

# LIFE BETWEEN *ONTOLOGY* AND *HUMAN YEARNING* IN AFRICAN RELIGIOSITY PATHS of SCHOLARS' INTERPRETATION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR MISSION

Flaminia Elia \*

## TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF AFRICAN RELIGION: AN INTRODUCTION

One of the most interesting data which clearly emerges from the study of Africa is the fact that, for some years now, it has begun to recount its own history, culture, thought and religion. All of these aspects had long been interpreted through the mediation of explorers, missionaries, European settlers, and been misunderstood or ignored by most of them in their writings. Now these issues are flowing from the pages of many African authors from all over the continent, who with just pride are claiming knowledge and experience. By reading some of these pages, a reading still open to further contributions, one becomes aware of the existence of a fundamental concept, discussed in this article, namely, that *life* is the common denominator that runs through the existence of all the elements of God's creation besides representing man's highest aspiration.

This theme is developed here through the interpretation of three authors who, within the limitless texts on the thought and on the Traditional African Religion, have paid particular attention to the question of *life*: the interpretative key to both.

These authors are: the Belgian Placide Tempels, who initiated the said reflection, and Vincent Mulago and Laurenti Magesa, both Africans, who received, clarified and developed it. It is fair to say that their work, focused on the Bantu area in the case of Tempels and Mulago, and then broadened to include the whole of sub-Saharan Africa in the case of Magesa, constitutes the essential background for this discussion.<sup>1</sup>

Before studying the question, it is as well to try to give an overview of the African religion, based on some of the most frequently highlighted issues in accepted contemporary literature.<sup>2</sup> They

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<sup>1</sup> Sulla lettura della vita quale concetto centrale per la comprensione dell'universo africano, si segnalano gli ulteriori e più specifici contributi di F.A. OBORJI, «Religione tradizionale africana tra pluralismo e realtà ultima», in *Pluralismo e missione, sfide e opportunità*, 58, 1 (2005), 93-124 e di E.E. UZUKWU, «Igbo world and ultimate reality and meaning» in *Lucerna*, 4 (1983), 9-24. In essi, la vita viene definita la «realtà ultima» della Religione Tradizionale Africana; A.M. NG'WESHEMI, «The Way of the Ancestor Revisited: The Concept of Life in African Traditional Religion», in *Africa Theological Journal*, 34, 2 (2014), 1-14; F.O.C. NJOKU, *Essays in African philosophy, thought & theology*, Clacom Communications, Enugu, Lagos 2002, 167-168; J. SHAMUANA MABENGA, *L'Africa che canta la vita. La cultura africana della vita alla luce dei suoi proverbi*, EdUP, Roma 2000, 50; M. NKAUFU NKEMNKIA, *Il pensiero africano come "vitalogia"*, Città Nuova Editrice, Roma 1995, 96, 102, 141-142; P.A. KALILOMBE, «La spiritualità in una prospettiva africana», in R. GIBELLINI (ed.), *Percorsi di Teologia Africana*, Queriniana, Brescia 1994, 179-211; B. BUJO, *Africa e morale cristiana: un processo di inculturazione*, Città Nuova Editrice, Roma 1994, 99-100. Qui l'autore afferma: «La chiave per poter capire la religione degli africani, infatti, sta nella preoccupazione che essi hanno per la vita»; H. SINDIMA, «Community of Life: Ecological Theology in African Perspective», in C. BIRCH - W. EAKIN - J.B. McDANIEL (ed. by), *Liberating Life. Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology*, Orbis Books, New York 1990, 137-147; Engelbert MVENG, in *Identità africana e cristianesimo*, SEI, Torino 1990, 47- 48 (ed. originale in lingua francese: *L'Afrique dans l'Eglise. Paroles d'un croyant*, L'Harmattan, Paris 1985), scrive: «La realtà fondamentale, nella tradizione africana, è la vita. La vita allo stato puro si trova solo in Dio, autore e fonte di ogni vita. [...] Sull'immenso campo di battaglia del mondo dove la vita e la morte si affrontano costantemente, la missione dell'uomo è quella di individuare gli alleati della vita, di conquistarli alla sua causa e garantire così la propria sopravvivenza che è nello stesso tempo vittoria della vita. Questo è il significato profondo della religione tradizionale africana. Prendiamo un qualsiasi rito africano: esso è un rito di liberazione e di salvezza dell'uomo. Analizziamo le preghiere della religione tradizionale: cercano tutte la salvezza presso le potenze della vita».

<sup>2</sup> Si precisa che, non essendo la religione tradizionale l'argomento principale dell'articolo, non è possibile dare conto e merito della totalità degli autori che tale letteratura concorrono a formare.

relate to its definition and general characteristics which hold a central position within the cultural fabric, its singularity or plurality, and, lastly, its constituent elements.

According to J. Omosade Awolalu, “When we speak of African Traditional Religion we mean the indigenous religion of the African. It is a religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebears of the present generation of Africans. It is not a fossilized religion (a thing of the past) but a religion that Africans today have made their own by living it and practicing it”.<sup>3</sup> This religion, “Africa's own way of coming to terms with reality”,<sup>4</sup> which preceded the arrival of Christianity and of Islam, and that still influences the thinking and lives of millions of Africans, is characterized by its presence in myths, fables, stories, proverbs, ethical precepts, prayers, symbols, dancing and rituals, and for the lack, unlike other religions, of a founder, of sacred writings and of missionary zeal.<sup>5</sup>

It represents the heart of African culture. It is the element that runs through and permeates it in depth and fullness in such a way that it makes it impossible to distinguish it apart and one can say that African culture is a religious culture, and that the African is a religious person. In this regard the words of John S. Mbiti are often cited. In 1969, in his best known text: *African Religions and Philosophy*, (here translated), he wrote: “Since the traditional religions permeate all areas of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the profane, religiosity and lack of religion, the material and spiritual spheres of life. Wherever an African may be, there is his religion: he carries it with him to the fields where he sows or harvests the produce of the land; it accompanies him to a party or a funeral ceremony; if he is studying it goes with him to the exams whether at school or university; if he is a politician, it accompanies him to Parliament”.<sup>6</sup>

In the above-mentioned publication the author states that in referring to the African religious phenomenon, he employed the expression ‘Traditional African Religions’ in the plural, because in his opinion every African people has its own religious system that cannot be extended to another tribal group.<sup>7</sup>

Author E. Bolaji Idowu expresses a different opinion in *African Traditional Religion. A Definition*, by affirming that it is possible to speak of Traditional African Religion in the singular. This is because if one looks at Africa as a whole in a careful and thorough way, one can perceive a common factor: “a common African-ness about the complex of cultures and religious beliefs and practices of Africa”,<sup>8</sup> whose decisive and determining element is the same concept of God.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> J.O. AWOLALU, “Sin and its Removal in African Traditional Religion”, in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 44, 2 (1976), 275.

<sup>4</sup> K.A. OPOKU, “African traditional religion: An enduring heritage”, in J.K. OLUPONA - S.S. NYANG (ed. by), *Religious Plurality in Africa. Essays in Honour of John S. Mbiti*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, New York 1993, 65.

<sup>5</sup> J.S. MBITI, “Never Break The Pot That Keeps You Together. Peace and Reconciliation in African Religion”, in *Dialogue & Alliance* vol. 24, n.1 (2010), 4-21; E. IKENGA-METUH, *Comparative Studies of African traditional Religions*, IMICO Publishers, Onitsha, Nigeria 1987, 25-39; J. B. BALLONG-WEN-MEWUDA, «Religioni Africane Tradizionali», in *Dizionario di Missiologia*, 427-431; G.G. TATA, *Vivere insieme. Aspetti etico-sociali dell'antropologia africana*, Urbaniana University Press, Roma 2014, 38.

<sup>6</sup> J.S. MBITI, *Oltre la magia*, SEI, Torino 1992, 2 (ed. originale in lingua inglese: *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinemann, London 1969); cf. M.N. NKEMNKIA, *Il Divino nella religione tradizionale africana. Un approccio comparativo ed ermeneutico*, Città Nuova, Roma 2011, 9; F.A. OBORJI, *La teologia africana e l'evangelizzazione*, Leberit, Roma 2004, 45 (ed. originale in lingua inglese: *Trends in African Theology Since Vatican II: A Missiological Orientation*, Leberit, Roma 1998).

<sup>7</sup> J.S. MBITI, *Oltre la magia*, 1- 4; Tra gli autori che attualmente sostengono l'uso del plurale si segnala Jacob K. Olupona. In *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, New York 2014, 1, dichiara: «African religions are as diverse as the African continent itself. [...] It's not surprising, then, that this enormous range of peoples, cultures, and modes of living would also be reflected in a diverse range of religious expressions».

<sup>8</sup> E.B. IDOWU, *African Traditional Religion. A Definition*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 1973, 103.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, 104. Idowu ipotizza che la presenza di questa comunanza di dati culturali e religiosi possa trovare una spiegazione nella comune origine razziale o nel fenomeno della diffusione.

Idowu's position has been followed by many other authors too, who, though fully aware of the plurality and diversity of African religions, have undertaken a path of comparative research in order to detect and then systematize the common features.<sup>10</sup> John S. Mbiti joined them later in February 1989. In the preface to the second edition of his above-mentioned work, he stated: "In the first edition I talked about 'African Religions' in the plural, to highlight the diversity of African religiosity. Since then I have felt the need to emphasize the common elements too and their potential unity (not uniformity) within this diversity. Consequently, in lectures and other publications, I now use the singular, 'African Religion, more than the plural expression'".<sup>11</sup> In fact, in his *Introduction to African Religion*,<sup>12</sup> which is taken as a reference point here, he specifies the five essential parts that make up the core and foundation of African religion. These are the various forms of the belief in God, in spirits, in human life, in magic, in the afterlife; practices and ceremonies that include prayer, making offerings and sacrifices, performing rituals; the sites chosen and religious objects: altars, caves, sacred hills, rivers, amulets, and masks; the moral values and principles such as truth, justice, love, good and evil, respect for people and prosperity, individual and community responsibility, integrity; religious leaders, such as priests, the rain augurs, the elders, the diviners, the medicine men and kings.<sup>13</sup>

### THE VITAL FORCE POSITED BY PLACIDE TEMPELS

In the cultural atmosphere following the First World War, marked, among other things, by severe criticism of the colonial system, as well as the controversial theory of "prelogicality" of the French philosopher Lucien Lévi-Bruhl, according to which the brain of the so-called primitive peoples, lacking the principles of identity and causality, would be pre-logical and in this way differ from that of European peoples,<sup>14</sup> Placide Tempels,<sup>15</sup> a Belgian Missionary, gave the world his

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<sup>10</sup> Tra i sostenitori dell'esistenza di un nucleo comune: D.E. THOMAS, *African Traditional Religion in the Modern World*, McFarland & Company, Inc., Jefferson, NC, 2005, 25-26; D. ZAHAN, nel suo *Religion spiritualité et pensée africaines*, Petit Bibliothèque Payot, Paris 1970, 9, così afferma: «La diversité des ethnies africaines ne doit pas faire obstacle à une telle entreprise; car, en fait, la différenciation à ce point de vue touche moins les idées que leur expression, à travers des éléments dissemblables, liés aux occupations, à la flore et à la faune»; G. PARRINDER, *African Traditional Religion*, Hutchinson's University Library, London 1954, 11; P. AKOI, *Religion in African Social Heritage*, 1970, 196. Tra le sintesi offerte: A. F. OBORJI, *Towards a Christian Theology of African Religion. Issues of Interpretation and Mission*, AMECEA Gaba Publications, Eldoret, 2005, 13-28; J. ILUNGA MUYA, «Alcuni elementi costitutivi dell'esperienza religiosa africana» in R. CIPRIANI - G. MURA (cura di), *Il fenomeno religioso oggi. Tradizione, mutamento, negazione*, Urbaniana University Press, Rome 2002, 778-800; R. BAUM, «African Religions: An Interpretation», in K.A. APPIAH and H.L. GATES (ed.), *Africana. The encyclopedia of the African and African American experience*, Basic Civitas Book, New York 1999, 31-34; S.A. THORPE, *African Traditional Religions. An Introduction*, University of South Africa, Pretoria 1991, 104-117; E.I. METUH, *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions*, 61-63; K.A. OPOKU, *West African Traditional Religion*, FEP International Private Limited, Accra 1978, 8. Nel presente articolo, nella stessa volontà di individuare ciò che unisce piuttosto di ciò che divide, si fa uso dell'espressione «religione tradizionale africana» al singolare.

<sup>11</sup> J. S. MBITI, *Oltre la magia*, XI.

<sup>12</sup> J. S. MBITI, *Introduction to African Religion*, Heinemann, London 1975.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, 10-11

<sup>14</sup> Questa teoria è presente in alcune sue pubblicazioni, tra le quali *Les fonctions mentales dans la sociétés inférieures*, Alcan, Paris 1910, 54-55, in cui scrive che: «Les objets, les êtres, les phénomènes peuvent être, d'une façon incompréhensible pour nous, à la fois eux-mêmes et autre chose qu'eux-mêmes. [...] En d'autres termes, pour cette mentalité, l'opposition entre l'un et les plusieurs, le même et l'autre, etc., n'impose pas la nécessité d'affirmer l'un des termes si l'on nie l'autre, ou réciproquement. Elle n'a qu'un intérêt secondaire». Trascorsi alcuni anni questa teoria è stata rifiutata dallo stesso Lévi-Bruhl. Come si legge nella sua opera postuma *Les carnets de Lucien*, Les Presses universitaires de France, Paris 1949, 72, «La structure logique de l'esprit est la même dans toutes les sociétés humaines connue, donc ne plus parler de caractère prélogique».

<sup>15</sup> Frans Tempels nasce a Berlaar, in Belgio, il 18 febbraio 1906. Nel 1924 entra nel noviziato dell'Ordine dei Frati Minori Francescani di Thielt, ricevendo il nome di Placide. Nel 1933 inizia il suo impegno missionario in Congo Belga, ora Repubblica Democratica del Congo, che si concluderà nel 1962. Tra le sue pubblicazioni vi sono quattro scritti etnografici su diverse tribù bantu (Baluba, Bazela, Bashila) pubblicati in *Kongo-Overzee*, cinque articoli contro

pioneering work, that was considered to be explosive/shocking from many aspects: *La Philosophie Bantoue*.<sup>16</sup> He was the first author, after nearly thirty years of study and work in the Belgian Congo,<sup>17</sup> to have upheld the existence of logical and coherent African thought. This earned him then, and it is still valid today, due to the approval and criticism expressed, an important position in the field of the philosophical and religious interpretation of African religiosity.

Concerning this issue, Tempels argued that the Bantu peoples have their own ontology that “naturally penetrates and informs the entire mentality of primitive peoples, it dominates and directs their whole conduct”.<sup>18</sup> It is a rational reading of the nature of visible and invisible beings which forms the basis of their particular conception of God, of the world, of man, of life and of their relationship. This ontological system, key to the understanding of the whole philosophical and religious thought of these peoples, has at its center a vital idea: the ‘vital force’.<sup>19</sup> This force which represents “the being itself, in its total actual realization, is endowed with the capacity for a more intense realization”,<sup>20</sup> is therefore the being in every being, its inner nature, such as to affirm that “being is strength”.<sup>21</sup> Thus the vital force, identified with the Being itself, of which it does not constitute, as in Western philosophical thought, a simple attribute,<sup>22</sup> is not considered to be complete and static, but rather dynamic and capable of growing or weakening. From this it follows that the being too is dynamic and susceptible to change, to more or less marked growth or decline. This change is possible thanks to the ontological interactions that take place with God and with all other beings or vital forces created by Him. Each one is endowed with a specific energy that can strengthen man; and is apparent in the vitality of each individual’s life or rank of belonging.

This universe of interactive, inter-dependent hierarchical degrees of power resembles “a spider’s web; one cannot touch a single thread without making the whole web vibrate”.<sup>23</sup> God represents the “Vigorous”/Supreme Creative force that upholds and strengthens the vitality of all his creatures.<sup>24</sup> Initially, He communicated the vital life force to the ancestors of the clan, and from them it passed to the deceased, according to precise laws of “primogeniture” and vigour of life,<sup>25</sup> to

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l’amministrazione coloniale belga pubblicati sul giornale *L’Essor du Congo* di Elisabethville, *Le concept fondamental de l’ontologie bantou*, *La Philosophie bantoue*, *Catéchèse bantoue*, *Notre rencontre*. Placide Tempels muore in Belgio il 9 ottobre 1977. Cf. H. RZEPKOWSKI, «Placide Tempels» in *Lessico di Missiologia*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2000, 604.

<sup>16</sup> *La Philosophie bantoue* è il testo più conosciuto e controverso di Placide Tempels. Fu pubblicato per la prima volta in francese con la traduzione dal fiammingo ad opera di A. Rubbens, dalle Edizioni Lovania di Elisabethville nel 1945. Numerose sono state le edizioni successive e le sue traduzioni in varie lingue. In questo articolo si utilizza l’edizione in lingua italiana, *Filosofia bantou*, Ed. Medusa, Milano 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Il nome attuale di questo Stato è Repubblica Democratica del Congo.

<sup>18</sup> P. TEMPELS, *Filosofia bantou*, 37.

<sup>19</sup> P. TEMPELS, *Filosofia bantou*, 57; cf. P. TEMPELS, «Le concept fondamental de l’ontologie bantou», in A.J. SMET, *Melanges de philosophie africaine*, Faculté de Théologie Catholique, Kinshasa 1978, 153-180.

<sup>20</sup> P. TEMPELS, *Filosofia bantou*, 60.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, 59; cf. P. TEMPELS, «Le concept fondamental de l’ontologie bantou», 159. Qui asserisce che: «Je penserais presque que, pour les Bantou, la notion de *force de la vie* remplace et répond à notre notion de *l’ens*. Chaque être est une force de la vie, chaque force de la vie est un être, et dans ce sens-là, la notion de force de la vie serait la notion fondamentale de l’ontologie bantou, la notion universelle suprême, applicable à tout ce qui existe réellement: Dieu, les esprits; les défunts, les hommes, les animaux, les plantes et les êtres matériels».

<sup>22</sup> Nella coincidenza tra essere e forza vitale, e nella considerazione dell’essere come dinamico, Tempels ravvisa la differenza che separa la filosofia bantou da quella occidentale. In quest’ultima, infatti, l’essere è «ciò che è», e la forza ne costituisce solo un attributo, un accessorio. L’essere si caratterizza poi per la sua staticità e i cambiamenti che intervengono sono propri dei suoi attributi o accidenti. Cf. P. TEMPELS, «Le concept fondamental de l’ontologie bantou», 159.

<sup>23</sup> P. TEMPELS, *Filosofia Bantou*, 66.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, 55.

<sup>25</sup> All’interno di un clan il primogenito è considerato “l’anello di rinforzo, la vita che collega gli antenati alla sua discendenza”, *ibidem*, 67.

human beings and then to other animal, vegetable and mineral forces. Thus, the being who occupies a senior position has stronger vitality, and can increase or decrease the vital force, or being, of those who, or what, occupy a lower position. For example, the ancestors and the deceased can exercise their vital influence on; men on other men of a lower rank, animals, plants and minerals. The center of creation is represented by man, the most powerful, visible force, who benefits directly from the vital vertical influence of God, of the clan's ancestors, of his direct forebears, or their vital influence arising horizontally from the vital force of superior human beings and from the respective vital force of animals, vegetables and minerals, specifically created by God for man's vital reinforcement.

This philosophy of forces, which the Bantu hold to be the wisdom handed down to them by their ancestors, characterizes, explains and conditions their beliefs, religious practices, conduct and ethical life. It contains *man's supreme aspiration that is represented by life*, by the life-force that comes from God.<sup>26</sup>

"The supreme value of the Bantu is *life*: vigour, vigorous life, the vitality of life. They would explain that those customs, whose meaning we fail to understand, serve to acquire the vigour of life or of the vital force of life".<sup>27</sup>

Thus, life<sup>28</sup> is the heart of the Bantu philosophical and religious approach. It represents "what motivates their prayer and invocations to God, to the spirits, to the deceased".<sup>29</sup> Each Bantu knows that he/she is inserted in an ontological order of creation and existence foreseen by God, and that, not being in oneself a full vital force, only a correct and respectful relationship with the Source of Life and with Life itself, as well as with all the other vital forces alive in Creation, constitutes the means by which to secure the vital potential longed for.

#### VINCENT MULAGO'S VITAL UNION

Placide Tempels' interpretation shows a universe of beings or vital forces constantly in search of a fuller life. This reality was received and further analysed, although with some differences, by the esteemed African theologian Vincent Mulago<sup>30</sup> too, in the context of his interpretation of the Bantu world and, in particular, of its religion.

This interpretation formed the subject of his work entitled *The Traditional Religion of the Bantu and Their Vision of the World*, as well as part of his doctoral thesis on theology entitled: *The Vital Union of the Bashi, Banyarwanda and Burundians in the Face of the Vital Unity in the*

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem* 54, 57, 50; cf. anche *Catéchèse bantoue*, Le Bulletin des Missions, Les Bruges 1948, 5. Anche in questo testo, pensato per la catechesi dei Bantu, l'autore sostiene che « c'est la "vie", la « force vitale » ou « la vie intense » qu'ils désirent par-dessus tout»; cf. P. TEMPELS, *Notre Rencontre*, Centre d'Etudes Pastorales, Limete-Léopoldville 1962, 12.

<sup>27</sup> P. TEMPELS, *Filosofia bantu*, 54.

<sup>28</sup> Come Tempels spiega in *Notre rencontre*, Centre d'Etudes Pastorales, Limete-Leopoldville 1962, 15, la vita non consiste solo nella vita fisica, ma anche nella vita interiore. Il rinforzo vitale cui l'uomo africano anela riguarda sia il corpo che «la richesse profonde des nos pensées, la générosité des nos élans, l'épanouissement de notre coeur».

<sup>29</sup> P. TEMPELS, *Filosofia bantu*, 54.

<sup>30</sup> Vincent Mulago nasce a Birava nella Repubblica Democratica del Congo nel 1924. Viene ordinato sacerdote a Roma nel 1952, e nel 1955 diviene dottore in teologia presso la Pontificia Università Urbaniana, con la dissertazione *L'union vitale bantu chez les Bashi, Banyarwanda et les Barundi face à l'unité vitale ecclésiale*. Dopo esser stato il fondatore e direttore del Centre de pastorale Liturgique de l'Archidiocèse de Bukavu, diviene professore dapprima associato e poi ordinario all'Université Lovanium di Kinshasa. Nel 1966 fonda il *Centre de Religions Africaines* di Kinshasa e l'anno seguente la rivista *Cahiers des Religions Africaines*. Dopo essersi ritirato a Bukavu, diviene direttore del Centre Diocésain de Pastorale, Catéchèse et Liturgie, e rettore dell'Université Catholique de Bukavu. Vincent Mulago muore nel 2012. Cf. B. BUJO, «Vincent Mulago. Un passionné de la Théologie Africaine», in B. BUJO - J.I. MUJA (ed.), *Théologie africaine au XXI siècle. Quelques figures*, vol. I, Editions Universitaires, Fribourg 2002, 11-34.

*Church*.<sup>31</sup> In the texts, through a study of the phenomenological experience of three ethnic groups of the Bantu family, the Bashi, the Banyarwanda, and the Barundi, he identifies and focusses on one of the central concepts underpinning their *vital union*. “When one studies the family life, the political-social and the religious life of the Bantu of Bushi, Rwanda and Burundi, one discovers that life, the idea of vital union, is at the centre of this”.<sup>32</sup>

Mulago’s works support the primacy of religious experience in African culture, in so far as it forms the horizon within which to read the African’s entire vision of the world, life, values and ethical norms.<sup>33</sup>

In his view African Traditional Religion is a system built around four beliefs and four principles. The first four are made up of: «the belief in two worlds, the visible and the invisible; the belief in the communitarian character and hierarchical structure of these two worlds; the interaction between the two worlds. The transcendence of the invisible world does not impede its immanence; the belief in a Supreme Being, the Creator and Father of all that exists». <sup>34</sup> The second four are made up of: «the unity of life and participation; the belief in the beings’ ability to grow, fall and interact; the symbol, as the principal means of contact and union; an ethics flowing from ontology». <sup>35</sup>

In this system, in which all created beings of both the worlds are considered capable of growth and decrease ontologically based on the vital relationship with other beings, the ancestors of the invisible world enjoy special importance because of the key role they play. In fact, they are the invisible family members who, although dead but considered living, are the first to share in the life given by God, and they are the first to ensure that their descendants living in the visible world receive it, thus providing them with the much longed-for *vital ontological increases*. This explains why, in a culture in which life represents the primary good and the chief preoccupation, almost the entire cult of the people revolves around these issues. This is why Mulago, in defining their religiosity, states that: “The religious life of the Bantu may be summarized as the worship of their ancestors and their monotheism”. <sup>36</sup> More precisely it should be said that their ancestral worship <sup>37</sup> must be understood within a strong monotheism. Although the ancestors retain their decisive importance due to the transmission of life, the Supreme Being is not in the least secondary or marginal, but, as philosophical and theological reflection shows, He is the “Creator”, <sup>38</sup> “the inexhaustible Source of Life, of forces and of vital means”. <sup>39</sup> He is the One who creates them, exceeds them and dispenses them to other created beings, “the One who is the source and the cause of all happiness”. <sup>40</sup>

Therefore, religious experience appears to be a phenomenon focused on life which, given by the Supreme Being, circulates through the ancestors to all the beings of the two worlds by a series

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<sup>31</sup> Questa tesi, rimasta inedita, è stata oggetto di pubblicazioni parziali. In questo articolo si fa riferimento ad una di esse, *Un visage africain du christianisme. L’union vitale bantu face à l’unité vitale ecclésiale*, Présence Africaine, Paris 1962.

<sup>32</sup> V. MULAGO, *Un visage africain du christianisme. L’union vitale bantu face à l’unité vitale ecclésiale*, 234; *ibidem*, 115.

<sup>33</sup> [...] Et comme la religion imprègne toute la vie du Muntu, comme celle de l’homme africain en général, on comprend aisément qu’elle soit l’élément central de la culture bantu et la clef de la compréhension de la vision du monde négro-africain», in Gwa Cikala M. MULAGO, *La religion traditionnelle des Bantu et leur vision du monde*, Faculté de Théologie Catholique, Kinshasa 1980<sup>2</sup>, 1973<sup>1</sup>, 9.

<sup>34</sup> Gwa Cikala M. MULAGO, *La religion traditionnelle des Bantu et leur vision du monde*, 12

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, 133.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, 9.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, 15; V. MULAGO, *Un visage africain du christianisme. L’union vitale bantu face à l’unité vitale ecclésiale*, 87.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, 107

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, 112.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, 108.

of ontologically important relationships. Mulago affirms that at the center of this phenomenon there is a key concept: *vital union*.

“Per unit of life or vital union, we may understand that there is: a) a life-giving relationship of being and life of each individual with his/her forebears, family, brothers in the clan, position, as well as with God, the definitive Source of all life;

(b) an analogous ontological relationship of each person with his heritage, property, all that it contains or produces, and with what is believed and lived”.<sup>41</sup>

The vital union represents the ontological and existential relationship that unites, vertically and horizontally, all living and deceased members of a family or a clan with God and with the assets belonging to them that make life possible. It may also be defined as the ontological-existential condition in which all beings live, by virtue of their participation in life itself, given by God, and transmitted by Him to the ancestors. Thanks to whom life is generated, is shared by all and can flourish.

This life forms “the object of all the concern of our peoples”.<sup>42</sup> It is a community life that circulates in all members of a family or a clan, thereby making them united, solidary and interdependent. Given that it is also dynamic and capable of waxing and waning depending on the vital influences of each one, all the energy of the members of the community aims to increase its circulation and growth, well aware that: “beyond this circuit, one would deprive oneself of the vital influence of the vitally Superior members, and this would signify the loss of the will to live”.<sup>43</sup>

## LAURENTI MAGESA’S MORAL OF LIFE

On the same interpretive line as that of Placide Tempels and Vincent Mulago, Laurenti Magesa’s contribution,<sup>44</sup> should be read. He is the theologian from Tanzania who put the link between life, morality and spirituality at the center of his reflection, thus developing a further understanding of African religiosity in its ethical – existential - significance.

In Magesa’s main work relative to our theme: *African Religion. The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, the author asserts that African morality can be understood only in the light of the religious vision in which it is rooted and of which it constitutes a concrete expression.

This traditional view presents some key points which concern God, the universe, created beings and the ancestors. Regarding God, his existence is never questioned: he is “The Primary and ultimate life-giving power”,<sup>45</sup> “the first initiator of a people's way of life, its traditions”<sup>46</sup> and the Creator of the universe. As far as the universe is concerned, it is divided into two spheres placed in

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, 117; cf anche V. MULAGO, «Vital Participation. The Cohesive Principle of the Bantu Community», in K. A. DICKSON & P. ELLINGWORTH, *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 1969, 137-158.

<sup>42</sup> V. MULAGO, *Un visage africain du christianisme. L’union vitale bantu face à l’unité vitale ecclésiale*, 118.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, 135.

<sup>44</sup> Laurenti Magesa è un sacerdote tanzaniano della Diocesi di Musoma in Tanzania. Dopo aver conseguito il dottorato in teologia morale alla St. Paul University di Ottawa, ha insegnato presso la Catholic University of East Africa a Nairobi ed è stato professore invitato alla Maryknoll School of Theology di Maryknoll. È autore di diverse pubblicazioni di teologia morale, teologia africana e etica sociale. Tra le sue pubblicazioni più conosciute *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (1997), *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* (2004), *Rethinking mission: evangelization in Africa in a new era* (2006), *What is not Sacred? African Spirituality* (2013).

<sup>45</sup> L. MAGESA, *African Religion. The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 1997, 39.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, 35.

hierarchical order, intercommunicating and inhabited by different beings.<sup>47</sup> To all these beings God has given a specific *vital force* that connects them, enables them to influence each other, and is in direct proportion to the role played by each. Among them, the ancestors occupy a very prominent place. By virtue of their being the progenitors of the human race, and the main intermediaries of life between God and man, they are, in fact, the most powerful vital force of creation and are the custodians of the whole divine moral tradition.<sup>48</sup> At the center of creation is man who is *ontologically connected* to all the other vital forces that influence it, and that he himself can influence, for better or for worse.

Considering that *the purpose of human existence is the fullness of life*, “to seek life, to see to it that human life continues and grows to its full capacity”,<sup>49</sup> and that this fullness depends directly on other vital forces, whose interaction with them is absolutely essential and must take place with due respect for the moral order established by God and guarded by the ancestors in the tradition passed down through the generations. Thus, if the order is followed, and the life of beings is promoted, it has the power to sustain existence and the permanence of the universe, ensuring mankind life in abundance.<sup>50</sup> From this it follows that the ethical moral criterion that must guide human conduct is the promotion of life, as laid down by God. Everything that furthers life is considered good and right, all that diminishes it is bad and unjust.

According to Magesa, in the ethical reflection of the African, the world assumes a fundamental importance in so far as it is a manifestation of God, who is mystically connected with the spirits<sup>51</sup> that inhabit it, and, above all, indispensable to human life.

“In African ethical thought, the universe has been lent by God to Humanity on the condition that it must be kept in good order and used by all for the promotion of life, good relationships, and peace”.<sup>52</sup> From this it follows that man and his community have the moral obligation to place themselves in harmony with creation and to treat it with care and gratitude, appreciating its natural resources that are indispensable for life, allowing everyone access to it and to benefit from it, and must refrain from tampering or destroying it senselessly. In fact, its destruction would bring about the elimination of the vital animate or inanimate forces that are essential for the human being, and would compromise the typical religious intention concerning the desire for a full life.

Like the relations with the world, interpersonal relations and those with the ancestors are subjected to the scrutiny of ethics too. “The realization of sociability or relationships in daily living by the individual and the community is the central moral and ethical imperative of African Religion”.<sup>53</sup> This ethical imperative takes into consideration the relations and conditions essential for the circulation of life within the community. Whoever fails in this vital sharing with the members of his community performs an immoral act, inasmuch as that loosens and weakens the vital link between its members.

Within a community whose guiding ethical principle is life and its preservation, any event which causes an interruption or reduction of the life force, as in the case of immoral behaviour, disease, natural disasters, the restoration of life is of paramount ethical importance. It is entrusted to the competence of religious experts, “the moral conscience of African society”,<sup>54</sup> who identify the cause of the problem, and through the means at their disposal, such as prayers, sacrifices, offerings and medicines, restore the vital circulation. In short, “the foundation and purpose of the ethical

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<sup>47</sup> Dio, gli spiriti e gli antenati occupano la sfera invisibile superiore, gli uomini, gli animali e i vegetali occupano quella visibile inferiore

<sup>48</sup> L. MAGESA, *African Religion. The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, 35.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, 52.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, 72.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, 56. Presenti nei fiumi, negli alberi, nelle rocce e negli animali, gli spiriti possono arrecare danno alla vita umana. Da ciò ne consegue l'obbligo di propiziarli con offerte e sacrifici.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, 62.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, 64.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, 194.



perspective of African Religion is life, life in its fullness. Everything is perceived with reference to this".<sup>55</sup>

Magesa, the theologian, ever interested in the question of life, in his most recent work, *What is not Sacred? African Spirituality*,<sup>56</sup> addresses the issue of African spirituality, considering it crucial to understanding the African and his yearning for a full life. He states that, this spirituality does not belong to a distant past alone but to the present too which feels its vitality and dynamism; that its originality can build an alternative model of life to that marked by materialism, technology and the unbridled exploitation of the earth.

The author makes it clear that in the African context, unlike other religious contexts, spirituality is far from consisting of, and being exhausted by, a mystical experience reserved for a few, or by a personal and cultural relationship with the divine that excludes others and the world in which one lives. On the contrary, "In the African worldview, spirituality is more than a passive quality. Rather than a 'state of being', it is a way of behaving or, rather, relating. It involves dynamic relationships between visible and invisible powers. Better yet, it entails the mutual exchange of energies among all beings".<sup>57</sup>

Thus, in stating that "power" and "energy" are synonymous of "vital force",<sup>58</sup> spirituality signifies being ready to exchange the vital energy with all the beings in the universe. This force, invisibly present in each being, binds one to another, and makes them deserving of respect.<sup>59</sup> It is the indispensable element for the growth of human life and the harmony of the universe. Achieving this harmony is entrusted to man and his ability to assume a correct relationship with all the other components of creation.

In conclusion: "As an ongoing encounter with life, African spirituality is not a matter of mere belief or assent to doctrine and dogmas.... It does not primarily answer the question of: what we should believe; it responds, rather, to the question of *how we should live*".

## A RELIGION CENTERED ON *LIFE*: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR MISSION

The scholars considered here have effectively shown that the central concept of the African Traditional Religion is *life*, in the dual dimension of its ontological condition and supreme human aspiration.

Later their work served to draw up a Bantu Catechesis based on the vital life force in the case of Placide Tempels;<sup>61</sup> and drew a parallel between the vital union of the Bantu and the vital unity of the Church, in the case of Vincent Mulago.<sup>62</sup> Thus it offers Christians the opportunity to initiate a dialogue with African Religion based on the idea of life, namely, to undertake to act as a critical voice in comparing what this life compromises, and as an ally of all that promotes it.

In the first place this dialogue must aim to build bridges and not barriers, and be conducted in an atmosphere of respect and esteem that promotes true knowledge and mutual enrichment by recognizing the African's values and view of God. Thus, God, the Source of Life, of existence, is in a vital, intense and solidary communion with humanity and the surrounding environment that sustains life, and with the ancestors who, like the dead, must not be forgotten because they live unseen close to God and to men, and strengthen with their vital power, the life pulsating in their descendants. At the same time, the Christian proclamation of the abundance of life given by the grace of Jesus Christ, should be appreciated and supported because it can effectively match, lead to, and satisfy the deep African yearning for fullness of life.<sup>63</sup>

"The dialogue that is being established today is not that of two theoretical entities or two ideologies; on the one hand Christianity and on the other African traditions, no! The dialogue that is being established today is that of the African peoples now at grips with their own future. Its aim is to vanquish historical death which is becoming more menacing every day. Africa appeals to all its sources of vital energy. Its religious heritage must feed these forms of energy. Christianity must,

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, 77.

<sup>56</sup> L. MAGESA, *What is not Sacred? African Spirituality*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 2013.

therefore, build this religious heritage. Christ said that he came that we might have life, and have it abundantly (cf. Jn 10:10)".<sup>65</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the dialogue simply outlined above cannot be the sole purpose of the missionary effort which is intended to spread and keep pace with the dual commitment to foil the situations that threaten life and to enhance those that promote it. The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Munus*, on the Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace, dated 19 November 2011, supports our service to reconciliation, justice and peace. In it, after a brief summary of the African vision of life, and the observation that: "serious threats loom over human life in Africa" (n. 72), Benedict XVI invites the Christian community to play a constructive role in dealing with the key issues of disease, chronic poverty, and the unregulated exploitation of natural resources, (cf. nn. 72, 73, 79, 80).<sup>66</sup> "I ask all the members of the Church to work and speak out in favour of an economy that cares for the poor and is resolutely opposed to an unjust order" (*ibid.*, n. 72).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, 26

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, 26

<sup>59</sup> Nell'elenco dei diversi elementi naturali che costituiscono l'ambiente di vita e le risorse del sostentamento umano, è interessante il cenno alla terra ancestrale. Essa è una terra diversa dalle altre, onorata e rispettata in modo speciale per il riconoscimento in essa della forza vitale degli antenati lì sepolti; la terra ancestrale è considerata *home*, a differenza degli altri luoghi che sono *houses*. E in essa che tutti desiderano essere sepolti.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, 32

<sup>61</sup> La catechesi proposta da Placide Tempels per i popoli bantu, è contenuta nel suo *Catéchèse bantoue*, Le Bulletin des Missions, Abbaye de saint-André- les-Bryges, 1948.

<sup>62</sup> Nel suo *Un visage africain du christianisme*, 161, Mulago sostiene che "La relation de vie qui fonde l'unité des communautés et des individus chez les Bantu, cette communication-participation vitale, et des moyens vitsaux, cet effort d'accroissement, de dépassement, d'enrichissement ontal, trouve une réponse et une réalisation sublimes et transcendantes dans l'Eglise du Christ, communauté de vie elle aussi, dont le principe vital est une participation à la Vie trinitaire, humanisée dans le Verbe de Dieu fait Homme".

<sup>63</sup> Tra coloro che individuano in Gesù Cristo la risposta all'istanza vitale africana, P. Tempels, *Notre rencontre*, 19-21; F.A. Oborji, *La teologia africana e l'evangelizzazione*, 156-160; L. Magesa, *What is not sacred? African Spirituality*, 173; B. Bujo, *Africa e morale cristiana: un processo di inculturazione*, 110.

<sup>64</sup> E. Mveng, *Identità Africana e Cristianesimo*, 82-83.