



For an African Christianity

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Africa is called the « Dark Continent », not because its inhabitants are black, but because they are so mysterious. European scholars, priests and laymen have set themselves the task of solving the mystery of Africa. Books are written and read about the mentality of the African. Pocket editions filled with African stories flood the markets in Europe. Educated Africans find it easy to sell whatever they write, as long as they show that Africa is still Africa.

It is not my purpose to add anything new to that mass of literature¹. I shall simply distil a few points which I find characteristic in that mass, a few points about the way the people « South of the Sahara » appreciate the reality in which they live, so that we may learn to preach Christ to them, not the Christ of Europe, but the Christ who feels at home in Africa.

A hundred years of Christianity has not succeeded in making of Christianity an African religion. People take to it, because they feel it to be a good influence coming from abroad. It gives them a certain standing, a sense of belonging, like speaking English or French, but it leaves their deepest feelings unsatisfied...

¹ Books and papers used: Janheinz Jahn « Muntu, an outline of Neo-African Culture (Faber and Faber, 1961, (London) Piccolo Temples. « Bantu-Philosophy » (Presence Africaine, Paris), Herman Wouters, « Volcan en Volkankunde » (Guthrie, Amsterdam) Simba Janira « Kleine grote zwarte man » (Scheltema-Gilley, Amsterdam). Private papers both from my students in the Cameroon and from my students at Gqaba in Uganda.

A Bantu Language as a Key to understand what Reality means for the Bantu

God brought all things to Adam and Adam gave them their name, and they became for him in so far as he was able to name them. His children hearing these things named, understood them again as their father had done. If we knew that language of Adam and his children, we would know what meaning the things held for them. And if we learn an African language we shall find out how the people of that language appreciate the reality which they have thus named.

Father Kagame of Ruanda, in his thesis on the philology of his people, rightly then makes the language of his people his starting point. We shall follow him as far as we find that his observations are not restricted to Ruanda, but are valid for all Bantu-speaking Africans.

Kagame maintains that all things that exist have ultimately this in common that they are a kind of FORCE, a kind of NTU. The four categories of NTU under which all things are grouped are the category of MU-NTU, the category of KI-NTU, the category of KA-NTU and finally the category of KU-NTU.

These categories are again subdivided into classes, but that does not concern us here. What interests us most is the reality which is put under the heading of Muntu and the reality characterised as Kintu.

The force which one meets in a Muntu is a force which can spread its influence around. A Kintu, is not an original influence in the world, but can become a source of evil influence or good, as far as a Muntu has given it power to spread. If a man puts power into a Kintu by putting a blessing or a curse on it, or by putting his mark on it or even by shaping it according to his will, another Muntu will undergo this influence unless his own force is stronger. And if a Kintu has caused evil or good luck, the Muntu who has put this influence in the Kintu, is sought out.

This power which a man has of being an original source of influence has nothing to do with his being alive. Animals, too, are alive, but they remain Bantu. Animals and men alike possess a Kintu class; a man on the contrary becomes a Muzima of the Kintu class; if an animal dies, the Buzima disappears and the Muntu class. If an animal dies, the Buzima disappears and the Kizima is dead and finished; but if a man loses his life, his power

remains. He still is a **Muntu**, albeit a dead one. The dead are the **Muzimu**, i. e. the **muzima** no longer alive, pure forms of influence. The dead are the influence par excellence, but the influence obviously only comes to life in the living.

Further explanation of the Bantu outlook on reality

What is **Muntu**, that power which makes the living and the dead alike? That power which the dead can strengthen in the living and which the living can stir up in themselves by their communion with the dead?

The family seems to be the key to the understanding of it. The power of being Father of a family, of being Originator, Generator, Ruler of things, naming them by one's own name and calling them « mine », all that can be summed up, according to Kagame by the word « **NOMMO** ». He who has « **nommo** », is a **muntu** and the **muntu** par excellence is the Father. **Nommo**, therefore, means « seed » as well as « blood », as well as « water » and last of all it means the power of the « word », the power of giving things one's meaning. The father is immortal as long as his « name », his « **nommo** », is preserved in the family.

The same spirit which possessed the family during the father's lifetime, now lives in his children and is recognised, since these children are called by his name. It is the dead, therefore, that are the important factor for the well-being of the family. The dead forefathers are the influence par excellence, an influence which lives on in their children.

This appreciation of reality which the people of Africa betray in their way of life is both beautiful and penetrating. It harmoniously solves a world of bewildering problems :

- The problem of dying and yet being immortal. Man dies but his **Mu** power remains.
- The problem of personal immortality and the impersonal continuation of the species in one's children. As a dead **Muntu**, one exists, but does not act except in one's children.
- The problem of the relation between father and child ; the child is an independent existence, yet « something of the father ». Even though the child in its turn may become head of the family, yet he continues to act in the power and spirit of his fathers. How delicately they steer clear of the crude solution of reincarnation ! And again, how

well they understand that the living body is the instrument of the human spirit and that the human spirit can neither laugh nor weep nor express itself, being dead. It can be best portrayed by an impersonal mask with big staring eyes.

The spirit of the dead is strongest in the elders of the clan or tribe. Their flesh is least flesh. Their words are most powerful. They are nearest to the dead and they remember best how the forefathers used to live their powerful lives. They are by condition the priests of the tribe, keeping the old spirit alive by sacrifice and invocation. The chief is the elder, the Father above all others. He is in direct contact with the Forefathers, either by descent or dedication. Through him they work. He may even be considered on the same line with the forefathers, directly in touch with God to Whom originally belongs the **Nommo**, the meaning giving influence.

I could almost quote St. John to explain the God of the Africans. The Logos, the Word, the **Nommo**, was in the beginning with God. The Logos who fathers all things, giving them meaning. Everything exists ultimately in as far as it partakes of the Logos of God. Europeans often have the idea that God is an engineer, the Builder of the universe. For the Africans he is the Father of all things. He begets the universe by the power of his Word. The forefathers are God's first born. In them His Word lives strongest. They are the fountainheads of the life and of the well-being of their offspring. It is from them that their children expect help — it is to them that they turn. God Himself is not exactly forgotten, but nobody is interested in Him, just as nobody is interested in the sea from which all water originally comes, but in the clouds over his land which can save his crops.

Comparison with Christianity

It is a mistake to think that religion for an African is one of the many aspects of life. To the African, religion is life. Religious is his attitude to his chief ; religious is the name by which children is called ; religious is his marriage ; and the begetting of children is his duty to his forefathers who in this way are perpetuated. Whatever he does or undergoes, an African feels it as a strengthening or weakening of his spiritual power, his **Nommo**. If he loses a goat, the loss cannot be assessed in terms of money. There is sorrow to be consoled. It may take three goats to restore him

to his former state of happiness and prestige. If he is sick and asks for medicine, he really asks for something to restore his spiritual power, some sacramental, some **Kintu** blessed by a **Muntu** with a powerful Word. He cannot appreciate the impersonal, physical quality of the medicine itself. Poison, too, is a neutral thing to which an enemy has attached a curse. Even the words which he uses or paints on his shop window or motor car are not simply cold blooded scientific expressions of his thought. They are the external side of his spiritual influence. His **Nommo**, his Word, coming out in the open to rule the world, to bless it or curse it, at any rate, to influence it.

It is a mistake to think that European Christianity, where the doctor keeps it separate from his medicine, where the scientist keeps it out of his laboratory, where the shopkeeper keeps it apart from his business, christianity, reduced to catechism questions and lists of sins, can replace the old outlook on life and eternity. People are willing enough. It is part of their religious outlook, that they profit from any good influence which comes their way. But if there is a conflict between the law of Christ and their outlook on life, Christ is sure to lose because He has not been reduced to fit into their mentality.

It is most enlightening to consider the African mentality as a kind of Old Testament mentality, not to be abolished but to be completed, to be fulfilled by Our Lord and His Teaching. As the Jews were proud of being children of Abraham, zealously defending the laws of their Fathers, so Africa lives on the glory of the past, feeds on the spirit of the great men of old. They keep their traditions as a religion, obeying the laws of their rulers in fear and trembling. But all in vain, because « in the law no man is justified with God » (Gal. III, 11). « But the law was our pedagogue leading us to Christ, » (Gal. III, 24) « And now the new Adam has come, the real Father of men, of whom the old Adam was the type » (cf. Rom. V, 14). « And through faith in Jesus Christ you are all now God's sons. »

« All you who have been baptised in Christ's name have put on the spirit of Christ... » (Gall. III, 26). « Because God has raised Him to such a height, given Him that name which is greater than any other name ; so that everything in Heaven and on earth and under the earth must bend the knee before the name of Jesus, and every tongue must confess Jesus Christ as the Lord dwelling in the Glory of God the Father. » (Phil. II, 9).

The epistles of St. Paul, often so difficult for a European, are opportune in Africa. It is a pleasure to read them out here where the people understand perfectly what St. Paul meant when he said : « To live in Christ », « in His Spirit », « Now I live no more, but Christ lives in me ».

Africans know and appreciate what it means to be called by His Name. Our catechumens should be made to feel in baptism what St. Paul says happens to them : « You know well enough that we who were taken up into Christ by baptism, have been taken up, all of us, into His death. In our baptism we have been buried with Him, died like Him, so that just as Christ was raised up by His Father's power from the dead, we, too, might live and move in a new kind of existence. » (Rom. VI, 4-5)

Again as like the Power, the animating power of the tribe, is personified in the chief, so for a Catholic the Power of Christ rests visibly in the Holy Father at Rome and in the Bishops in communion with him. A Catholic can come into contact with the life-giving Power of Christ through his Bishop and his helpers, the priests, who distribute the Grace of Christ through the sacraments, the **Bintu** which are the carriers of Christ's Spirit.

I have witnessed how the people of Africa want their bishop to be just that, their real Father in Christ, their strength and well-being, the heart-beat of their Christianity. I was at Soppo at the consecration of the new Bishop of Buea in West Cameroon. The people were touched beyond belief, when the old Bishop put the young Bishop, his successor, on his chair to show the whole world that he had abdicated, that he was dead for them, that their salvation now lay with the new Bishop. The realism with which the people witnessed this ceremony was so contagious, that I could almost see the old wrinkled Bishop shrink into insignificance, standing humbly beside his chair. And I felt the emotions around me going out to the new Bishop, their Father in Christ.

It is true that many priests have seen the analogy between Christianity and the African outlook on life. They do their best to explain the catechism with the help of examples from African life. We, Europeans, always want to explain things instead of allowing our people simply to undergo the ceremonies and blessings and sacramentals and all these things that are so obvious for an African. Holy water does not become a superstition because an African takes it in the same spirit as he used to take native medicine. Then it was superstition, but there is nothing wrong

now. First the African sought help where it was not to be found, but now he goes out to a **Kintu** in which truly resides Our Lord's Power against Satan, put there by the blessing of the priest.

The African mentality deteriorated

Our article would not be complete, we would not have truthfully described the African mentality, if we left out all mention of original sin and its effects. The original beautiful appreciation of reality has in many African countries undergone deteriorations to such an extent that it is hardly recognisable.

The main instance where original sin has corrupted their view, concerns the natural ascendancy of the elders over the young ones. It concerns the fourth commandment of God, which says: «Thou shalt honour thy father and mother». On this commandment really turns the African outlook on life. The Fathers, the Chiefs, are the life-giving element. To be under their protection is safety, to be cursed or banned by them, is death. But wherever we look in Africa, we find that the parents and the elders being the stronger, have taken too much of their share of the fourth commandment. They keep their subjects as slaves, their children as merchandise and their wives as beasts of burden. They distort the natural devotion and reverence of their children and underlings for fear.

Are there still parents in Africa who spend money on their children without calculating how much they will get in return? The strong ones have turned their duty to serve the weak ones upside down and want to be served instead. And the impact of European materialism on this debased paganism has given grotesque proportions to this unnatural attitude. Who can believe that parents sell their daughters to the highest bidder and that the daughter is so afraid that she goes! Who can believe that a married woman is called back home if the parents decide that their son-in-law has not paid up sufficiently, and that the woman is so afraid that she obeys! The parents have become egoists as hard as the devil likes it. They cannot even conceive of the idea of doing good to their own children without calculating what profit it will bring to them.

It is difficult to discover under this mess of corruption, of materialism and egoism, anything of the original Bantu philosophy worth redeeming. Africa seems hidden under a dark cloud

of fear caused by the harshness of the Big Men. Fear makes the daughter go to the man she does not want. Fear makes the young man pay his salary to his parents. Fear, too, makes the little child scramble off early in the morning to bring water to the hut. Fear of poison, fear of a curse, fear that makes them suspicious of anybody who tries to practise charity on them. What force will be strong enough to lift Africa out of this swamp? Christianity could do it, African Christianity will bring back the old spirit so that all things will be restored in Christ.



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