

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AND AFRICAN INDIGENOUS SPIRITUALITY

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MY PURPOSE HERE is to examine some fundamental aspects of African indigenous spiritualities and cultures that can offer inspiration in our practice of spiritual direction within African Christianity. It is my belief that every formation tradition has the potential to inspire other such traditions and in turn be inspired by them. African formation traditions in the area of mentoring and guidance can and should inspire the tradition of Christian spiritual direction—and other non-Christian formation traditions as well.

I shall be looking at six aspects of African mentoring practice: a holistic approach to life; the power of good example; the idea that each person is a *genius* who has unique gifts to offer to the community; the use of stories and proverbs to inspire a sense of transcendence awareness; the value placed on courage in striving for justice and peace; and the transcendent meaning of silence, reflection and thoughtfulness.

The Holistic Approach to Life

Africans take the human formation process very seriously. I know from the time I spent in my childhood with my parents and grandparents that the moral well-being of the family and community was their number one priority. They believed that society has to do everything in its power to make sure that children are brought up well to become good and morally responsible humans. This world-view, fundamental to everyday life, involves four aspects: a firm belief in an almighty Divine Being who brings forth everyone, everything and all that is; an understanding that human life is an ongoing unfolding and disclosure of one's deepest identity from birth to death, that is, ongoing formation; a view of the universe as interconnected and interrelated; and finally a view that there must



always be a balance between the importance and uniqueness of the individual and the importance of community to the individual. As John Mbiti says: 'I am, because we are, and since we are, therefore I am'.¹

To appreciate how indigenous people see and understand all being in a holistic way, we need only look at the importance for them of the *circle*. Many indigenous African people build circular homes. They dance in a circle. They make circular stools and chairs. The circle, in this tradition, is the ultimate symbol of interconnectedness. Life and death are interconnected; this life and the life to come are interconnected; likewise our past is connected to the present and to the future. People consciously know that they belong in the circle and that everyone and everything should be part of it.

The circle must be protected and kept alive; discomfort and lack of peace come when the circle is broken. There is dissonance in the community when family members harbour ill feeling against others or when one community fights another. Dissonance and death come when we fail to see that 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am'. Brothers or neighbours who are feuding must be reconciled. Everyone who veers out of the circle will be brought back by the wisdom of the people, enshrined in their elders, their stories, their proverbs, their reconciliation rituals and their ceremonies. Most rituals exist because they help to reconnect everyone and everything back to the circle. There is the example of an African Christian widow who experienced a

¹ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1999 [1969]), 106.

debilitating lack of peace, and a wise spiritual director suggested that she should give a name to a baby she had miscarried some time before. When she did so in a family ritual, she felt connected to that child, who now became connected to her and to her family. She had brought her baby back into the circle, without compromising her Christian faith and beliefs.

Moreover the idea of the circle does not apply only to humans. The same circle includes all being. It is a cosmic, all-inclusive phenomenon. In this circle of life, everything and all being are alive, always speaking and sending messages. Everything belongs together, and it belongs in the circle of life. As Fritjof Capra puts it:

There is a sense of connectedness to the cosmos as a whole. That's also in the smile of a baby. The smile of that baby is my smile, because I am the father, but the smile of *any* baby is also my smile. And the smile of the dolphin—if you can call it a smile—is also my smile. That's what Gregory Bateson meant when he called it 'the pattern which connects the orchid to the primrose and the dolphin to the whale and all four of them to me'.²

The stone is as alive as the tree and our grandmother. It speaks and invites you to respect it and calls you to use it respectfully. Nothing is referred to as *waste* or *inanimate* because everything points beyond itself to a transcendent meaning and purpose.

In my mother's language, Kichagga, there is no word for *waste*. My parents never threw anything away, because there was no *waste*. Everything is part of the circle and therefore has its niche and *raison d'être* in life and being. After people have eaten meat they will use the bones for making something or as fertiliser for plants. So bones are never thrown away disrespectfully, because that would be rude to the animal to which the bones belonged. Ashes are used as pesticide, as fertiliser and also for building houses.

This most basic interconnectedness among all beings is also the basis for the interconnectedness of the human dimensions that we call body, mind and spirit. The human person is one whole, and must be seen and approached as one whole. We cannot, in real life, deal with a disembodied spirit. The person who sits at the feet of a *guru* or comes for spiritual

² Fritjof Capra and David Steindl-Rast, *Belonging to the Universe: Explorations on the Frontiers of Science and Spirituality* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), 14.

direction comes with every dimension of his or her being and must be assisted as one whole, someone who is also part of a certain history, an ancestry, a certain community, and someone who is male or female. Both in Christianity and in African indigenous spirituality, the human dimension of *spirit* is seen as the driving force of our humanity.³ To speak of spiritual direction in both traditions, therefore, means to speak about the 'direction' of that which is innermost in the human person. Nevertheless, one cannot, as it were, extricate a person's spirit from him or her and give it direction.

For this reason, Christian spiritual direction in an African context should be inspired by a world-view in which the seeker is inherently interconnected with all life and world, with the past, present and future, with his or her present community and with the community of those yet to be born. Such direction should aim at helping the seeker to become a healthy part of the circle, contributing to its well-being and its day-to-day functioning. Direction should seek to reaffirm, rekindle and renew the interconnectedness that the seeker should continuously enjoy, and strengthen and contribute to its vibrancy. Malidoma Some states:

The general health and well-being of an individual are connected to a community, and not something that can be maintained alone or in a vacuum. Healing, ritual, and community—these three elements are vitally linked.⁴

In spiritual direction among African Christians, the awareness of an interconnected and holistic approach to life broadens the perspectives of both director and seeker, showing them that guidance here concerns the total person and not just the 'spirit' of the seeker. In this African context, one might say that the seeker is in a 'life direction' process rather than a 'spiritual direction' process. The phrase 'life direction' suggests a more holistic view of that process than 'spiritual direction'.

Indeed, from my experience and study of indigenous African spirituality—as in my own Kichagga language of northern Tanzania—there is no such phrase as 'spiritual direction'. The expression seems to suggest a duality that does not resonate with the African understanding of interconnectedness. In Kiswahili, the national language of Tanzania

³ Sobonfu Some, *The Spirit of Intimacy: Ancient African Teachings in the Ways of Relationships* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 13.

⁴ Malidoma Patrice Some, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose through Nature, Ritual, Community* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 22.

and Kenya, we speak of *malezi ya kiroho*, meaning spiritual direction. But there is a growing tendency to speak simply of *malezi*, meaning formation, and to refer to a 'spiritual director' as *mlezi*, as in *Mama Mlezi* and *Baba Mlezi*. I personally feel more comfortable with these terms, *malezi* and *mlezi*, to name this most important aspect of our African Christian life in a way consonant with our holistic mode of thinking.

The Power of Good Example

The second lesson for spiritual direction that emerges from indigenous African culture is that a person who guides others on their journey is someone deeply revered, and someone *who leads by good example*. The Chagga people go to great lengths to prepare the *mlosha*, a woman or man who is entrusted with the guidance of the community, especially of its youth. The *mlosha* is a person of high regard, a person who inspires respect, embodies high moral standards and is deeply immersed in the circle of life. Above all he or she connects young people to the tradition and to the moral standards expected of everyone; in a way, every elder, parent or grandparent is a *mlosha*.

The greatest responsibility of a *mlosha* (plural *walosha*) is to be an example in the community. He or she leads by good example, because good example is seen as the most important means of giving life direction. The *walosha* and other elders lead by good example in the way they talk and do their work, in how they care for their children and grandchildren, in their total way of life. They are keenly aware that actions are more important than words.

We have uncountable examples of saints and great people in the Christian tradition and in other formation traditions who teach us by the way they lived. Mahatma Gandhi said that 'if one man gains ... the whole world gains with him, and if one man falls, the whole world falls to that extent', and these words found flesh in his own example.⁵ The guru teaches more by silence and prayer and less by words. St Francis of Assisi told his followers: 'all the brothers ... should preach by their deeds'.⁶ Jesus himself washed the feet of his disciples and asked them to do the same: to serve others. He fed the hungry, he cried when his friend Lazarus died, he forgave everyone who was seen as sinful, and finally

⁵ *The Essential Gandhi: An Anthology of His Writings on His Life, Work and Ideas*, edited by Louis Fischer (New York: Vintage, 1983), 303.

⁶ Francis of Assisi, 'The Earlier Rule', chapter 17, 'Preachers', in *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist, 1982), 122.

died for what he believed to be the right thing to do. *His words and teachings draw strength from his powerful examples.*

Freeing the Genius in a Seeker

The third lesson that we learn from indigenous African culture is about the *purpose of life direction*. Malidoma P. Some and his wife Sobonfu Some have written extensively on their human formation experience within their ethnic group, the Dagara people of Burkina Faso. The Dagara believe that each person is a genius, born with a purpose and coming into this world bringing specific gifts to the community. Sobonfu Some writes:

When two people are married and have built an intimate relationship, there is a desire that they make themselves available for other souls to come through, that they create a safe and sacred space for spirits who want to bring their gifts and fulfil their purpose. And so people in the village say that children do not belong completely to the parents who gave them birth. They have used their parents' bodies to come through, but they belong to the community and to the spirit.⁷

A child born into this world brings gifts to be given to the community. This is the realm of uniqueness and individual talents that



everyone has. So it is right to state that *each person is a genius*, and that the goal of life direction is to assist people to bring out that genius, to recognise the gifts that they have for the human community and for the universe. The life director stands in front of the seeker as if standing before an awe-inspiring mountain full of wonderful gifts to be given to the community. The director should be humbled by this realisation. What gifts is this genius bringing forth? How can this genius make this world a better place? The director can help the seeker to

⁷ Some, *Spirit of Intimacy*, 55.

realise his or her gifts, not only by asking these and similar questions, but also by telling stories about other geniuses: stories of courage and success, stories of ancestors and contemporary heroes who have done wonderful things for their communities. The place of stories and other rhetorical tools in African indigenous practices of spiritual direction is the subject of the next section.

Stories and Proverbs in Spiritual Direction

The use of stories and proverbs in order to teach a moral lesson, in Africa and beyond, is as old as the existence of humans on this planet. All of life is indeed a story, and the countless stories within this big story should be told to inspire others, whether in spiritual direction or elsewhere. In my book *The Heartbeat of Indigenous Africa*, I have elucidated in some detail the use of stories among my own Chagga people of northern Tanzania and other communities.⁸

My grandparents and parents told me countless stories about diligent workers and respected ancestors in the Mosha family, and often quoted proverbs to bring home the meaning of these stories. At other times they would start with a proverb and then use a story to elucidate it. In the Christian tradition we have numerous role models of faith, and their stories can be inspiring in a life direction session and in other formation situations. When I was growing up, we celebrated the feast of a saint every day of the week in our worship and the priest told us the story of each saint. Such stories inspire us and help us to recognise the genius within us. How can we evangelize without using the rich stories of the courageous and holy Christian women and men who have gone before us? How can we find our own genius if we do not hear the stories of the geniuses of the past, or geniuses in our contemporary times? In spiritual direction storytelling is a powerful tool that brings home the message intended by the director in a gentle yet inspiring way.

The Courage to Fight for Justice and Peace

In our African continent there is much suffering arising from ignorance, poverty and exploitation by others. Africans should never speak of personal spiritual growth while remaining unaware of the suffering all around them. Spiritual growth goes hand in hand with active participation

⁸ See R. Sambuli Mosha, *The Heartbeat of Indigenous Africa* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2000).

in the alleviation of suffering. The rich idea of interconnectedness in African philosophy calls African seekers to seek the well-being of the person next to them as well as their own. The African Christian seeker is called by Jesus to stand on the side of the poor and fight for them.

In many African countries, poverty is rampant and corruption is as real as the forests and waters of the continent. Where is our African Archbishop Oscar Romero? We need more Desmond Tutus in our continent, more Mandelas, and seekers who will also fight for justice and peace so that their sisters and brothers may have the basic necessities for their lives. Martin Luther King Jr said: 'We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people'.⁹ In Africa we will indeed, in many cases, remember the silence of our leaders, and of our spiritual directors.

Nevertheless it is heartening that there are some courageous religious and political leaders who speak fearlessly about corruption and about the utter poverty of the majority. In my opinion, there is an urgent need to wake up the genius in our seekers and to make them aware of the disposition that Jon Sobrino calls 'political holiness'.¹⁰ Spiritual direction for African Christians in Africa will be incomplete if the reality of poverty is not seriously discussed.

Silence and Reflection in Spiritual Direction

Finally, there is a profound disposition that I have seen in the lives of my ancestors, parents and grandparents, and especially in the *walosha* among them. This is the virtue of *silence and reflection*. Indigenous Africans cherish silence as a great virtue. They see it, not as a vacuum, but as positive energy that is alive with thoughtfulness and reflection. Silence is the mother of wisdom; it is the gateway to wise speech; and it is the home of confidentiality and reserve.

We have over two million African proverbs, many of which demonstrate the importance of silence and reflection.¹¹ In the culture

⁹ Martin Luther King, 'Letter from Birmingham City Jail', in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr*, edited by James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 296.

¹⁰ See Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Towards a Political Holiness* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990).

¹¹ See John S. Mbiti, 'Children Confer Glory on a Home', series introduction in the five volumes of the African Proverbs series (Pretoria: UNISA, 1996–7); and Mosha, *Heartbeat of Indigenous Africa*, 122–124.

of the Chagga people of northern Tanzania, the greatest leaders are those who are 'cooked in the pot of silence'. Also in Tanzania, 'the giraffe is the wisest animal, it never speaks'. And I am always awed by these sayings of the Bambara people of West Africa:

If speech constructs the village, silence builds the world. Silence adorned the world, speech made it hum. Speech dispersed the world, silence reassembles it. Speech destroys the village, silence makes its foundation good The secret belongs to he who keeps quiet. Silence delimited the paths, speech confused them ... silence pondered; speech did not want to think. Silence soothes the *dya* [one of a person's spiritual principles], speech frightens it.¹²

I have known many elders who listen extensively and are not quick to speak. Their silence is itself an instrument of guidance and life direction. Then from the depth of that silence they speak slowly and wisely. I have noticed that when African elders speak, nobody else speaks or interferes. You can hear a needle drop, so thick is the silence when someone else is speaking, and again before the next speaker takes over. My mother's father was a quiet person who spoke only when he had to. He carried this aura of silence and reflection around with him. He guided me more by silence than by words. He reminds me of Max Picard, who said:

***Silence is
itself an
instrument of
guidance***

Silence is an autonomous phenomenon. It is creative, it is formative of human beings as language is formative, but not in the same degree ... language becomes emaciated if it loses its connection with silence.¹³

The spiritual director as mentor and friend should be a person of silence and reflection, and one who leads the seeker to be such a person. In a spiritual direction session, for instance, the intervals of silence can be profoundly inspiring and so, also, the periods of silence between sessions. Spiritual direction in an African Christian context should be inspired by the rich teachings on silence in this continent, as well as in our

¹² Dominique Zahan, *The Religion, Spirituality, and Thought of Traditional Africa* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P, 1979), 117–118.

¹³ Max Picard, *The World of Silence* (Chicago: Regnery, 1952), xix.

Christian tradition of ongoing reflection, meditation and contemplation. Psalm 46: 10 reminds us: 'Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.'

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