

Religious Functionaries (Priests, Kings, Medicine Men, Diviners and Oracles) In Africa

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ABSTRACT: There are many religious functionaries in African Religion. These include authorities and specialists in various aspects of African life; like priest, king, medicine men and diviners. Broadly speaking, their roles fall into two broad categories, mediators and mediums. A mediator could be roughly defined as a go-between, one who mediates between God and man. In this context, he is a human being, who because of his office, training and skill, or his personal qualities plays the role of a go-between in man's relationships with the spiritual world. Mediums on the other hand are persons (or objects) whom a deity or spirit uses to communicate his message or benefits on people. In the African scene, mediators are usually priests, kings and medicine-men. Mediums are diviners, spirit mediums and prophets. The roles of these religious functionaries are not mutually exclusive. A priest can also be a diviner or medicine-man, and vice versa. We will illustrate each of these functions with examples drawn from some African societies.

INTRODUCTION

Priests

The priest like the king and the medicine man is a mediator between man and the spiritual world. However, his role differs from that of a king or a medicine man in some respects. A priest like the king is a public functionary. He is usually attached to a cultic center, a shrine or a temple where he performs certain prescribed forms of rituals on behalf of the people whom such centers are supposed to serve. It is precisely in this aspect that he differs from a medicine man. Thus, whereas a medicine man is self-employed and offers his services to individuals or groups who may request and pay his services, a priest, regardless of whether his office is hereditary or personal is usually associated with some type of social organization, of which he is an employee or organ operating in the interest of the organization's members. The same could be of a king, however, a priest differs from a king in that he is primarily concerned with the performance of rituals, whereas a king's functions are mainly political. It is true that priest in some societies may combine their ritual functions with some political functions, just as king in some societies also perform religious rituals, yet primarily a priest's role is the performance of rituals.

In some African societies, it is difficult to distinguish between the ritual and political roles of the priest. Among the Lubar, the head of every family cluster (bba wara) has some ritual as well as some socio-political functions. As the senior living descendant of the lineage's agnatic ancestors, he is the ritual representation of the lineage, as well as its political head. Besides, the shrines of his own recent ancestors, he has at homestead the shrines of the founding ancestors. He consults oracles and performs rituals on behalf of

his dependents. He is also responsible for the allocation of the family land. But his ritual duties have priority and control over his dependents and strengthened by his authority and control over his dependents to bring sickness to a dependent who flouts lineage authority. The dead are said to ‘hear his words’. In some parts of Lugbara land, the shrines controlled by these headmen are not only centers of ancestral cult but also centers of rain-making or some magical cult inherited from the lineage. So that essentially it is not the physical possession of the shrines which is the force behind his status, but the possession of the necessary spiritual qualities which enable him to approach the ancestors and to represent the living to them on the one hand and to represent them to the living on the other hand. The emphasis is on the fact that only he knows those mysteries unknown to ordinary men because ‘he is near his father who told him the words of the ancestors. The Lugbara present us with a socio-religious system based on the ancestral cult in which the lineage head has ritual as well as some political functions. He is primarily a priest of the ancestral cult, but has also important socio-political functions.

Priests Among the Ikwerre

Ikwerre society of the Niger Delta Region of Rivers State, Nigeria, like the Lugbara society is organized on the segmentary lineage system. Each lineage head, (the Okpara), is the priest of the ancestral shrines. The Ikwerre idea of a lineage is an intimate complex of its present members, its ancestors, and its future progeny, and the fact that the senior diali (free born) of the lineage always holds the ‘Owhor’ and ministers at the shrines of the lineage ancestor, would seem to emphasize the need for the maintenance of close continuity between all three elements involved. The lineage head is the bearer of the Owhor-the most senior freeborn, the symbol of ancestral authority. With it he offers regular rituals at the lineage ancestral shrines (ndiche) on behalf of his dependents. He has also socio-political functions. He is in-charge of the family land and property inherited from the ancestors. He is symbol of the unity and peace in the lineage. And settles disputes among its members. He could with his ‘Owhor’ interdict any recalcitrant members who would not accept his decisions or constantly flout the traditions and customs received from the ancestors.

Besides, these lineage priests, there are priests of particular deities or spirits which have public shrines and cuts. These priests are called ‘Eze agbara’ (chief of deities). In every Ikwerre town there are several of such priests each of which is attached to one public shrines of a deity worshipped in the town. The priest keeps the shrines in good repair and attends to devotees who come there to offer sacrifices, to make offerings, to swear or to ask for the protection or vengeance of the deity. The earth-deity is the arch deity or principal deity in most Ikwerre towns. So too, her priest (Eze-Ali) is greatest as the ‘high priest’ in each town.

With some deities, the office of the priest is hereditary. In many cases, succession to a vacant priestly office is a result of direct call by the deity through some extra-ordinary religious experience. The authority of the call is usually confirmed by consulting divination. The training of the new priest is usually a simple affair. Where succession to the priesthood is by inheritance, the successor is designated even from his childhood days and he gradually learns by assisting his father or uncle in his priestly duties. No special training is required in cases where the candidate receives his call from the deity, he is going to serve because the ritual duties of a priest are not very complex and any elder who has been close to a priest would have a fairly good knowledge of them. Besides, the deity would normally choose the person competent to do the job. For the rest, he learns from experience. The initiation ceremonies into the priest office vary in solemnity according to the importance and influence of the deity he serves. In some cases, it involves no more than some sacrifices after which the priest designate controls the shrine and makes a feast.

Priest Among the Nuer

The Nuer of Sudan have three categories of priests. Firstly, the head of the family could offer sacrifices in cases of sickness or some other needs involving only his own family. He could thus be called the family

priest. However, sacrifices which have more than domestic import, that is, which involves a whole lineage or a clan are performed by the ‘gwan buthin’ (literally the master of ceremonies). Each family has its own master of ceremonies, who must not be a member of the lineage to which the family belongs, but of a collateral lineage. He thus presides at these rituals as a representative of the larger family circle to which the lineage making the sacrifice belongs. A master of ceremonies presides at weddings, mortuary ceremonies, blood-feuds, initiations serving of kinship to allow intermarriage of cohabitation and so forth.

The third and most important category of priest among the Nuer is the priest of the leopard-skin. The name leopard-skin priest derives only from their costume which consists of a leopard-skin worn across their shoulder. He should more appropriately be called ‘the priest of the earth’ because his powers have symbolically deeper association with the earth. For example, his blessing or curse can favorably or adversely affect the growth of crops and other human activities which take place on the earth. The lineage of the leopard-skin priests are said to have descended from a man called ‘Gee’ the first priest. These priestly lineages are now found spread in all parts of Nuerland. This is necessary because their services are essential to the Nuer everywhere, and it is significant that they are generally not members of lineages identified with political groups, because they are to act as peace-makers between such groups.

The chief services of the leopard-skin priest are in connection with homicide. His role is to arrange a settlement to avert a blood-feud which may likely develop, and to offer a sacrifice to lift the condition of interdiction which has fallen on both the slayer and his kinsmen of the slain as a result of the shedding of blood. A man who slays another would immediately take refuge in the house of the nearest priest, who would draw the point of a fishing spear down his right arm and sacrifice an ox, called ‘the cow of blood’. Were the slayer to eat or drink before his ritual, he would, the Nuer believe certainly die. The priest then conducts a negotiation between the family of the slayer and the slain for an acceptable number of cattle which will be given in compensation for the deceased. Some of these cattle received in compensation are used to marry a wife to beget children in the name of deceased, while some are offered in sacrifice to lift the interdiction on the two families to eat or drink together or communicate in any way among themselves. In this context, the religious and political role of the leopard-skin priest stands out in bold relief. The priest’s role in making this sacrifice, which only he can perform and the performance of which is the essentially priestly role in blood-feuds, is clearly distinguished from the sanctuary he provides and the mediation he offers. The first is a sacramental act which only a priest can perform, the others are acts he can perform because of the high regard people have for his status in society. It is a distinction between priestly office and priestly status. He is primarily a priest, but the society appreciates the social and political roles attaching to his priestly office. Let us now at this point discuss Sacred Kings.

Sacred Kings

Many societies in Africa have no kings at all, but some do have kings. Where kings are found, very often, they are not simply political heads, but sacred personages who possess some spiritual and mystical powers which enable them to command some benefits on their people. In some cases, they are regarded as descendants or incarnations of some beings they are believed to have control over some phenomena on which the life and welfare of the people depend, like rain, fertility, pestilence and so forth. From time to time, they perform certain rituals to revitalize their powers and to bring the natural forces under control, so that the king is not only a political leader, but also a ritual functionary. In other places, the position of the king is seen as that of the head of a family. He is the head of the clan, the link between the visible and invisible sections of the clan. He is the mouth-piece of the ancestors. The living sees him as the representative of the ancestors who were the founders of the society and custodians of its traditions and customs. In this capacity, he mediates between the living and their ancestors, and presides at the ancestral rites in honor of the founders of

society. Here we shall illustrate patterns and functions of African kingship with examples taken from some African peoples.

The Ashante-hene-King of the Ashanti

The Ashanti chiefdom, is a combination of localized lineages inhabiting a given territory and forming a political community. Each lineage is a political unit having its own headman who represents it on the chiefly council. Every lineage is believed to be protected by its own lineage ancestors, but it is the dead rulers, the ancestors of the royal lineage, that guards and protects the whole tribes or chiefdom. As each lineage has its own blackened stool which is the shrine of its ancestors, before which the lineage head makes offering and pours libation at the appropriate seasons, so the Ashanti nation as a whole has its own stool which is the sacred emblem of its performance and continuity. The saying goes that ‘the stool is the soul of the nation’.

The Ashanti chief has not only an important role as a political ruler who is the axis of the political relations of his people and the one in whom the various lineages that compose the tribe find their unity, but also primarily fills a sacred role as the ‘one who sits upon the stool of the ancestors. In the central rite of a chief’s installation, the chief-elect is gently lowered and raised three times over the blackened stool of the ancestor believed to be the founder of the lineage. By this ceremony, the chief is believed to have been imbued with the spirit of his ancestors, there upon his person becomes sacred and is hedged round by a number of taboos. For example, he may not strike or be struck to by anyone, he should not walk bare-footed, his buttock must not touch the ground. Should any of these taboos be broken, appropriate sacrifices are made to avert any danger that would befall the community. The chief thus as the occupant of the stool, represents all those who have occupied it before him. He is the link, the intermediary between the living and the dead. This is very well illustrated by the ritual performed by the Ashanti chief at the ‘Adaye’ and ‘Odiwera’ ceremonies. At both ceremonies which are performed in honor of the ancestors, the chief presides, and offers prayers and makes offering before the stools to his ancestors on behalf of the tribe, asking that the earth may be fruitful; Ashanti chief is like the clan and lineage heads, the first born of the nation. He is the leader of the living members of the Ashanti nation, their representatives before the ancestors, as well as the medicine that has been prepared, here “it is he that makes the medicine be successful. I am sacrificing to Kpara. I am sacrificing to Tswacha Malu...” The names mentioned are names of the ancestors of the guild of medicine-men.

Medicine Men

Medicine can thus be defined as a recipe of herbal mixtures and some ritual formulae designed to generate some powers which are built into nature by God, which can be tapped and applied with the help of God and other spiritual beings to meet various human needs. Medicine can act for anyone who observes the proper ceremonies for becoming the owner of the medicine, and observes the taboos carefully. Some medicines can be bought and sold, in fact, there is a number of simple medicine mixtures which are known and used by many people in every African community. However, medicine men are specialist in the art of preparing, controlling and administering medicine.

There are all sorts of medicines. There are good medicines and bad medicines. Good medicines are socially approved medicines usually used to cure diseases and ward off misfortunes, while bad medicines are medicines applied to socially disapproved goals. Although a competent medicine man would have some knowledge of bad medicines, yet as a public practitioner, he would deal mainly with good medicines to maintain a good public image and retain a good proportion of his clients.

Africans have a profound belief in a spiritual universe. Phenomena and events in the universe are determined not only by material and physical laws and forces, but also by invisible powers and spiritual beings. Agents of evils and misfortunes in African world views as defined earlier, are many and can attack for innumerable number of reasons. A particular illness or misfortune besides its known physical causes, may also be a result

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of an ill-will of the patient, or an evil-eye of an enemy, a curse, a broken taboo, sorcery, witchcraft, punishment of an ancestor, a deity or even of God himself. In other words, there is always a religious dimension to every human condition, it is part of the work of the medicine man to diagnose the physical and spiritual causes of the illness and prescribe the appropriate remedies. In every complicated cases, he may refer the patient to a diviner or an oracle, a more authoritative diagnosis; but by an image, he continues to treat the patient until he gets well.

Since sickness for an African is not only a physical but also a spiritual and psychological experience, a medicine man is a great asset in every African society. He is at once a physician, a psychiatrist, a wonder-healer, and a performer of rituals. The presence of a medicine man in every African traditional society is therefore essential. His services and his house are accessible to all at all times. He comes into play at many points in the individual and community life. His main concern is with sickness, disease and misfortunes. However, he can be called in to provide protective medicine for any form of misfortune just as he could be approached to prepare medicine to attract some fortunes. He can drive away evil spirits, track down witches and prepare antidotes for sorcery. He could make medicine to guarantee abundant harvest, to prevent all sorts of pestilence, to cure infertility and to prevent constant child-deaths. Every competent medicine man should be able to provide solutions to most areas of human need. The more the human needs a medicine man can provide solutions for, the greater his competence. Thus, the name ‘witch doctor’ which Western literature commonly uses for the medicine man is inadequate and very often has derogatory undertones. Medicine men are not themselves witches, but witch constitutes only a very tiny fraction of his functions.

In fact, it is usual in many African societies for one man to combine the role of a medicine man with that of a diviner and a priest. However, for an African, a medicine is seen primarily as a protector of life. Life in this context is not limited to the physical life, but includes the various dimensions of the African conception of life, his existence, health, long life, off springs, his well beings and the strength and wellbeing of the groups to which he belongs. The importance of medicine men in African societies is borne out by the presence of many medicine men in many African cities. If the number of signboards one sees in most Nigerian towns is anything to go by, then their relevance in the changing Nigerian society must be considerable. It is well-known locally that their clientele come from all sectors of the community and include politicians, highly placed government officials, university lecturers and students, business men, military officers, women, men, boys, girls and even religious leaders.

The way a medicine man receives his vocation varies in different African societies. In some societies, the ability to become a successful medicine man is regarded as a natural gift which can be nurtured to perfection through proper training. In other societies, like the Igbo, only those who are called by the deity of medicine (Agwu) may become medicine men. The call is experience in the form of a mild mental disturbance, (Ala agwu, madness of Agwu). Divination confirms that it is a medicine man. The candidate then sets up a shrine for Agwu deity and attaches himself to an experienced medicine man as some families. The skill of making medicines is valued as part of the family patrimony, a closely guarded secret, which a father can bequeath to his son, or an uncle to a nephew. In every case, any prospective medicine man undergoes an intensive and sometimes long period of training. During this period, he acquires knowledge in matters pertaining to the quality and uses of different kinds of herbs, roots, animals, insects and mineral substances (see Olumati, 2013). He learns through observation and assisting their masters on how to handle people with different kinds of diseases and human problems. They master how to mix the different types of medicines, the different invocations, rituals and sacrifices that go with them and how to handle the different spiritual and human agencies of evil. He may be allowed to practice on his own, only after his character and professional competence have been certified by his master and he has been publicly initiated into the local guild of medicine men. We shall now illustrate the position and functions of a medicine man with examples drawn from two African societies.

Mediums

There are other functionaries in African religious traditions whose role can best be described as that of medium through whom the deities make known their wishes to their devotees. These people practice different forms of divination by which they obtain the oracular messages from the divinities and interpret them to human inquiries. There are the diviners properly so called who reveal the minds of the deities by interpreting certain signs according to fixed principles. There are others who divine by spirit possession. While the possession lasts, their own personality lies in abeyance and all their utterances are accepted as the voice of the god, or the spirit dwelling in them and speaking through them. Sometimes, a deity gives its oracles at some oracular spot a cave, a river, a shrine or a forest. The oracle is given by a mysterious voice said to be the voice of the deity emanating from the oracular spot. In some cases, the voice is quite intelligible to the enquirers. In other cases, it is not and is interpreted to the enquirers by some attendant. Finally, there are prophets, or charismatic figures who claim to have received a personal revelation from deity which they proclaim to the people. They wield considerable power and influence in societies in which they operate.

Spirit Mediums

The mediumistic aspect of all divination is most dramatically demonstrated in the cases of spirit possession. In such cases, the medium is believed to be overpowered by a deity and his utterances are believed to be 'oracle' or messages directly given by the deity. According to Frazer, the belief in temporary incarnation or inspiration is worldwide, certain persons are supposed to be possessed from time to time by a spirit or deity. While the possession lasts, their own personality lies in abeyance, the presence of the spirit is revealed by convulsive shivering and shakings of the man's whole body by wild gestures and excited looks, all of which are referred not to himself but to the spirit which has entered into him, and in this abnormal state, all his utterance are accepted as the voice of the god or the spirit in him and speaking through him. Since Frazer wrote these words, a lot of more has been learnt about the phenomenon of spirit possession. There are some societies which know spirit possession only as an attack to be cured like a sickness by propitiating or driving away the spirit in question. Most African societies however, welcome the spirits that come into mediums as friendly spirits, and interpret them as a sign of a call of the patient to enter his service as a priest, a diviner, a medicine man or a medium. We have already discussed spirit possession as it relates to the work of priests, diviners and medicine men. In some African societies some people who get spirit possession function as professional mediums either on their own or in collaboration with a priest or diviner.

The main duty of mediums is to link human beings with the living dead and the spirits. Through them messages are received from the spirit world and passed on to men about things that would otherwise be difficult or impossible to know. Mediums function in this role only when they are possessed by a spirit, otherwise they are normal people without specialized abilities. The trance which accompanies the spirit possession is normally induced, usually by prolonged singing, drumming, dancing or the interminable shaking of seeds in a dry ground, and much rarely with drugs. Sometimes the medium is assisted by 'an interpreter of the tongues', but in most areas, the oracle is directly intelligible.

Many Dahomean priests, according to Parrinder are never subject to possession themselves, but they have mediums attached to their temples who enter into trances at will. Possession generally occurs for the first time when the person is attending 'a public religious ceremony'. At the movement of the dance and the example of some inspired devotees, the new person falls down in fits or leaps into the ring and dances in an extravagant fashion. The presiding priests interpret this as a divine call and persuade the inspired one to begin training for the service of a deity. The training must last up to two or three years, and during this period the novice may have no sexual relationships of any kind. This is because the novice is said to be consecrated and 'married' to the god at the end of the training, he offers a sacrifice and says to the god: 'today you have

completed marriage with me!’ thereafter, he may marry or return to her husband or wife. Hence, these mediums are usually referred to as wives of the deity (Vodun si in fon or Iya Orisha in Yoruba).

At feats of the deities, these mediums become possessed during the course of the drumming. They begin to rock and tremble, when their assistants rush them aside and prepare them for the dance. Then, they may imitate and impersonate some deities and spirits, give messages and perform some feats, which would be impossible in their normal state. The priests receive the messages and issue instructions based on the messages to the people. The medium are thus passive instruments of the deities and carry no authority whatever except when they are possessed.

Among the Kalabari, the Orukurapu, literally ‘the bearer of a spirit is a medium. Such spirit possession may involve a variety of spiritual agencies, water spirits possession may involve a variety of spiritual agencies, water spirits or a spirit water doctor, but the great majority of ‘Orukurapu’ are women possessed by the minor water spirits. To consult an Orukurapu, one goes to her house and tells her that he would want to talk to her spirit. She will then take a bottle of palm gin and one or two shillings and go to the shrines to call upon her spirit to come. The spirit possession takes place at the ‘shrine’. Being a spirit, the woman’s possessor will automatically see which of the gods is afflicting the client and will diagnose and recommend treatment accordingly. After the session the spirit will leave the woman and she will return to her every day state.

Spirit mediums thus play very important roles in traditional African life. African world view as we have seen, see the visible world of the living and the invisible spirit world as essentially inter-dependent. The invisible world which belongs to the realm of cosmogonic time, contain the archetypes of the beings in the visible world which belongs to the realm of temporal time and constantly exercise vital influences are most unpredictable. Mediums play the vital role of establishing a bridge between the two worlds, and the two time realms. Men need to know the disposition, intensions and commands of the deities in very important situations. Mediums surrender control of their faculties and personalities, so that the divinities could use them to pass on vital messages and blessings to the people. In a society where ignorance or misunderstanding of the will of the divinities can have very threatening consequences, ascertain the will of the deities brings a great psychological release and is a prerequisite for making appropriate religious rituals. The strict discipline and high moral standards they observe during their training and the corrective pronouncements of their spirits help to sustain the social, moral and cultural values of the society. It has often been asked whether the phenomenon of spirit possession is genuine or fake.

Diviners

The Yoruba of Nigeria have one of the most highly developed divination systems in West Africa. This divination system called ‘Ifa’, is connected with the Yoruba deity ‘*Orunmija* (translated: Heaven knows salvation), said to be a child of the Supreme Being, (Olodumare), and his deputy and oracle on earth. The diviner is called ‘*babalawo*’ (father of mysteries).

A person becomes a *babalawo* either by inheriting this ability from his father or another member of his family or by a direct call from ‘Orunmila’. Training begins between the ages of seven and twelve. A novice attaches himself to an experienced *Babalawo* whom he serves for about ten to twelve years. During this period he learns the technique and vast oral literature associated with the Ifa divination.

The basis of the Ifa divination is a large collection of proverbs and parables correlated with a set of 256 divination figures, called ‘Odu’. Some diviners claim that they can recite proverbs and eight parables for each ‘Odu’. This would give about 4,096 of the oracle proverbs and parables. The proverbs are supposed to be the synopsis of the oracle while the parable is meant to illustrate it. Finally the application is made by the diviner to the needs and requests of the enquirer.

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There are two methods of selecting the ‘Odu’ divination figures. The more complex pattern involves a rectangular divining board and a set of sixteen palm nuts. Before the divination process, the diviner may make a sacrifice to Ehu deity. While shaking the sixteen palm nuts in his loosely clasped hands, he rapidly tries to lift all the nuts from his left hand to his right. If two nuts are left in his left hand, he marks one stroke on the powered divining board. If one is left, he marks two strokes. If more than two or none is left the process is repeated. He continues this process until he completes two columns each with four markings. A shorter method involves the use of a divination chain or string on which are attached eight halves of seed pods or shells. The chain is held in the middle and thrown in such a way that the eight pods fall in two parallel lines. Pods that fall with their concave side upwards are equivalent to one line on the divining board while those that fall with the convex side upwards are equivalent to two lines.

Once the set of eight marks arranged in two columns has been obtained by either process, the diviner gives the proverbs and recites the explanatory parable attached to it. This gives the oracular reply to the enquirer’s problems. The role of the diviner is simply to apply this response to the specific needs of the customer. Sometimes this may be necessary for the parables can be self-explanatory in some situations. The parables generally refer to occasions in the past when the deities, ancestors or some animals consulted Ifa about certain problems, description of the situation and the sacrifice that was prescribed. The practical application may be that the enquirers should likewise make a sacrifice to a named deity, and so avert the threatened danger or obtain his protection for a project in hand.

The Ifa divination is consulted at all important occasions in a person’s life. It is consulted at birth, before marriage, during serious sickness, after a series of misfortunes, to obtain a job, to pass an examination, before building a new house, etc. Background to the Ifa system is the Yoruba belief that everybody has received from the Creator a destiny (On) which is unalterable. The Ifa does not pretend to advise a man on how to change his destiny, but what to do at any point to get the best out of his destiny package.

The Ifa system technically operates as a set of horoscope. Built into the parables are five categories of fortunes and five categories of misfortunes drawn from the Yoruba experience and outlook on life. The fortunes are defeat of one’s enemy, children marriage, money, and long life. While misfortunes are: personal loss, want of money, a fight, illness and death. In practice, each is subject to a wide interpretation. The client whispers his problems into one of the palm nuts or any object used in the consultation of Ifa, thus informing Ifa and Orunmila about them. The diviner does not know the client’s problem and does not need to know because only Orunmila through Ifa can reveal to anybody the position of his destiny at any given time. The diviner is only the mechanical operator of the process of selecting the figure and reciting the parables. He is only an instrument or medium the deity uses to communicate his secrets. The skill of the diviner lies in the number and types of parables he is known for any given Odu, and some parables have wide application. After hearing the proverbs and parables, the client chooses the one that is most relevant to his problems.

So, effectively, the functions of Ifa divination are to help a client to focus reflectively on his problem and to provide him with an apparatus rooted in accepted cultural values for analyzing them, and above all to give an authoritative backing of the spiritual world to whatever decision and course of action he may want to take on his own situation. Ifa thus provides confidence and certainly in a work of anxiety and doubt.

Among the *Ndembu* of Zambia we find diviners who combine divination by manipulating a divination apparatus with divination by spirit possession. A man receives his call, the diviner from the *Kayongu*, the spirit of divination. The call is experienced as a ‘heavy’ sickness resulting in fits of trembling that took like epileptic seizures. Eventually, diviner would confirm that the illness is caused by *Kayongu* and is a sign of a call to the diviners’ profession. The patient would then be admitted for training during which he is taught how to control his seizures and the techniques and symbolisms of basket divination. Henceforth, the spirit of *Kayongu* comes to him when he divines and assists him in his practice.

An *Ndembu* diviner divines by manipulating a winnowing basket in which are contained a variety of some twenty odd object representing the various misfortunes, social categories, and malicious motives which are typical of *Ndembu* life. For example, a piece of red clay indicates enmity, a piece of white clay indicates absence of witchcraft, a piece of wood tied with a bark string called ‘Mutu’ represents a corpse, etc. As the diviner begins to shake the winnowing basket, he gradually enters into a mild trance. His heavy breathing and shaking signify possession by Kayongu. Slowly, he interprets the meaning of the various symbolic objects which rise to the top of his basket as oracular response to the enquiries of his clients.

The *Ndembu* diviner’s task is not to foretell the future, but rather to unveil the past, mainly to disclose the causes of misfortunes or death. Since all human problems such as infertility illness or a big loss are ascribed to moral conflicts within the society, the diviner’s task is to disclose the acts of immortality which have provoked the vengeance of the spiritual agencies, or to reveal the identity of the witches or sorcerers responsible. The symbols in the winnowing basket constitute his diagnostics scheme which classify human problems and solutions under general principles. The diviner’s social as well as moral analyst who significantly contributes in sustaining the moral and social values of the society. Since some illnesses have psychosomatic origins, the moral and social features of the divination contribute to their cure.

Prophets

Prophets are like diviners and spirit mediums in some aspects. All three are mediators of the divine, but whereas diviners read the divine will of a symbolic medium, and spirit mediums are vehicles of the divine message only while they are in a temporary state of trance, prophets are charismatic who speak forth the divine word received in a revelation. His revelations may come to him in flashes during a period of spirit possession. But he is not a bearer or receiver of divine message only while the spirit is still in him. In fact, the prophet essentially differs from a spirit medium in that he is not merely a receiver of divine message (which other proclaim and interpret) but in the words of Evans Pritchard; the prophet is the mouthpiece of a spirit, its interpreter, it is he who speaks, but he speaks under its control. With medium, it is the spirit, not the human agent who speaks. The authority of the prophet is based on his personal call the revelation he has received and his charisma. Unlike the priests who is a holder of a public office in service of some sacred institution, a prophet is self-employed, his powers are charismatic an individual inspiration. The virtue of the priest resides in his office, that of the prophet in himself. For this reason, prophets are often sources of creative religious change and in some cases leaders of mass religious movements or cultic groups. However, these differences are not absolute. Under certain circumstances, diviners and priests may develop prophet powers and become leaders of religious and social change.

Mbiti is of the opinion that prophets and prophet movements ‘in the strict biblical sense’ do not exist in African traditional societies. This he thinks is due to lack of a long dimension of the future in African concept of time. This may be so but I do not think that prediction of events in the distant future is essential to prophethood, nor is it necessary that African prophethood must correspond to the biblical pattern. As a matter of fact, prophets are found in different parts of Africa.

Prophets among the Tonga of Zambia, as described by Colson, are personages of much lesser social statute. In contrast to the priest custodians of shrines whose spirits are associated with independent local communities made up of matrilineal descent groups, the spirits (Basangu) which possess the prophets and sometimes are resident in shrines set up by the prophets are not identified with any social community. In fact some prophets say that their ‘basangu’ manifest itself as a snake which claws into the body through the mouth. Spirits which possess prophets are generally spoken of as ‘visitors’ some prophets in fact claim that their spirits come from the neighbors. These facts are meant to emphasize that the powers of the ‘Hasangu’ transcend the local communities, and consequently that prophets are not limited to the service of any local community or kinship

group. It is believed that ‘basangu’ choose their prophets from any descent groups locality, and may enter any man, woman or child.

Children however become active prophets only on maturity. Prophets are not usually consulted for individual needs. They are usually concerned with issues which affect the larger community especially when the worship of the local spirits fails to yield the expected results. Their intervention is sought especially in cases of drought, and to stop destructive rain. Prophets may also warn of trouble coming unless people throughout the country side heed their message e.g. to receive and wear a particular charm, or comply with some new or half-forgotten ruling. They are therefore able to introduce innovations in ritual including local ritual. Few prophets have achieved a reputation that went for beyond the Tonga territory. For example, in the late 19th century, a prophet now called ‘Monze’, the name of his ‘basangu’ received delegations from communities in the Tonga, Ila, and Sala regions. Some coming from as far as 100 miles away, the spirit by some contemporary claimed to be the possessing spirit by some contemporary prophets.

CONCLUSION

Prophets and prophetic cults existed in many African communities. Their role and importance in traditional societies are borne out by the proliferation of syncretic prophetic Christian cults in many African societies today. In other words, whereas African Traditional Religion may be crumbling because the structure of these cults which have its roots in African Religion are on the increase and are in fact threatening missionary Christianity in Africa. This dynamism in my view derives from the role of prophets and prophetic cult in traditional societies. Cults in African traditional societies were highly localized. Priests, shrines, and cults were linked to particular lineage and local communities to the exclusion of others. Even diviners, medicine men and spirit mediums who were not part of the institutionalized hierarchy, most often were in the service of the local community or kinship group. The prophets on the other hand, whose authority derives from a personal revelation and his charisma was not a product of the social structure and as it were, stood outside it and could criticize it. He rarely if ever, advocated the scraping of the traditional social order, but he constantly advocated its purification and renewal. He was therefore more responsive to the impulse of change. Many prophets like Ngundeng, Gwek and Arianhdit did in fact provide leadership in times of national crises and destabilizing change. Because of their extraordinary powers, prophets provided solutions to problems, which were beyond the powers of the local shrines and consequently draw their clients and followers from varied and distant areas that cut across local and tribal frontiers. Prophets therefore both served as courts of appeal from local cults, which did not satisfy their adherents, and provided the universalistic elements in otherwise locally and ethnically based African Religion.

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