoro* (literally *bra* (life) *goro* (play or dance)), cannot be performed without the authorisation of the queen-mother of the village or town. In this sense *Bragoro* is also a means of controlling behaviour and constitutes a social mechanism and an important instrument of governance.

According to Peter Sarpong, the opening scene of *Bragoro* occurs at a village square. After the public announcement of the menstruation for the ritual process to begin, the young woman is dressed and brought out to sit on a stool like a queen to receive congratulations and blessing in the form of gifts from members of the community.

“A brass basin (*yaawa*) is filled with water, in which the leaves of the *adwira* plant, an egg, and a dry okro fruit are put, and placed near her. Into this basin are thrown any oncoming gifts in the form of coins. Another woman sitting next to the basin dips her right hand into it each time a donor’s money falls into it and taking out the leaves, sprinkles the initiand with water”(p22).

In many rites of the Akan, the egg represents life and, in political symbolism, power – the says “*Tumi tese kesua*” (Power is like an egg). The *adwira* leaves are used to arrest pollution and neutralise negative spiritual forces; and the okro stands for fecundity – the seeds representing the children in the womb of a woman. In effect, each gift that is thrown into the water, undergoes purification, so that the blessings of the gift might go through the water to be sprinkled on the maiden.

The spirituality of water again stands out in the final and climactic scene of the *Bragoro*. The girl is taken to a stream for what Sarpong called a ritual bath, though Sarpong's own account seems to suggest it represents something more. At the riverside, the girl "is given a piece of rag to cover her genitals. An elderly then plunges her three times into the river (a slightly different practice obtains in some places whereby only the girls buttocks are made to touch the surface of the running water) p. 29.. And, after some other acts, comes the prayer to the river: "Let no mishap come her way. If a man has intercourse with her, let her be pregnant at once." (p30)

Sarpong continues:

"As the officiant proceeds, she invokes the aquatic spirit to help the novice make use the particular part of the girl's body being washed, for its proper purpose." (p30)

Clearly the purpose of this dipping process, is use the waters of the river to impart spiritual powers to the faculties of the maiden so they can function as they should in a woman and a mother.

In sum then, rites of passage like the naming ceremony and the *Bragoro*, play an important role in imparting the values of society to individuals in different stages of life. Each stage requires the individual to carry out prescribed roles and functions and each requires spiritual protection and empowerment. Each station in life has its own moral obligations; and the individual goes through life by rising through levels of spirituality to tackle higher moral responsibilities and fulfil the mission God sent them to accomplish on earth. From the community perspective, rites of passage constitute part of the ensemble of instruments of soft power that enable society to control individuals and keep them committed to their different roles in society. In many rites of transition from birth to death African cultures employ water to impart the values of society and demands of personal spirituality. In many African cultures each person on the journey from this world to the spiritual world, has to cross a river.

Spirituality in Governance – the Mechanisms of Beliefs, Values, Sacred Rules, Ritual Acts, and Institutions

Governance concerns the maintenance of order in a political community through the use of various instruments of power. The discourse above illustrates that African cultures link two things relevant to the stability of societies and state systems. To the extent that the greatest threat to life and social stability arises from the natural environment, African cultures take the management of the ecology as an important aspect of the functions of governance. To this end, beliefs, customs and practices associated with the natural environment for the protection of biodiversity become critical to good governance. The essence of the spirituality of water in African life is that water enables us to make the dependence of human life on nature an important dimension of the ideology and practice of governance in so many societies.

African cultures present a number of paradigms relating to environmental and community governance. One paradigm places the responsibility for the health of the environment on the highest power in the land. Another places responsibility for the environment on all members

of society. Between these two paradigms, a third paradigm makes the ruler and subjects jointly responsible for the health and proper care of the nature and the environment.

J.D. and E. J. Krigge wrote of The Luvedu of the Transvaal (Daryll Forde, the African World):

“The queen is ‘Transformer of the Clouds’, the changer of the seasons, and guarantor of their cyclic regularity, but she can exercise her powers auspiciously only in certain conditions and in agreement with the ancestors.”

“For the regulation of the cosmic forces the queen relied not only on her divinity but also upon the royal rain-medicines and, in the last resort, on the agreement of the royal ancestor spirits. To prevent the weakening of the rain medicine it must be revitalized by being given the first termites and the first fruits each year, and occasionally parts of a black sheep or, in the **ol** days, a human being.

“Rain charms are liable to weaken (*fighella*) or become defiled (*khuma*) by certain deviations from the normal course of nature unless special precautions are taken. Twins, babies cutting their upper teeth before their lower, women dying in pregnancy, abortions and miscarriages, men dying of *dere*, a deadly coughing disease believed to be contracted by having sexual intercourse with a woman who has had a miscarriage or abortion or whose child has died before weaning – all these deviations which contaminate the earth, causing it to be ‘hot’, and therefore have to be buried in wet soil or cooled with rain medicine. The polluted corpse (called *pukudi*, the opposite of *fuga*) is thought of as thrusting up an arm and waving it about to disperse the rain.

“It is the duty of the queen each year to *thea* or ‘establish’ the season propitiously for her people.”

“If there is drought or if the rain does not come at its appropriate time, people say the queen has not changed the year properly and steps are taken to approach her. Royal relatives may approach her personally or complain in her hearing that she is killing her people by withholding rain.” (African worlds pp 65, 66)

The Lele of Kasai show us the second paradigm. According to Mary Douglas (African Worlds), the Lele require all persons living in a village to be at peace with each other.

The village faces its own forest, and through it the spiritual world, as a single whole.... In religion the solidarity of each village is such that an offence by one member affects adversely the whole village, and the barrenness of a woman or the failure of an individual hunter may be attributed to the general condition of the village in which they live”(1954: 13)..

The Lele village does not depend on a strong central authority to enforce compliance with the traditional rules relating to peace in the village and the health of the village forest. People are actuated by common beliefs about the impact of individual behaviour on the forest and society to maintain peace and to observe the rules of behaviour that tradition says help to preserve the forest.

Among the Akan and many other cultures in Africa, the responsibility for keeping the peace of the community and maintaining harmony with the ecological system is deemed to belong both to the citizens and the ruler of the nation. Lack of rainfall, famine, strange diseases and unexpected events would be attributed to the individual offences of the members of society or the moral offences and failing spiritual strength of the ruler. Besides punishing individuals for acts that offend the ancestors, nature and the Supreme Being, the king or village elder has to perform rites to cleanse society, restore the balance of nature and seek reconciliation with the ancestors and with God.

And it is worthy of note that at the heart of the relationship between social order and the natural order in all these three paradigms is rainfall which, to the African, God withholds to indicate the impact of human behaviour on the environment.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Water and Cultural Spirituality

Water plays an important role in African spirituality for reasons that are not difficult to discern. Water is not only the element uniquely identified with physical existence and the survival of human, plant and animal life, water is also the vital common link between all living things – the element that all living things share – and, as Africans see it, the one thing that reflects the dependency of all living things on the Sky God.

Water also creates awareness of the fundamental qualities or properties – as distinct from substance – that are critical to sustaining human life in the spiritual as in the physical state. Water gives life and well-being only when clean and pure. The purity of water is what assures wellness of human life; and impurity or pollution of water causes illness and compromises life. As water makes evident the need for purity for good physical health, so does it make evident the need for purity, truthfulness, goodness, honesty and transparency as qualities of personal life that cultures make the hallmark of moral discipline and spiritual health and vitality of individuals and communities..

Human settlements are created near water bodies that serve as a lifeline for human survival and also for the flora and fauna in the ecological system. In the celebrating community life, African cultures invariably celebrate water bodies as sources of life and call them divine, indeed, the first offspring of God. When the last water bodies dry up, forests would disappear and no human settlement would survive.

In African cultures water occupies a special place in the hierarchy of existential values. The value of water is only next to the value of life; and so water is an ever present element in religious and social celebration of life – in festivals and rites of individual and community transitions. Regular rainfall and proper seasons we take as the sign of God's favour; and we see irregular droughts and famine as a sign of God's displeasure for human offences – a constant reminder that we have obligations to the Creator as well as to nature.

In this connection as droughts and famine pose serious existential threat to life and engender restlessness, confusion, conflict and war, the protection of the environment and of water

sources becomes an imperative of governance – indeed a priority. The culture of spirituality of life creates an ideology that unifies the quest for material and social prosperity with the need to preserve and protect the harmony of nature and the integrity of the seas, rivers, lakes, plants and animals in nature. This makes the conservation of nature an imperative of good governance and peace among peoples.

Africa cannot ask the world to come back to the affirmation of the spirituality of nature or the spirituality of water in particular. However, the world has reached a critical point where it can and must assist Africa to find ways of using the belief in the spirituality of nature to preserve the seas, rivers, lakes and forests in Africa as a lifeline for humanity into the future.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beidelman, T.O., 'Right and Left hand among the Kaguru: a note on symbolic classification, *Africa*, 31, 1961.
- Beidelman, T.O., 'Pig (Guluwe): an essay on Ngulu sexual symbolism and ceremony'. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 20, 1964.
- Busia, K.A. 'The Ashanti of the Gold Coast', *African Worlds*, edit, Daryll Forde, I.A.I. OUP., 1954.
- Danquah, Joseph Boakye, *The Akan Doctrine of God*. London Frank Cass, 1968..
- Dauglas, Mary 'The Lele of kasai' in *African Worlds*, dit by Daryll Forde, I.A.I. OUP. 1954.
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E., *Nuer Religion*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1956.
- Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 'Zande Theology' in *Essays in Social Anthropology*, Faber and Faber, London, 1962.
- Hagan George P., 'Dondology: Music, Mind and Matter', in *Discourses in African Musicology*, edited by Kwesi Ampene et al. Michigan Publishers, USA., 2015.
- Idowu, E. Bolaji, *Olodumare God in Yoruba Beliefs*, Longmans Nigeria, Ikeja, 1962.
- Krigge J.D. and Krigge E. J., 'The Lovedu of the Transvaal', in *African Worlds*, edit, Daryll Forde, 1954.
- Lienhardt Godfrey, 'The Shilluk of the Upper Nile', in *African Worlds* , edit, Daryll forde, 1954.
- Lienhardt Godfrey, *Divinity and Experience, The Religion of the Dinka*, 1961.
- Lienhardt Godfrey, *Social Anthroopology*, London OUP, 1964.
- Mbiti John S. *African Religion and Philosophy*, London, 1969.
- Mercier, P, ' The Fon of Dahomey', in *African Worlds*, 1954.
- Meyerowitz, Eva L.R. *The Akan of Ghana, Their Ancient Belie*, Faber and Faber, London, 1958.
- Nketia Kwabena J.H., *Drumming in Akan Communities of Ghana*, Edinburgh and London: University of Ghana and Thomas Nelson and sons ltd. 1963.
- Rattray, R>S., *Religion and /Art in Ashanti*, London, OUP, 1927.
- Rigby Peter, 'Some Gogo Rituals of Purification: An Essay on Social and Moral Categories', *Cambridge Papers in social Anthropology*, No. 5 *Dialectic in Practical Religion*, Cambridge at the university Press, 1968.
- Sarpong Peter, *Girls' Nubility Rites in Ashanti*, Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1977.

Whiteley W. H. 'Colour-Words and Colour-Values: The Evidence from Gusii in Modes of Thought, edit. Robin Horton and Ruth Finnegan, Faber and Faber, 1973.