

THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE OF GOD THROUGH THE EYES OF AN AKAN WOMAN

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WRITING ABOUT AFRICA IS A hazardous enterprise. One needs to draw up many parameters and make explicit the extent of the study. This becomes even more difficult considering the subject in hand. Whose experience of God are we dealing with? What is the extent of the Africa we are talking about? From the Mediterranean to the Cape of Good Hope there have been primal religious experiences of God issuing, for instance, in the building of the pyramids and continuing to undergird the annual festivals celebrated by West Africans. There are Muslims from Cape Verde to the Red Sea and down to Dar and throughout the continent, some of them having roots going to the beginnings of Islam while others are recent converts. The same goes for Christians. Africa also hosts Hindus and Sikhs and Buddhists and many others. We are therefore wanting to talk about the experience of God in a multi-religious context.

To create a handle for the subject we shall limit ourselves to the Primal Religion (designated African Religion, AR), as it has been documented by recent studies, and the new Christianity that Africa is living in our days. Geographically we shall limit ourselves to Africa south of the Sahara. The scope of the content will be guided by the experiences of God I have gathered through reading and participation in events that have afforded me the possibility of hearing Africans talk about God. I have in mind the traditional notions as captured by the early African theologians from the AR, the experience of God in South Africa in the days of the struggle against racism, and the emerging profile of God being sketched by African women through creative literature and theological reflection. But first we need to establish the nature of the reality of God in African cosmology and culture.

The living God

'The fool says in his heart "There is no God".' In traditional Africa there are no such 'fools'. In his inaugural lecture delivered at Ibadan in 1974, Professor Bolaji Idowu discussed 'the reality and unreality of God' under the title 'Obituary: God's or man's?', bringing to that university the British 'God is dead' debate of the 1960s. Idowu believes that 'man's estimate of himself and his destiny, his interpretation of the phenomena of the universe and his philosophy of history depend upon this one central point: belief in God, because He is; or unbelief . . .'. Elsewhere Idowu asserts that 'God is universal and so is revelation'. Here he agrees with the Tanzanian who said that as people everywhere see the one sun, so they all have the one God.¹ On the other hand, Betty Goviden, in her article 'In search of our own wells', quotes Malusi Mpumlwanas, a South African poet, who asks 'What do I mean when I say I believe in God? . . . Is God of the "Die Stem" and "Nkosi Sikelela" one and the same God?'²

In traditional Africa, that is, Africa when people are being themselves, discounting Christianity, Islam and western norms, God is experienced as an all-pervading reality. God is a constant participant in the affairs of human beings, judging by the everyday language of West Africans of my experience. A Muslim never projects into the future nor talks about the past without the qualifying phrase *insha Allah*, 'by the will of Allah'. Yoruba Christians will say 'DV' ('God willing'), though few can tell you its Latin equivalent, and the Akan will convince you that all is 'by the grace of God'. Nothing and no situation is without God. The Akan of Ghana say *Nsem nyina ne Onyame* ('all things/affairs pertain to God'). That Africans maintain an integrated view of the world has been expressed by many. In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela writes:

My father was an unofficial priest and presided over ritual . . . and local rites . . . he did not need to be ordained, for traditional religion of the Xhosa is characterized by a cosmic wholeness so that there is little distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the natural and the supernatural.³

The Yoruba respond to prayer with *ASE*, the divine and highly potent power with which Olodumare (God) created the universe and maintains its physical laws.⁴ The belief in the all-pervading power and presence of God endows the universe with a sacramental nature.⁵ The African view of the world is nourished by a cosmology that is founded on a Source Being, the Supreme God, and other divine beings that are

associated with God. As God is the foundation of life, so nothing happens without God. God lives, God does not die and so indeed humans do not die. Even when we do not occupy a touchable body, we still live on.

The way we experience God is portrayed in the language we use about God, especially the names by which God is known. Early researchers into AR like G. Parrinder, E. B. Idowu and J. S. Mbiti have recorded for us several African names of God with copious annotations, which it is not necessary to rehearse at this stage.⁶ What needs to be said is that these names are still current and that more names descriptive of people's experience of God are available in proverbs, songs and prayers. These names, says Idowu, are not mere labels: 'They are descriptive of character and depict people's experience of God'.

When words fail, symbols take over. For the Akan of Ghana the Adinkra symbols, the minuscule figures for gold weights and those on royal maces, include many that are theophorous. The star in Adinkra is a symbol that says 'Like the star, I depend on God and not on myself'. The symbol of hope says 'God, there is something in the heavens, let it reach my hands'. The dependence of the existence of the human spirit on the spirit of God is expressed in another symbol; and the more well known *Gye Nyame* is the Akan expression of the belief that without God nothing holds together, and is variously interpreted as 'except God' or 'unless God' – God is experienced as the very foundation of existence.⁷ All these examples demonstrate the difficulty of translation and the inadequacy of words to express our experience of God.

People believe that all the good and well-being they enjoy come from God, and that if one is not yet enjoying well-being it is because one's time has not yet come. 'AR holds that the world and nature are good gifts that God entrusted to human beings: they provide nourishment for life, security and home for our bodies' (Lutheran World Federation [LWF] document on AR). The experience of God as beneficent is not only Muslim or Christian, but a living faith of Africans that has been reinforced by these 'missionary' religions.

Experiencing the deposit of faith

The current interest in the nature of Christian missions has sparked off studies in the theology of religions, inter-religious relations, multi-religious communities, gospel and cultures, and has therefore renewed interest in the religion of 'the other'. It is in this context that the LWF established a working group on AR which is described as 'an indigenous system of beliefs and practices integrated into the culture and

world views of African peoples'. This original religion of Africans expresses the African experiences of God and pervades all cultural norms. All human relations are affected by the belief that we all belong together in God. *Onyame nti* (because of God, or for the sake of God), we act or refrain from acting. God is experienced as the sole creator and sustainer of all things, who expects human beings to be to God as children and to each other as siblings, and to respect the earth and other natural phenomena.

The belief in the unity of God goes with the unity of the cosmos. God's sustenance and beneficence are seen in the rain as in the sunshine. Indeed when the dark clouds begin to gather, some say the rain is angry, while others say God is angry. But even as we say *muna*, which in the human face is a sign of anger and displeasure, the *muna* of God issues forth in the blessing of the rain. If there is too much rain or flood, we do not attribute them to God but to the anger of the divinities that are associated with nature or the ancestors whom we may have wronged by some unethical behaviour or lack of reverence for what pertains to the spirit world. God always gives what is sufficient. The experience of God as good and the experience of evil becomes a challenge to Africans. In the tradition, some would say both come from God but that 'when God gives you disease, God also gives you the cure'.⁸

We experience the total dependence on God in AR in the prayers.⁹ God is the ultimate receiver of all prayers, so all libations begin with calling upon God. This God has been with Africans from the beginning and features in prayers and greetings, blessings and curses: 'God will pay you back' is feared as a most potent curse. People are discouraged from using it as it may rebound on those who use it when they deserve what they have received at the hands of those whom they curse. In AR it is not God who suffers from the evil we do to each other. God does not suffer at the hands of the exploiter and the oppressor, it is the individual who suffers. However, when individuals suffer through evil not of their doing, God who is the Creator of all humans demonstrates concern. Behind the unpronounceable curse is the expectation that God judges impartially, that God sees when we cheat and exploit the weak. Most important is the experience that God guards the weak. Often, when children and others deemed weak in society escape calamity, all agree that it is God's doing.

The immediacy of God in African affairs is also demonstrated through the God-related names we bear. Theophorous names like Nyamekye (gift of God) and Dardom (depend on God) are examples

from Akan names. Yoruba names beginning with Olu or Oluwa speak of human experience of God. In names we encounter the African ontology that is centred on God who is the source of life and cohesion, whose sovereignty over all cannot be questioned. We experience blessings when ideals like unity, community, caring, faithfulness, excellence, steadfastness, etc. abound among human beings, for in these we experience God.

God is experienced as the good parent, the grandparent *Nana*, a source of loving-kindness and protection. Some say *Nana* is father while others say *Nana* is mother, but the sentiment is the same: human beings experience a closeness to God which they describe in terms of motherhood and fatherhood. There was never any need to debate the existence of God. The challenge was always to discern God at work. Does God take sides? If so, whose side is God on, and why? The African experience of God is that ultimately God is on the side of the weak and the side of justice. No one can explain God. *Nsa baako ntumi nkata Onyame ani* (no single hand can cover the eye of God), and so Africans grant a plurality of approaches to God and experiences of God. Experiences of God vary according to the circumstances surrounding people's daily life. To illustrate this we now review some contemporary scenes that indicate shifts in the language about God that correspond to changed situations.

A contemporary shift in God-talk

The South African case is illustrative of how traditional Christian language about God is modified to cope with the people's experience of God at work. Alan Boesak, writing on 'Coming in out of the wilderness' in *Emergent gospel*, tells of Isaiah Shembe (1870–1935), the founder of an AIC (African independent church), and records the following statement made by him to people in his church:

You my people, were once told of a God who had neither arms nor legs, who cannot see, who has neither love nor pity. But Isaiah Shembe showed you God who walks on feet and who heals with his hands, and who can be known by men.¹⁰

In this church the African meets a God who loves and has compassion. Like Betty Goviden, Isaiah Shembe underlines the South African dilemma of a God who seems to decree injustice so as to favour some and oppress others. In this, as in other contexts, the experience of God as a healer and companion on life's journey is very important for Africans, and the 'exodus' from white-led churches into AICs, says

Boesak, is a theological statement. Further theological statements issuing out of the South African experience of God have been collected in *Black theology: the South African voice*¹¹ edited by Basil Moore. In South Africa, God was experienced by the Africans as active and operating with a whole lot of envoys when missionaries arrived to declare the whole system of AR idolatrous and without God. It has taken the AICs to re-establish African language about God in the vocabulary of African Christians. The South African experience of racism included a Christian God who was *boss* (the South African secret police) and partial to the dominant group. Black theology had to debunk the underlying theory that God is partial and has favoured the white race and subjected the black race to servitude under them. A fresh profile of God was needed to heighten the experience of God as compassionate and just. Revelation is through experience, and South Africans, black and white, were experiencing afresh the presence and essence of God in that situation. In this collection of essays we find a testimony to people's experience of God in South Africa.

In the context of apartheid, where white people set themselves up as gods who determined how the humanity of others was to develop, it was a real challenge to talk about the Source Being in meaningful terms. God in the apartheid system was depicted in patriarchal and hierarchical terms, lending support to the oppressive regime. Traditional Christian theological terms like omniscience and omnipotence fuelled the oppressive authoritarianism and were no use to a people who understood God as abhorring slavery. The Africans found white authority incongruent to their traditional philosophy in which authority derives from serving the unity and well-being of the whole people. Authority is not power over. Secondly, their traditional experience of being human is in life-giving relationships. This results in images of God that are freeing and that depict unity and wholeness.

God has to be experienced as the source of humanizing relationships of love, truth and justice, of mercy and kindness. New language developed and South Africans, both those of African descent and those of European and Asian descent who were awakened to the evil of apartheid, began to experience God as freedom. God as freedom became a theological symbol. They began to discard the anthropomorphic language which fuels sexism and to create relational expressions. In the contribution of Sabelo Ntwana and Basil Moore titled 'The concept of God in black theology', they state that 'God is love' means that God is a person who loves me, but 'God is freedom' means that God is the freedom made known in our history, calling us from

oppression into wholeness of life. God is this wholeness which exists in the spaces between people when their dignity and worth is mutually affirmed in love, truth, honesty, justice and caring warmth. God cannot be represented in any created object.¹²

Mokgethi Motlhabi in his essay declares that the Church had become an oppressive human organization. 'Only God is freedom.' By definition, therefore, our freedom is reflected in the image of God.¹³ From Motlhabi's experience in the South African context, God was to be imaged as 'both creator and liberator to all people in their entire situation not only religious but also social, political and economic'.¹⁴ Here is a call to the holistic cosmology of AR that is also biblical. In South Africa, God has been experienced as freedom and truth, as comrade and friend in the struggle for freedom.

Women's experiences of God

The South African re-imaging of God revolved around ridding themselves of the patriarchal model that supports the hierarchy, domination and sexism of their experience under apartheid. On this, the editors of *Black theology: the South African voice* wrote: 'The symbol "person" for God attracts both gender and color and has strong overtones of authority'. 'God is male' has had repercussions in Christianity that one cannot continue to uphold; therefore, 'Black theology of liberation that is relevant to South Africa cannot afford to perpetuate any form of domination, not even male domination; if its liberation is not human enough to include the liberation of women, it will not be liberation'.¹⁵ The constitution of the new South Africa has been true to this vision, a vision shared by many African women and articulated by women who have constituted themselves into a Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.¹⁶

Since in the Church in Africa men and the clergy presume to speak for God, and to demand the obedience of women, it is not easy to experience God as empowering and liberating when one is in the Church's ambit. Women experience God as the one who orders their subordination, who requires them to serve and never be served. God is the one who made them women, with a body deemed to be the locus of sin and impurity. God is experienced as source of women's oppression and Jesus as the author of the exclusion of women from sacramental roles in the Church. This is the God the Christian tradition wants women to love and obey.

For many women, however, this is a clear substitution of the will of God with the will of the male of the human species. Many women

experience God differently and cannot allow themselves to be subjected to cultural codes that mask the image of God in women. They experience God as empowering them with a spirituality of resistance to dehumanization. The androcentric Bible and Church have not been able to warp women's direct experience of God as a loving liberator.

The experience of God is articulated by these women in terms of a theology of creation and the implications of the Christian affirmation that 'God was in Christ'. The Christology of African women is centred on Jesus, friend and liberator who upholds the dignity of the humanity of women. They experience God in Christ as affirming the goodness of the sexuality of women, a factor that has been a pretext in both AR and Christianity for the diminution of women, discrimination against them and their marginalization from centres of power and the ministration of sacraments. Writings of women theologians from Africa are replete with these experiences.¹⁷

In *The will to arise* Teresia Hinga describes an experience of God in Christ that is very real to African women. Women often describe Jesus as the friend and companion who helps them bear life's burdens.¹⁸ There is also the prophetic Jesus who challenges oppressors and hypocrites but forgives sinners. In Jesus, women experience the God who is love. These experiences of God are affirmed by women in terms of 'nevertheless'. Women describe themselves as being in the image of God even if sexism denies their dignity.

In the women theologians' Circle, studies of God's hospitality, African hospitality and women in the household of God reveal women's experience of God as the Great Householder who empowers all and recognizes all as children in a parent's home and around the one table. They give expression to experiences of the God who sustains in times of dire need and who brings victory where it is least expected. They have constantly attributed all recognition and inclusiveness to the power of God which transforms human beings and human conditions. They express their experience of God in affirming cultural beliefs and practices, while they feel called by God to denounce and to deconstruct oppressive ones.

Despite sexism making it difficult for women to experience God in the Church, women have nevertheless witnessed to their experience of God in Christ, the one who brings salvation. While critical of certain aspects of biblical culture, they have nevertheless testified to their experience of the liberating God of the Bible in events in their own lives. Rereading Scripture, and especially the stories of women in the Bible, has brought God closer and enhanced the Presence around us.¹⁹

Women experience God as groaning with them as they participate in straining towards the birth of a new Africa free from sexism and racism, from poverty, exploitation and violence.

All experiences of 'love beyond self', all that is just and life-giving, are understood to be expressions of the presence of God.²⁰ All that enhances the dignity and worth of women is attributed to the presence of God. Women who take the image of God in human beings seriously see it in the faces of the starving children around them and in all those who suffer needlessly in Africa. When women live by caring, they are expressing the caring God in whose image they are created. Hopefully those who experience love and justice and compassion will realize that God is present.

Building up Christ's Body

How do these experiences of God in Africa relate to the building up of the Body of Christ in Africa? How do the churches respond to peoples' experiences of God? There is a revival of traditional African images of God, in the AICs and, to a lesser extent, in the 'Prosperity Christianity' that has taken Africa by storm for nearly two decades. The AICs have a profile of being prophetic-healing-praying churches. Africans move to these churches to hear God through prophets, as they used to do through the divination of AR. They seek and experience healing of body and soul and the efficacy of communing with God in prayer. Religion comes alive, it ceases to be a formal gathering with an ambience that is devoid of African culture. However, to a significant extent the charismatic-pentecostal-prosperity churches have returned Africans to the anti-African culture of the western missionaries. They maintain that to succeed you must move away from African beliefs related to ancestors, African practices and ritual, and seek 'deliverance' from evil and poverty through the Church, your new family. The music, song and dance, tithing and exuberant demonstration of spirituality may be similar in both types of church, but there is a marked difference in their attitudes to things African. Those who flock to join these churches presumably do so because they experience the presence of God they yearn for. These churches are building up the Body of Christ by seeking to meet the felt needs of people.

The South African experience of God as liberator has encouraged churches in other parts of Africa to confront governments with their lack of care for the populace. Contemporary experiences of atrocities committed in Africa by Africans on Africans lead people to ask 'Where is God in all this?' 'On whose side is God?' some have asked. Some

have surmised that God is apparently not interested in what happens to humanity in Africa.²¹ In other words, Africa experiences the absence of God when evil triumphs. This is the case with adherents of AR as with Christians. Mandela quotes from a speech given during his initiation into manhood which ends with the speaker saying:

I know that Qameta (God) is all-seeing and never sleeps, but I have a suspicion that Qameta may in fact be dozing. If this is the case, the sooner I die the better, because then I can meet him and shake him awake and tell him that the children of Ngubengcuku, the flower of the Xhosa nation, are dying.²²

When apartheid was formally dismantled, all Africa, indeed the whole of the justice-loving world, rejoiced and the religious gave glory to God. The presence of God has been demonstrated.

To build up Christ's body we need to demonstrate the liberating presence of God. When we are able to empower Zaire and Rwanda, Sudan and Nigeria to learn to live creatively and justly with difference, we shall be helping to unveil God. African myths of separation attribute the felt absence of God to human acts of greed and callousness. To build up the Body of Christ everywhere requires building up human relations, seeing humanity as one family under God who is the source of the life of the human family. We cannot continue the rhetoric of loving, caring words about God if people are not experiencing loving, caring acts from one another.

We cannot tell people that creation is a 'pure gift from God, unsolicited' when some enjoy more of these gifts than others and the Church does little to alleviate poverty. African affirmations about God and creation have to come alive in the projects, programme and attitudes of the Church. What does it mean when we say 'Nothing is too difficult for God?', when we affirm it is 'God who gives the cow to the Masai' or that 'When God gives no one can snatch'? All of this is empty rhetoric if people cannot testify that 'What God says God does'. And how is this to be demonstrated if the Church proclaims 'God in Christ' has arms too short to reach the hurt of people? We seek the presence of God who saves now, in the being and doing of the Church. For many it is the absence of God, the alienation from God the source of life, that is the immediate experience.²³

Faith in a God of love lives on in Africa in spite of the apparent absence. For Africans like the Masai for whom there is no life after death, and even for the Akan who are gathered to God and to the ancestors when they die, it is important to see the goodness of God here

in the land of the living, for that is what establishes the presence of God among human beings. Many of the women I know are like Buchie Emecheta, they know that God has more important things to do than to punish them for having 'ambitions' of fulfilling their potential. Like her they pray for miracles. God is a miracle-working God. Emecheta says 'When I saw a miracle flying by I would grab it'. Winning a scholarship for secondary school education was for her one such miracle. African women expect God to 'deliver'. In lyrics, traditional and modern, they sing about the God who says and does and they invite all to come and see what God has actually done. They declare that words are not up to the task of expressing thanks to God.²⁴ When Africans can testify to sight for the blind, that becomes evidence that God is being experienced. To respond to these expectations and experiences of God in Africa is to build up the Body of Christ, not only in Africa, but worldwide. For God cannot treat Africa and Africans differently from other places and people and still remain the sole source of human being. The Church will build up the Body of Christ if it acts to heal, strengthen, nourish and treat with dignity all of its members, and that means acting as God-in-Christ expects of the Church.

NOTES

¹ Joseph Healey and Donald Syberts (eds), *Towards an African narrative theology* (Pauline Publishers Africa, 1995), p 295.

² Betty Govinden Devarakshanam, 'In search of our own wells' in Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro and Nyambura J. Njoroge (eds), *Groaning in faith: African women in the household of God* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1996), pp 112-135.

³ Nelson Mandela, *Long walk to freedom* (Abacus, 1994), p 15.

⁴ Wande Abimbola, *Ifa divination poetry* (Paris: UNESCO, 1975), note 115.

⁵ Osalador Imasogie, p 84.

⁶ J. Healey and D. Syberts, *op. cit.*, pp 80-82, record names collected between 1992 and 1995.

⁷ For other examples of the use of symbolic language in narrative theology in Africa, see Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African women and patriarchy* (Orbis Books, 1995).

⁸ Kwesi A. Dickson, *African theology*, p 60.

⁹ J. S. Mbiti, *Prayers of an African religion*.

¹⁰ Allan Boesak, 'Coming out of the wilderness' in Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella, *The emergent gospel* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1976), p 76.

¹¹ Basil Moore (ed), *Black theology: the South African voice* (London: Hurst, 1973).

¹² *Ibidem*, p 25.

¹³ Mokgethi Motlhabi, 'Black theology: a personal view' in Basil Moore, *op. cit.*, pp 74-75.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p 77.

¹⁵ Basil Moore, *op. cit.*, p 25.

¹⁶ The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians came into being on the initiative of Mercy Amba Oduyoye to enable African women to contribute to the theological literature that is being developed by Africans. Since its inauguration in October of 1989 two pan-African books and three regional ones have been published. Papers from the August pan-African conference are being processed for publication.

¹⁷ See Part I of Kanyoro and Njoroge, *op. cit.*, for examples.

¹⁸ Teresia Hinga in Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, *The will to arise* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), pp 190–191.

¹⁹ Christine Landman, 'A land flowing with milk and honey' in Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro and Nyambura J. Njoroge, *Groaning in faith: African women in the household of God* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1996), pp 99–111.

²⁰ Grace Ndyabahika, 'Women's place in creation' in Kanyoro and Njoroge, *op. cit.*, p 256.

²¹ Kwesi A. Dickson, *op. cit.*, p 91.

²² Nelson Mandela, *op. cit.*, p 35.

²³ J. Healey and D. Sybert, *op. cit.*, p 29.

²⁴ Buchie Emecheta's *Head above water: an autobiography* and several Fante lyrics, including the one below, testify to this experience of God.

Nyame a ose a oye ho. Waaye o!
wommesen nkohwe. Efurafo weenya enyiwa.