

African Roots of Afro-American Baptismal Practices

Introduction

Baptismal waters, for Black worshippers, whether identified as a particular place in a large body of water (river, creek or ocean), a small body of water near or "in" a church (pool or baptistry) confined in a small bowl on a table or in a font, flow from African streams. Although largely defined by Western Christianity as a rite of initiation, incorporation, cleansing, washing away of sins, symbolic understandings can be traced to traditional African religions.

Symbolism plays an important role in the life of Africans and Afro-Americans. Through symbols one can communicate that which is difficult to express in words; through symbols the world is made transparent, and explanations can be given to incomprehensible phenomena. Through symbols the absolute or ultimate truth can be apprehended or suggested. Humans touch and see "outer fringes" which may be the deceptive phenomenon or reality.

Symbols are signs that point to a deeper reality. As such they are forms of communication and marks of identification which facilitate existential living. Africans long recognized the inability of humans to explain the inevitability of life and death and have utilized symbols as a natural response to interpreting reality.

No doubt for certain first generation Africans in America, baptism was a reminder of African rites of passage, and thus an acceptable form of initiation into an apparent Euro-American religion. Rites and rituals must in some way reflect the reality of existential situations. For this reason, understandings of the symbolic "realities" of water facilitated an acceptance of its significance in a newly adopted religious pattern.

Like other primal world views, Africans consciously and unconsciously recognized the existence and importance of a balanced sacralized cosmos. As notoriously religious beings¹ Africans from traditional religions

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¹ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 2.

incorporated symbols from nature and natural phenomena as necessary for survival. Rites and rituals are forms of communication with the creator who established the cosmos, and a means of reactualizing the paradigmatic act of creation.² Whether symbolically becoming contemporary with the cosmogony, identifying themselves as "present" at the creation as suggested by Eliade³ or maintaining an ontological balance with nature, rites and rituals are necessary for existence.

Water, in many African religions, is recognized as a priority in the creation of the world. It can then symbolize the origin of all the possibilities of existence, since it precedes every form of human creation. Immersion in water signifies an immersion into pre-existence and emersion as a newly created being. One is symbolically regenerated upon contact with water as the old self is disintegrated and new birth occurs, and as the potential for new life is enhanced by "re-entry" into the waters (womb) where fertilization takes place. These meanings apparently operative in Christian Baptism easily carry-over into the newly adopted religion of Afro-Americans as the sacred-secular merger continues to affirm the wholeness of life.

Because traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the spiritual and material areas of life.⁴

These words published by the distinguished African theologian, John S. Mbiti, reflect life experienced by an African.⁵ Continual research by African scholars supports the concept of sacred/secular unity of life, and provides greater insight into the life and history of a people once considered "barbaric." Out of this rich religious heritage where life is viewed holistically came the African to America.

Although the scope of this study is limited to rites which call for the use of water, it will be further limited to those rites which are not too far removed from Christian practices. This is not to imply that all rites presented herein have Christian implications, but the practices will be based upon the understanding of the existence of a Supreme God. Excluded from this study are practices of the Ethiopian Coptic church which are similar to rites in the Western church. The study basically encompasses traditional religions south of the Sahara Region, with brief historical data in order to place the ritual in the context of the particular culture.

² Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), p. 64.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁴ Mbiti, p. 2.

⁵ The words "society," "community," "village," and "culture" will be used interchangeably to replace the traditional use of the word "tribe" except where necessary for clarity.

Traditional Religions

African theologians contend that all traditional African religions are essentially monotheistic in the sense that there is an acknowledgement of one "High" God who created the universe and mankind. This God is the ultimate source of order and final decisions. Many African religions are also polytheistic in that large numbers of "lesser" gods, spirits, or ancestors, and other kinds of divinities stand between God and humanity.

God created the universe and mankind without regard for good or evil, and withdrew from the center of human activities. The extent of withdrawal varies from one society to another. God may be seen variously as truly "obtiose" or removed and unavailable for direct human contact, to a God as personal as the God of the Judeo-Christian experience. For all societies, the created universe was an organically perfect system lacking only energy and power which had to be supplied by human creatures, or "lesser" gods. When evil is present, as indicated principally by human diseases and disaster, there is evidence that all is not well in the cosmos. In such misfortunes a "diviner" is needed to discover the appropriate means which can be used to correct it as well as to discover the author of the misfortune and properly punish him or her.⁶

Divination for the African is especially important because it is the source for the appropriate ritual that the community must perform. Once divination has occurred, the ritual follows with appropriate medical or legal transactions. Thus the *Rhythm of Life* is restored so that the community can function normally.

Each African society has a religious system (beliefs, practices, and ceremonies) evolving out of its particular sociological environment and geographic location. It is therefore important that the plural expression, traditional religions, be emphasized. Societal religions are not spread by missionary or evangelical efforts, but no doubt some of the religious ideas may have been dissimilated through migrations and inter-familial linkages. Individuals did not "preach" religious beliefs between groups, but evidence abounds of primordial similarities. Some basic similarities undergirding most (if not all) African religions should be innumeraed at the outset:

1. Wholeness of life: No separation of life into sacred and secular compartments.
2. Communal nature of religion: To be fully human is to belong to the whole community—*Extended Family* concept.
3. Belief in ONE SUPREME, SOVERIGN GOD, who is invisible, omnipotent, omniscient, transcendent and immanent.
4. God is both Mother and Father.
5. An antropocentric ontology: Everything is viewed in terms of its relationship to

⁶ Paul Bohannan, *African and Africans* (New York: The Natural History Press, 1964), p. 228.

- humanity: "I am because you are"
6. God possesses moral attributes while remaining Wholly-Other: He is faithful, righteous, loving, comforting, good, capable of anger, merciful and always a God of justice.
 7. Time is conceptualized as part of the rhythm of natural phenomena; time, therefore, is a series of events, those which have occurred, those which are taking place, and those which will occur. Humans participate in time as rhythm of the cosmos; it is not to be rushed nor feared.
 8. Spirit(s). The breath of life, *anima*, composed of superhuman beings and the souls of those who have lived and died (*anima persona*).

Each of the foregoing concepts reflects the anthropocentric ontology of African religions which places humanity at the center of a holistic existence. God is the originator and sustainer of humanity; animals, plants, and natural phenomena constitute the environment in which humanity lives, providing a "means of existence" and, if need be, humanity establishing a mystical relationship with them.⁷

E. B. Taylor, an English anthropologist who used the word "animism" in describing and defining primitive religions, viewed *anima* as a shadowy vaporous image animating the object it occupied.⁸ The term received a negative connotation under the assumption that so called "primitive" people considered every object to have its own soul, thus creating countless spirits in the universe. Followers of the Taylor theory perpetuated the idea that Africans and other "primitive" people worshipped many gods, and were therefore undeveloped in their understanding of God. With this definition, animism is *not* an adequate description of African religions and should not be used to define the religions of Africa. "Primitive" religions have also been negatively described as "savage" and lacking in imagination or emotion.⁹ *Primus*, the Latin root of primitive, is not negative in connotation. The use of the word "primitive" has been discouraged by writers from traditional religions, in order to allow the complexities inherent to shed light upon the study of other religious traditions of the world.

This clarity is necessary because the concept of the use of water in African cultures relates to an understanding of holistic living as part of the total religious phenomena. God the Creator and sustainer, the concept of "spirits," animals, plants, natural activities of the universe, and humanity all participate in the cosmos as a natural result of the *Rhythm of Life*. The use of water in rites of passage as well as other ritualistic

⁷ Mbiti, p. 20.

⁸ Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researchers into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*, Volumes I and II (London: John Murray, 1929); Edward B. Tylor, *Religion in Primitive Culture* (London: Harper & Row, 1958).

⁹ Mbiti, p. 11.

practices evolve from understandings of the normal *Rhythm of Life*.

Ritual

Formal and customarily repeated acts undergird the life of "notoriously religious" Africans. All rituals involve certain activities which puts a person or a community in touch with the divine. Two major components of African rituals are sacrifice and prayer, carried out by certain members of the community in the presence of others. The result of rituals is always an assurance of *Community Unity* and an incorporation into the natural rhythmic flow of the cosmos.

The Reverend John C. Gatu, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, recorded the importance of rituals as community builders and binders in a lecture on "Pastoral Problems and Rituals" given at a consultation on African Theology and Church Life. Problems of alienation occurred where Christian rituals were substituted for traditional African rituals among the Kikuyu of East Africa.

Such rites connected with birth, fertility, procreating, circumcision or puberty which expressed a binding religious-social phenomena as the African way of life were to be replaced by Baptism, birthday cards, confirmation and communion services, church weddings and church funerals, and of course Christmas trees!¹⁰

He explains further the importance of such rituals for African peoples:

Because rituals have their mythical model, any human act connected with that ritual, whether this be dancing, pouring of beer (libations) or ashes, acquires effectiveness to the extent to which it re-creates and uplifts the hopes and fears of those participating, the repeating of which becomes necessary from time to time in order to hold the group together.¹¹

These and additional acts became the unifying factor in uprisings against those Christians who moved onto the lands owned by Africans. A return to the traditional rituals among the Mau Mau, for instance, helped produce and maintain the *esprit de corps* necessary for group action.

Rituals Using Water

Where water is used as a part of the ritual act, there are three basic dimensions of symbolism evidenced in African religions:

1. *Cosmical*: water is basic to life in the universe; without water there is no life;

¹⁰ John C. Gatu, "Pastoral Problems and Rituals," a lecture given at the Makere University Consultation on African Theology and Church Life. Manuscript copy given to the writer by the author, February 14, 1983.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

2. *Death*: water can consume all of life and cause death;
3. *Purification and Regeneration*: water symbolizes cleanliness and re-creation.

Water, rain, rivers, oceans, seas, streams and waterfalls were created early in the order of God's creation, according to certain African cultures. For the Akan and Ashanti of Ghana, West Africa, for instance, the Creation took place in this order: the heavens (and sky), the earth, and then water. The general consensus is that human beings were created from water and clay, thus water plays an important part in human existence.

Water and rain are evidences of God's continual creation, thus a blessing and a sacred representation in most African societies. Rain often is so clearly associated with God that the same word is used for both. The following examples are the result of Mbiti's research.

<u>PEOPLE</u>	<u>NAME FOR GOD</u>	<u>WORD FOR RAIN</u>
Deir (Sudan)	Tummu	Tummu
Didinga (Sudan)	Tamukujen	Tamu
Iodoma (Nigeria)	Owo	Owo
Iyala (Nigeria)	Owo	Owo
Maasai (Kenya, Tanzania)	En-Kai	En-Kai (also for sky)
Nubia (Southern Sudan)	Kalo	Kalo
Piti (Nigeria)	Ure	Kire
Suk (Kenya)	Ilat	Ilat ¹²

Other cultural groups relate rain to God in action or at work as indicated:

<u>PEOPLE</u>	<u>CONCEPT RELATING TO GOD</u>
Bavenda (South Africa)	Master of rain; rain is God's instrument
Kikuyu (Kenya)	One of God's manifestations, thus a blessing
Tiv (Nigeria)	Emanation of divine presence; God spurting water out of his mouth
Akamba (Kenya)	Rain is God's saliva
Suk (Kenya)	Rain is the second Son of God ¹³

Among the Kikuyu of East Africa, the name *mbura*, the word for rain, is often incorporated into the name of persons who are considered to be a special blessing for the community. The last two sylla-

¹² John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 138.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

bles—*ura*—mean “pouring in the manner of heavy rain drops”. With the prefix *nya*, *mbura* means a female person who pours out special blessings from God. For the males the prefix would be *Wa*(*mbura*). *Mbura* is also the name of a clan of rainmakers in the Kikuyu society who would pray for rain around the sacrificial tree called *Mugumo*. Following the prayers, rain, it is believed, would fall in a matter of a few hours and sometimes minutes!¹⁴

The author, having been given the name *Nyambura* in a special naming ritual, received the following explanation and resulting adoption by the East African Kikuyu:

With your gift of music which knows no language barrier and which pours like a blessing upon everyone, plus the fact that when you came to Nairobi 2/12/83 the rains started and have continued to shower blessings on the country, with the fact that you have been a blessing to our P.C.E.A. [Presbyterian Church in East Africa] students at Johnson C. Smith, no better name seemed appropriate.¹⁵

The naming ritual involved a symbolic cutting of the wrists of the Kikuyu “transmitter” (John Gatu, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa) and the author as recipient. Wrists were joined so that blood could comingle. Although blood was not actually shed, there was an emotional binding with the gathered community, of Kikuyus and the extended family of Africans in the American diaspora. A similar engrafting ceremony took place between the author’s spouse and the Kikuyu Moderator as he was named *Macharia*, one who seeks and finds others to help in a special way.

Many African people greet rainy seasons with rituals of Thanksgiving and prayer for God’s perpetual expression of providence and greatness. Rain and ever moving streams of water have cosmical dimensions as they symbolize the living, endless rhythm of all creation. Rain (originating from above) links humanity with the divine. River banks and waterfalls are often set aside as sacred places where worship is offered. Such places close to water are God’s specially chosen places of refuge, refueling, refreshment, and revitalization of spirit. They are places where God and humanity meet—God’s altar!

The Katanga (Rhodesia) express the idea that God’s presence, like living water of the “Great Pool”—the Zambezi river—is everywhere, causing new growth.

Great Spirit
Waters of the pool that turn misty
Into misty rain when stirred.
Vessels overflowing with oil . . .

¹⁴ Explanation given by Moderator John C. Gatu, February 14, 1983, in Nairobi, Kenya, East Africa.

¹⁵ John C. Gatu, February 14, 1983.

Thou bringest forth the shoots
 That they stand erect . . .
 Thou givest of rain to mankind . . .¹⁶

The Lodagaa of Ghana provide an understanding of water associated with the journey into death. Persons who have been good in life journey to the next world by crossing the "River of Death" and face hardships with little trouble. Evil doers, however, face punishment at the River of Death, and are often excluded from the next world. It is believed that as they cross the river, they fall into the water but are not drowned. They must swim for three years without eating as they attempt to reach the shore. Upon arrival they must drink salt water and suffer at the hand of God.¹⁷

Water in Rites of Passage

A consistent understanding of rites of passage in African traditional religions is that, in the *Rhythm of Life*, one dies to one state of existence in order to move into another. Such a stage is marked by rituals which make the movement an unforgettable experience as an individual and community "nurturing event." Almost without exception African religions include rites of passage at every stage of human development. Equally important is the use of water.

The rhythm of life begins long before a child is born in that birth is always anticipated as part of the extended family—unborn, born, and departed. "Nature brings the child into the world"¹⁸ as part of God's continual creation activity. It is up to society, the immediate community, to participate in the creation process as they help the child become a "corporate" person. Mbiti eloquently explains this process:

Children are the buds of society, and every birth is the arrival of "spring," then life shoots out and the community thrives. The birth of a child is, therefore, the concern not only of the parents but of many relatives including the living and the departed. Kinship plays an important role here, so that a child cannot be exclusively "my child" but only "our child."¹⁹

The young girls in many villages are encouraged to marry at an early age to fulfill their role in the rhythmic pulse of life. Their marriage is finally recognized or consummated when the girl (woman) becomes pregnant. She is then elevated to full union with the community, serving her

¹⁶ E. W. Smith, ed., *African Ideas of God*, 2nd revised ed., (E. G. Parinder, London, 1961), p. 127.

¹⁷ J. R. Goody, *Death Property, and the Ancestors* (London: Longman, 1962) pp. 371. A fascinating account with many carry-overs retained in Black American concepts as evidenced in the "Spirituals."

¹⁸ Mbiti, *African Religions*, p. 143.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

major function as perpetuator of genealogical lineage, and therefore of herself. Child-bearing assures continuation of her own blood as well as the lineage of the community.

Although rites differ somewhat from culture to culture the basic flow is the same: the use of specially prepared water which has been blessed and set apart awaiting delivery. A ritual washing, drying, and oiling follows, usually performed by a midwife.

Simultaneous to the post-washing ritual, the placenta and cord are ritually thrown into the river (in Yansi cultures for example) symbolically severing the connection between "one" mother's single connection with a life that now belongs to the community! Another meaning of this symbolic act is "death to old form of living and the emergence of new life." The disposal indicates that the child has died to the state of pregnancy and now lives and has been engrafted into the covenant community.

An abbreviated account of the ritual surrounding the birth of a child among the Kikuyu will suffice to highlight the importance of this rite of passage, incorporating the use of water as part of the ritual.

The start of labor pains and the summoning of the midwife. Water for cleansing the mother is prepared [with certain prayers of petition, depending upon the particular community]. The mother is washed, the child is born. After the birth of the child the father cuts sugar canes, four stalks if the baby is a girl; five if a boy. The juice from the cane is given to the mother who then feeds the child a small amount of juice from her mouth. The placenta is removed and disposed of immediately by being covered with cane and grass and then buried in uncultivated land near the home.

The child is bathed and oiled. If the birth was difficult, a goat is sacrificed by the father, and a medicine man is called to purify the house. The cleaning of homes, bathing, washing of clothes, and moving of fire from place to place is halted. Mother and child are then secluded in the house for four days if a girl, and five days if a boy, regardless to the difficulty of birth. Women of the village attend the mother, making sure that sugar cane rubbish remains in the house. At the end of the period of seclusion the mother's head is shaved and she takes her first post-natal cleansing bath. The father sacrifices a sheep [or goat] of thanksgiving to God and the living dead, and in preparation for "the sweep" which is allowed for the first time since the birth of the child.

All is cleaned, and the mother and her new baby are welcomed back into the community.

The symbolism in this process includes "death and resurrection," enacted by seclusion and emergence of mother and child. It is as if the mother and child die as individuals and return to life on behalf of everyone else in the family. "Death to one state of existence and rising to another" is implied in the shaving of the mother's head. The hair is representative of pregnancy, which when ended, must be removed to allow new hair, new life, to exist. The mother is a new person (regardless of the number of pregnancies) and capable of further reproduction, thus available for continuing the rhythmic cycle of life. The hair is also sym-

bolic of the connection between mother and child, and shaving the mother's head symbolizes that the child now belongs to the entire community—extended family. In the words of Mbiti, “. . . the child is now ‘scattered’ like her [the mother's] shaven hair, so that it [now] has a hundred mothers, a hundred fathers, a hundred brothers, and hundreds of other relatives.”²⁰

To cease the cleansing of homes and to halt bathing, washing of clothes, and moving of fire from place to place symbolizes the dying of normal life for the corporate community in great anticipation of a new life to join with the community in corporate rhythm represented in the birth of a child. When a child is born, the entire community is reborn. The sacrificed sheep (goat) signals the important moment in new life where God is thanked. In all of this the living dead (deceased ancestors) participate and are acknowledged in the pouring of libations.

In the event of the death of the child, the mother goes through a cleansing ceremony using lots of water not only for cleansing but for propelling the child into the life beyond. If the child dies after the name has been given, it is customary to “revive” the child in the next pregnancy by either giving the next child the same name, or giving it another which would indicate “resurrection.”²¹

At the birth of a boy, a half calabash (ladle) is used as a wash basin, the same basin being later used in the rites of initiation before circumcision. This very important ceremony among the Kikuyu is known as *Gucokia muana ihu-inf* meaning “taking the child back into the womb” in preparation for a second birth. This process includes the securing of an “unblemished ram” which must stay in the house with the mother of the child who is to be reborn.

At the time of the rebirth process, there is a ceremonial walk to the river led by the father leading the ram. The walk through the water provides a process of selecting the soil which the ram's feet touches once out of the water. The ram is then slaughtered and waste parts of the ram are placed in the ladle along with the special soil. The ram's intestines symbolize the umbilical cord which is used to re-connect the mother and child as they sit together on a stool with the child between the mother's legs symbolizing a re-entry into the womb. The mixture in the ladle is used for a cleansing ritual for the mother to ascertain that she has been cleansed and purged from defilement, so that only cleanliness is absorbed by the child. Where this is practiced, girls are also often ceremoniously re-connected and again severed from the mother. The age of the child when this is done varies from community to community.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 151.

²¹ John C. Gatu, “Ceremonies of Adoption Among the Kikuyu Community Commonly Known as Njiarno,” Unpublished Research Paper, Princeton, 1971, p. 4.

Naming Ceremony

In keeping with the African ontology, especially regarding time, many names mark the occasion of the birth, as well as name lineage alternating between the father and the mother. Names describing weather conditions as the second part of the name are also frequent. For instance, if the birth occurs during rain, the name would mean rain, rainy, misty, or water. In the case of the Kikuyu, a name incorporating *mbura* meaning blessing, or gift from God (as cited earlier) would be used.

Naming ceremonies frequently include the use of water for cleansing before the name is given. If the person for whom the child is named still lives, the act will be sealed by that person placing saliva from his/her mouth on the child's lips. Where older persons name the child, he/she spits into the child's ear "to implant the name in the baby's head."²² Following this, the name is announced to the community gathered and prayers are offered for the health and prosperity of the child and the community.

Initiation Rites

Most African rituals include rites of passage to mark the birth of a child, passage from childhood into puberty and into adulthood. Such rites are major movements in the rhythm of the community of which the individual is a member. What happens to the individual happens corporately to the parents, relatives, neighbors, living and dead.

Water used in these rites symbolically expresses cleansing, and/or washing away the old self as a new self and a new status in the community is reached. Ritual acts of purification from the state of unproductive life to a dramatic preparation for adult life are also evidenced as a way of deepening the religious significance.

Girls and boys undergo prolonged periods of washing in cold water in order to "harden" them for the more difficult periods ahead. The writer experienced this ceremony in Ghana among the Ashanti, and in Liberia where for several weeks the boys and girls to be initiated were painted with white (water) paint, and were free to continue their daily activities. Three days before the ceremony, they were isolated and fed certain foods and drank herbal teas to assist in the cleansing process. The girls were taken to the sacred "washing" place where they were bathed by the women of the village, chanting certain words until all of the paint was removed. A similar ceremony took place in separate quarters for the boys. All initiates were dressed in white and brought before the community for approval and thanksgiving. A joyous celebration followed with

²² Mbiti, *African Religions*, p. 155.

the pouring of libations, feasting and dancing.

Circumcision

Where circumcision and clitoridectomy are performed as rites of passage, symbolic meanings as well as procedures vary according to beliefs (just as with other rites). From evidence gathered, both rites take place at an age when the participants are aware of the meaning for themselves. Ages vary from 4-19, and in all instances the rite is performed in the presence of a supportive community. In general this ritual has social implications severing the individual from childhood into youth and adulthood, announcing to the community that the individual is capable of procreation. This, too, is a form of rebirth, preparation for marriage, and training for endurance of physical and emotional pain. The ceremony prepares one for the difficulties and sufferings in later life.

For the Gisu (Uganda) God intervenes during the circumcision rite; for the Abaluja (Kenya) circumcision is a time of sacrifice to God. Except in these instances, rites of circumcision serve strictly social purposes. The blood that is shed falls into a hole which has been carefully prepared by each initiate symbolizing a mystical binding to the living dead and to the community into whose life they have become further engrafted. Water used during these ceremonies is for cleansing and for pouring of libations.

The Maasai (East Africa) begin this ritual at least two months before the cutting takes place. Candidates for circumcisions are boys between the ages of 12 and 16 who are covered with white clay symbolic of a new state of life. They are sent as a group to roam the countryside, "roughing" it for themselves. They return to the center of the community the day before the ceremony and wash themselves thoroughly in cold water, seeking to approach the important moment cleansed and appropriately toughened in order to withstand the pain. The newly initiated remain together during the healing process, emerging as a group, ready to withstand pressures of manhood and marriage.

For the Dahomey of West Africa, a later age for circumcision still remains in effect. Again, water is used to insure thorough cleanliness so that the incision may heal properly.²³

Where clitoridectomy is part of traditional African religions, symbolic meanings are similar to those for circumcision. The clitoris is either pierced, or a portion or the entire clitoris removed. Sacrifices are made, prayers are offered and the initiate is carefully cleaned and isolated until complete healing has taken place.

²³ Melville J. Herskovits, *Dahomey: An Ancient African Kingdom*, Vol. 1 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), p. 299.

Cicatrization

At least two forms of cicatrization (cutting the skin to induce the formation of a scar) are evidenced in Africa. The first, and perhaps most familiar form is that associated with "tribal" marks indicating membership in a particular society or religious group. The actual ceremony involving this form of cicatrization is carefully guarded by members and the use of water cannot be cited. The marks indicate various levels of understanding of the secrets of the society or tribe, the only public expression of which is in the dances performed outside the "cult houses."²⁴

The second form of cicatrization is particularly important in the Dahomean society where girls undergo cuts as an enhancement of erotic zones. This takes place in Dahomey usually in August which is the peak of the rainy season and the period when temperature is generally low, in order to avoid infections which could set in when the heat is intense. Since the main purpose is to provide large keloid scar tissue in certain places, a specially prepared irritant is prepared to rub into the freshly made incisions. After proper healing, the young woman is ready for marriage.

Marriage Rites

Marriage is required in most African cultures as a part of the rhythm of life in which the entire community participates. Failure to marry symbolizes the rejection of society, and thus rejection by society. As stated earlier, marriage and procreation are one single process; one is not complete without the other. The most generalized symbolism is "life-death-new life," ritualized in the marriage ceremony, seclusion, and re-entry into the community. (Rituals unrelated to water are special studies within themselves!)

Water is used in ritual bathing by bride and groom (in separate quarters—or separate places in the nearby river) as a symbol of cleansing and purification. Among the Batoro (Uganda) on the day after the wedding ceremony, and as a continuation of the ritual, the bride and groom wash themselves in very cold water in an enclosed courtyard. They undress and splash each other with water as a ritual of binding themselves to each other and as a process of cleansing themselves from the former state of unmarried life. This symbol of ritual ablution also carries the "death of the old life to resurrection of the new life of procreation."

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, pp. 183-200.

Death Rites

Rites of passage from birth, through puberty, and marriage continue the rhythmic flow as death rites become necessary. Paradoxically viewed as a break in the rhythmic flow of life, and as part of the natural rhythm of life, many rites are evidenced in the African communities studied. First of all, there is a need for the people to determine the cause of death—whether by socery and witchcraft or as natural movement to a higher life embodied in spirits. This, then, determines the particular rite to be used.

In the event of “natural” causes, the deceased is carried out of the home (in Ndebele societies—Rhodesia) through an opening other than the door, since he/she has not gone away, but is in effect still present. The body would have been ritualistically washed and properly wrapped for burial. A quiet feast is held with specially prepared meat and drink which is preceded by a libation to the recently departed spirit. The villagers go to the river to wash (cleanse) themselves and then return to their homes.

Since the living dead (recently departed) and spirits of previous deaths remain with the family, the rituals employed highlight the new form of continued existence. To understand this part of African religions’ *Rhythm of Life*, one must perceive of the continuity of the life of the deceased through his/her children, and the rituals which unite the two worlds. The family, through rituals, recall their surroundings by the “hosts of witnesses” who gather with them as they continue to flow with the natural order of creation. The washing of the body (where practiced) is a ritualistic preparation for the departed to be closer to God. Death is for the African the beginning of a permanent ontological departure of the individual from mankind to spirithood.

As the dead are buried, the earth then becomes the intimate point of contact between the living dead and their human relatives. Although the earthly grave removes the body from human sight, and in effect hides their physical existence, the ground is “sacred” and therefore the “altar” upon which libations are poured. It is no wonder, then, that land, earthly space taken by foreign invaders or African “brothers” is not only criminal, but at the same time profane.²⁵ The earth, while serving as a source of life, is a sacred repository of the bodies of those who once lived in human form, and now live in spirit.

Libations

As previously stated, libation, the act of pouring a liquid onto the

²⁵ John C. Gatu, “Pastoral Problems,” p. 2.

ground, is a form of sacrifice and an acknowledgement of the presence of the departed member of the community. This ritual, evident in most African cultures studied, symbolizes the continuing existence of those who have lived an earthly life, whether for a long or short period of time. Among the Igbo and Butawa of Nigeria, the Ewe of Dahomey, Ghana and Togo, the Kikuyu of Kenya, the Yoruba of Nigeria and Ashanti of Ghana, libations are poured as a way of establishing contact between human beings and the departed. This is often an expression indicating that the departed ones have not been forgotten. The writer experienced an emotional libation ritual in the Ivory Coast, a ritual performed by the chief of the village who had migrated there from Ghana along with others who had either died or had been sold into slavery. An important addition to this ritual, according to the interpreter, was libations to invite the "unknown" descendants of the Afro-Americans present to join us in a great family reunion!

Libations symbolize a welcoming of hospitality toward the deceased, and serve as a means of appeasement if the deceased has been offended or angered. If the property on which certain rituals are taking place was owned by the deceased, libations are means for communicating approval for the activity.

Water, palm wine or beer are among the liquids used. If either liquid has been taken from the property of the deceased, then this is one means of communicating a request of approval for the use of that liquid.

Among the Akamba, the spirits of the departed are directly under God's control, who may transmit messages through them. When praying and offering (pouring libations), the name(s) of the departed is (are) mentioned, concluded with the calling of God's name in the language of the particular culture. The Dinka (Sudan) particularly are careful to pour libations and begin the prayer with "God, and our ancestor . . ." ²⁶ Water or other liquids are symbolic of "spirit," which is then used to contact the "spirit" of the living dead.

River Cults

It was the contention of Melville Herskovits in *Myth of The Negro Past*²⁷ that African slaves from the west Coast of Africa were attracted to Baptist traditions because of the practice of baptism by immersion. This form of ritual was appealing because of the river cults which were active, especially in the Dahomey area, according to his observations.

²⁶ C. G. Siligman, and B. Z. Siligman, *Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan* (London: Longman, 1932), p. 179.

²⁷ Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 232.

Black writers have since then dispelled this thesis as other factors have emerged and have been substantiated. The baptism ritual was not the ultimate impetus for the large membership among the Baptist, since in any form (immersion, pouring or sprinkling) baptism for the slave did not assure full acceptance by the baptizing, dominant culture. For the African, the covenant community is a source of earthly sustenance, but in America, regardless of the mode and amount of water, "community" was not assured. Perhaps the freedom of expression in worship was more appealing than the mode of the rite of entry.

The belief of the River cult centered on the powerful spirits which inhabit rivers and other large bodies of water, as well as importance of this power in the *Rhythm of Life*. Members of this cult were among the most powerful members of tribal priestly parties, and their rituals included ritual washing, renewal, and infilling from the spirits in the water. Part of their initiation into membership was total immersion while naked, in a particular, sacred river.

It is of interest that African Christian theologians do not make references to the existence of such cults in their research. Mbiti's references to the Fon of Dahomey have to do with the will of God on a cosmic scale, which is expressed in terms of the word of god.²⁸ They conceive of creation as having taken place through the Word (Fa) of God;²⁹ this is one of the few references in Mbiti's study that highlights God's word. (This concept provides inspiration for further research among the Fon, perhaps connecting the word with water ritual).

The Yoruba of Nigeria

Certain beliefs and practices of the Yoruba have remained in their traditional forms in the African diaspora. Descendants found in Sierra Leone, Cuba, parts of the Caribbean, Brazil and South America have preserved beliefs and rites, holding faithfully to ancestral traditions. The Yoruba village, founded near Charleston, South Carolina, by a small group of Black Americans in the late 1960s, was developed to represent a continuation of Yoruba beliefs, rites, and life styles. Practices observed in this village as recently as 1980 authentically relate to the African (Yoruba) community, but reflect some of the modern conveniences of twentieth century America.

The Yoruba world-view is not unlike other African cultures in that sacrificial rites constitute the "outward and visible sign of inner beliefs of the people."³⁰ Sacrifice is the essence of the religion of the Yoruba,

²⁸ Mbiti, *Concepts*, p. 39.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

³⁰ J. Omosade Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites* (London, England: Long-

based upon an understanding that it is more important to relate to God than to be concerned about relating "person to person." Sacrificial offerings emphasize the creaturehood of humanity and the omnipotence of God. Whenever there is disorder or disharmony between any of the human family in the immediate or larger world, this is to be attributed to neglect of the Supreme Being and to workers of iniquity.

Water for the Yoruba contains special powers and spirits and is often used as a means of cleansing and for libation. There are ritualized water cleansings before each sacrifice and all villagers are expected to cleanse thoroughly before approaching any shrine. There is always a pot of water (considered sacred) in *Obalatala's* sanctuary. Obalata or Orisha-nla is considered to be one of the earliest divinities created by God, and devotees are to approach him only if they have been washed. Water is also used as a ceremonial drink in order to assist in the healing process. Worshipers are required to wear white as a symbol of purity during worship. The hands of "medicine men" are ritualistically washed as preparation for religious acts.

Rivers, lagoons and the sea are dwelling places of spirits, according to the Yoruba. For those who live close to large bodies of (flowing) water, there is a belief that spirits, if properly attended, can in return provide basic human needs. *Yemoja*, believed to be the goddess of water, is the source of all bodies of water. In the present age *Yemoja* is associated with the Ogun River and is given elaborate worship in those areas through which it flows.

Oya, goddess of the River Niger, is alleged to have been the first wife of *Sango* a significant deified ancestor. Because of disillusion with her husband's career, she killed herself and entered the bosom of the earth from which she emerges in the form of strong winds and waters to destroy life on earth upon occasion. Along with other water goddesses, she is worshiped and sacrifices are made to appease her anger.

Dwellers along the rivers believe that there are divine creatures living under water. There are legends that men and women among the Ilaje have gone under water for a number of days to live with the water spirits. Certain rites invoke water-spirits to live on land in order to provide balance in the earthly cosmos. Certain divinities are identified as "lords of the sea" and are prominently worshipped, since it is believed that wealth and prosperity come from the sea. *Olokun* or *Malokun* is a divinity principally worshipped among the Yoruba, because it is the major source of health, wealth, and food. He is considered to be greater than any of the earthly chiefs and worship is accorded him especially by those

man, 1980), p. xv. Dr. Awolalu in 1981-82 was a visiting professor at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia and was instrumental in providing insights about the Yoruba.

who live near the sea.³¹

*Christian Mission in Africa: African Religious
Movements and Christian Symbolism*

St. John Mark the evangelist is said to have brought Christianity to Egypt during the first century, A.D. It spread from there to Ethiopia, Nubia and other parts of North Africa.

The Christian Church flourished in North Africa between A.D. 180-430 in what is now Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine were produced by the church and are listed among the great patristic fathers. Thus, Africa is not only the home of traditional religions, but also the home of Islam and an early seat of Christianity! This heritage is too often overlooked.

By 1490 Franciscan and Capuchin missionaries were sent to the Congo area where they were centered in Angola. Rulers who were Christianized in the Congo adapted many of the church rituals into traditional religious practices for political reasons. Along with Catholic and Protestant religious practices came colonial subjugation which gave rise to ethnic consciousness and African unity at a deeply religious level. The need for a unified ethnic assertion arose at first in the cities but spread rapidly in rural areas.

Although evidence of what have been labelled messianic movements can be traced to 1704,³² ritual practices of Kimbanguism are the most carefully documented and useful for this study. Before highlighting some of these rituals, it is of interest to note that the Mwana Lesa sect in Southern Katanga (1923) had adopted the practice of baptism by immersion. During an immersion baptismal ceremony, a number of persons were drowned and the leader deported; he was hung in 1925.³³

Kimbanguism

The Kimbanguist movement in Zaire (Belguim Congo) was started by Simon Kimbangu, a former Protestant catechist. In March of 1921 Simon became known as a healer, worker of miracles, prophet and "son of God." He rapidly developed a following, partly because of his possession of religious literature and hymns written in the Kikongo language. He borrowed from Christian practices the ritual of Baptism, the confessions, and stressed Biblical passages that incited the oppressed aggressively to seek justice in their own land. Simon Kimbangu was arrested in September, 1921 and died some years later in prison.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 46-48.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

His martyrdom and the resulting persecution of his followers firmly established the movement which he started. He became a symbol of resistance to the colonial administration and a prophet of a golden age. In the eyes of the Bakonga he was elevated to positions similar to Moses and Mohammed.

The followers of Kimbangu, since his death, acknowledge his presence in worship, yet worship God through Jesus Christ. Christ is considered the "Great Founding Ancestor of the Family."

Baptismal rites imported to Africa by missionaries are practiced with the concept of spirit initiation into the Kimbanguist community. *Water is not used*, the laying on of hands or *chrismation* is the usual act accompanying baptism. There is an acute awareness of the indwelling Holy Spirit and the ingrafting into the Body of Christ.

The official theological statements expressed in their catechism were accepted for their admission as full standing members of the World Council of Churches in 1969. The rite of baptism includes the trinitarian formula with the additional words, ". . . and the Holy Spirit who spoke to us through the prophet Simon Kimbangu."³⁴

Conclusions

In order to understand rituals among African people one must understand the context in which rituals take place. For the African, life is lived and viewed holistically, with no compartmentalization of sacred and secular. To be human is to *belong* to the whole community and the cosmos. Therefore, rites and ceremonies provide a means for engrafting into a covenant fellowship while maintaining the rhythm established by God. Rituals allow individuals to remain in touch while nurturing and being nurtured. Regularly repeated acts allow the total community to keep in touch with the divine as the community is unified, and refueled for struggles and pleasures of life.

Water is necessary for life, thus a special gift from God. Where weather is determined basically by seasons, the absence of water in the form of rain causes a deep appreciation for the symbolic and realistic value of water. In addition to cosmical dimensions (water is necessary for the life of the universe) water means purification and regeneration, a new state of life: passing from death to resurrection. God used water for creating humans, and provided the waters of the womb for prenatal nurture. To be a child of a watery womb is to be a blessing from God. To use God's gift of water is to employ it in rituals of birth, puberty, marriage, naming, death, sacrifice and blessing. Water is poured, as in liba-

³⁴ E. Chambers, et.al., eds., *The 50th Anniversary of Kimbanguism* (Paris: Faurbourg—Poissonnier, 1971). Passim.

tions, sprinkled for blessings, bathed in, washed with, used to quench thirst and for medicinal purposes. Water washes away an old life and prepares the way for the new.

Water has a mysterious power for the African believer who, in certain cultures, hold that the spirit of God resides in every drop of water. Therefore, when water is placed in a container and blessings invoked, there is the presence of God. God in action, at work, continually creating, is the understanding of water for the African. Thus, water is appropriated for use in rituals. Of such is the heritage of the African in America who understands God at work in the context of total existence.