

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS

In Contemporary Society

Edited by Jacob K. Olupona

A New ERA Book



PARAGON HOUSE
New York

Published in the United States by

International Religious Foundation
481 Eighth Avenue
New York, New York 10001

BL
2462.5
.A38
1991

Distributed by

Paragon House Publishers
90 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10011

Copyright 1991 by International Religious Foundation except for the following:

"The Sacred in African New Religions," by Bennetta Jules-Rosette, copyright 1989 by Sage Publications. Reprinted from *The Changing Face of Religion*, 1989, by permission of Sage Publications.

All rights reserved. Except for use in reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, or otherwise, without the prior written consent of the publisher.

A New Ecumenical Research Association Book

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

African traditional religion in contemporary society / edited by Jacob K. Olupona. — 1st ed.

395 p. cm.

Papers presented at the conference "The place of African traditional religion in contemporary Africa," held in Nairobi, Kenya, on Sept. 10-14, 1987, sponsored by the Council for World Religions.

"A new ERA book."

ISBN 0-89226-077-7 : \$24.95

ISBN 0-89226-079-3 (pbk.) : \$12.95

1. Africa, Sub-Saharan—Religion—congresses. 2. Africa, Sub-Saharan—Religion—Study and teaching—Congresses. I. Olupona, Jacob Obafemi Kehinde. II. International Religious Foundation. III. Council for World Religions.

BL 2462.5.A38 1990

299.6—dc20

89-77137

CIP

**This book is
dedicated to
Wande Abimbola**

traditional religion, despite the entry of foreign faiths, has been the *sine qua non* of the existence of the Yoruba. Foreign religions and modern trends have not been able to relegate traditional religion to the status of a thing of the past. The religion is as relevant and meaningful to a good number of the Yoruba, Muslims, and Christians alike in contemporary Yorubaland as it was in the pre-Islamic and Christian era.

Notes

1. The Jihad of Uthman dan Fodio started in 1804. For further details see I.A.S. Balogun, *The Life and Works of Uthman dan Fodio* (Lagos: Islamic Publications Bureau, 1975).
2. This saying shows the historic sequence of the entrance of the three religions practiced by the Yoruba into their society. Islam entered Yorubaland since the 12th or 13th century A.D. probably from Mali, known to the ancient Yoruba as "Ilu Mole."
3. Ile-Ifẹ is believed by the Yoruba to be their ancestral home. The Yoruba also regard Ile-Ifẹ as the cradle of mankind.
4. See Bolaji Idowu Olodumare, *God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman, 1962).
5. The ancestral cult known as *Egungun* is one of the most important cults of Yoruba traditional religion. The Yoruba remember their ancestors annually with elaborate festivals involving carnivals embraced by the entire community including the Christians and Muslims.
6. See E. G. Parrinder, *West African Religion* (London: Epworth Press, 1961), 123.
7. See Wande Abimbola, *Ifa: An Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus* (Ibadan: University Press Ltd., 1976).
8. See Bolaji Idowu, *op.cit.*, 101-106.
9. *Oduduwa* is believed by the Yoruba to be the mythical figure who created dry land from water in ancient Ifẹ. All the kings of the Yoruba who wear beaded crowns are believed to have descended from *Oduduwa*.
10. P.A. Dọpamu, "Yoruba Magic and Medicine and Their Relevance for Today," in *Religious Journal of the Nigerian Association of Religious Studies*, 4, 1979, 3-20.

5

FLOWERS IN THE GARDEN

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN AFRICAN RELIGION

John S. Mbiti

Introduction

A BEAUTIFUL PICTURE OF WOMEN in African society is presented in a proverb from Ghana, which says: "A woman is a flower in a garden; her husband is the fence around it!" (*Bannerman*, 19). In this paper I wish to examine the place and the role of women according to African Religion. The paper draws on three areas: mythology, proverbs and prayers.

In the area of mythology we are confronted with the picture of women in the early state of human existence. This is not history. The myth is broader than history in explaining some aspects of society. It is a language depicting truths or realities for which history does not provide a full explanation.

Proverbs express wisdom acquired through reflection, experience, observation, and general knowledge. They are closely related to the culture of each given society. To appreciate, understand and apply the proverbs correctly, it is useful and even necessary for one to be part of the culture concerned, or to study it carefully. We are not able in this

paper to go into depth, but quoting or examining some of the proverbs here will give us a working picture of what the religious wisdom of African peoples says about women.

Prayers take us into the spirituality of those who pray them. They show us, among other things, the inner person, the needs of the heart (such as joy and sorrow, gratitude and disappointment, expectation and anxiety), as the praying person stands 'naked' before spiritual realities. Prayers open up a real realm for women to express themselves. So we want to see what women say in prayer, and thereby to get a glimpse into their spiritual life as it may be nourished by African religion and as it in turn contributes to African Religion itself. Some of the prayers are specifically women's prayers in composition and use; others are common to both men and women.

Women in African Mythology

A large number of myths is to be found in Africa. Each and every African people (the word 'tribe' has sometimes bad connotations in recent years) has its own body of myths, stories, legends, and oral history. We want to concentrate here mainly on the myths dealing with the origin of human beings, since women are featured very prominently in these myths.

Some myths speak about an original Mother of mankind, from whom all people originated. For example, the Akposso (of Togo) tell that when Uwolowu (God) made human beings, he first made a woman on the earth and bore her the first child, the first human being (*Baumann*, 138, 180). The Ibibio of Nigeria hold that the human beings came from the divinity Obumo, which was the son of the mother-divinity Eka-Abassi (*Baumann*, 180). In eastern Africa a story is told about a virgin woman, Ekao, who fell to earth from the sky and bore a son; the son got married to another woman and founded human society (*Baumann*, 49, 246). Other examples are mentioned by *Baumann* (pp. 245-248).

The main idea here is to link human life directly with God through the woman. She herself is created by God and in turn becomes the instrument of human life. She rightly becomes the one who nourishes and passes on life. This is beautifully illustrated in a myth of the Tusi (of Rwanda). They tell that the original pair of human beings was in paradise. But both the man and the woman were sterile; they could not bear children. So they begged God to help them. God mixed clay with saliva and formed a small human figure. He instructed the woman to put the figure into a pot and keep it there for nine months. Every day the woman had to pour milk into the pot, mornings and evenings. She

was to take out the figure only when it had grown limbs. So she followed these instructions and after nine months she pulled out what had now become a human being. God made other human beings according to this method, and these later increased on the earth (*Baumann*, 204). The pot is here the symbol of the mother's womb, in which a baby takes shape and after nine months it is born. The woman shares directly with God in a personal way, the secrets and mysteries of life and birth. This role of the woman is so important that it is pictured as having already started in the mythological time.

In other myths of man's origin, the woman is always or nearly always mentioned. In many cases even the name of the first woman is given in the myths; some myths mention only the name of the first woman and not of the husband. A lot of myths say that the first human pair was lowered by God from the sky to the ground (earth), such as the myths of the Akamba, Turkana, Luo, Luhyia and others in Kenya; those of the Baganda and Banyoro in Uganda; those of the Tusi in Rwanda, of the Bemba and Ila in Zambia, of the Yoruba and Igbo in Nigeria, and of many others.

In a few myths it is told that the woman was made by God out of the man's body, or after the man had been made. Perhaps behind these myths is the wish and practice on the part of males (men) to dominate women. For example, the Kwotto of Nigeria say that God made the first human beings out of the earth (soil). He made (created) first the husband, and, when he had become tired, he then made the wife (woman) who turned out to be weaker than her husband (*Baumann*, 204).

Fire is an important element in human life. In some myths it is the woman who either invented or discovered fire. Women are also credited with inventing or discovering foodstuffs and their preparations. Thus the cooking skills of the woman are attributed to her from mythological times. She is thus not only the bearer of human beings, but also their cook who provides them with nourishment.

The life of the first human beings is generally depicted as having been in a form of paradise. God provided for them; in some cases they lived in the sky (heaven) with him, or he was on earth with them. God gave them one of three important gifts: immortality, resurrection (if they should die) or rejuvenation (if they grew old). However, this paradise got lost: the earth and heaven separated from each other and God went to live up in heaven while men lived on the earth. In place of the lost gifts came diseases, suffering, and death. There are many myths which address themselves to this change of human fortune. Some speak about a message which God sent to the people, but which either did not reach them or was changed by the messenger on the way; or the message

arrived too late: a faster messenger from God had brought another message (of loss, death). Myths of the lost or changed or later-arrived message are very widespread in eastern, southern, and parts of western Africa. The carrier of the good message (of immortality, resurrection, or rejuvenation) is often the chameleon. The carrier of the contra message is often the lizard, the hare, the weaver bird, or the frog.

In some cases the myths speak of a test which God put to the original human beings. They failed the test. So the misfortunes of death and suffering, and of God's separation from men came about. Other myths explain that this happened as a result of jealousies and quarrels within human families. Still, in other myths, the cause originated from animals like the hyena which, being (always) hungry, sought and ate the leather rope that had united heaven (sky) and earth. (See further in *Baumann, passim*, and *Mbiti*, I, 171-177.)

There are, however, considerable myths which put the blame for this unfortunate tragedy on the woman. Thus, for example, it was a woman who, in Ashanti myths (of Ghana), while pounding fufu (the national food) went on knocking against God who lived in the sky. So God decided to go higher up. The good woman instructed her children to construct a tower by piling up the mortars one on top of another. The tower almost reached him, leaving a gap which could be filled with only one mortar. Since the children had used up all the mortars, their mother advised them to take the bottom-most mortar and fill the final gap. As they removed this mortar, the whole tower tumbled down and killed many people. In one of the Bambuti Pygmy (Zaire) myths, it is told that God gave the first people one rule: they could eat the fruits of all the trees, except from one tree. The people observed this rule, until a pregnant woman was overcome by food desire and persistently urged her husband to get the forbidden fruit for her. Finally he crept secretly into the forest, plucked the fruit and brought it to her. However, the moon was watching all this and went and reported to God. God became so angry that he sent death to the people as punishment.

While the woman is in these and some other myths blamed for the misfortune that befell the first human beings, she is clearly not the main nor the only culprit. Indeed the myths which put the blame on her are proportionally few. They indicate that she shares in the causes and effect of suffering, misfortune, and death in the world. She is a human being like men and children. She is also faced with the mysteries of life at the other end. Just as she shares in the mysteries of life's beginning, so she shares in life's end.

Through the myths of origin, we get a picture of the woman as someone placed by God in a special position. She shares with him the

creative process of life. In some ways her position and her role in these myths eclipse the position of the husband (male). She is in a real sense an agent of God. At the same time the woman shares in the misfortunes, suffering, and death which in various ways came into the world.

Women in African Proverbs

Here we shall consider the woman as seen and depicted in African wisdom, in the proverbs of the ages. There are infinitely more proverbs than myths. We find them in every African people. They address themselves to many themes and areas of life and knowledge. They are very concentrated in the sense that they put a lot of thoughts, ideas, reflections, experiences, observations, knowledge, and world views, into a few words. We shall quote only a few proverbs here and try to capture what they intend to put in a few words.

Women are pictured as being extremely valuable in the sight of society. Not only do they bear life, but they nurse, they cherish, they give warmth, they care for life since all human life passes through their own bodies. The following proverbs bring these points out clearly.

"Wives and oxen have no friends" (*Barra*, 2). This means that the wife is so valuable that she cannot be given over to even the best of her husband's friends to keep her as his own. For that reason, another proverb reminds us that "A woman must not be killed" (*op. cit.*, 62). She is the mother of life, and to kill the woman is to kill her children (real and potential); it is to destroy humanity itself. The woman should be handled with respect and not be treated as if she were a slave. So another proverb asks the husband: "Did you buy me with elephant tusks?" (*p'Bitek*, 6), if the husband is illtreating her. She thereby reminds him that he really cannot buy her; she is not a commodity for sale like elephant tusks or slaves.

Even an aged woman is a blessing to men. So another proverb says: "It is better to be married to an old lady than to remain unmarried" (*Kalugila*, 5). There are areas of human life which only the woman can fulfil. The unmarried man is lacking something as another proverb explains: "It is at five that man succeeds" (*Massek and Sidai*, 42). This proverb by the Maasai of Kenya and Tanzania means that a successful life needs "a wife, a cow, a sheep, a goat, and a donkey." This is a reminder that, even if one is rich, one is not successful as long as one lacks a wife.

The value of the woman begins already when she is born and not when she gets married. So it is stated: "A baby-girl means beautiful

cows" (*Dalfovo*, 214). Already at birth the woman is destined to be married — so the people believe. In traditional African society this entails a bride-exchange in form of cattle, services, foodstuffs, family ties, or other expressions of the marriage contract. Furthermore, the woman will bear children and thus enrich her husband and the wider circle of relatives from both sides. So the Tsonga and Shangani people of South Africa (Azania) say: "To beget a woman is to beget a man" (*Junod*, 179). This saying carries with it the hope and expectation that, after marriage, the wife will bear both girls and boys.

The woman who is not married has practically no role in society, as far as traditional African world-view goes. It is expected that all women get married. So a proverb of the Lugbara (Uganda) states: "An ugly girl does not become old at home" (*Dalfovo*, 286). This means that the looks of a girl should not stop her from getting married. Otherwise this would deny her the role of womanhood.

This thought is bound up with the value attached to the bearing of children. The childless woman goes through deep sorrows in African society. It is said, for example, by the Gikuyu (of Kenya): "The woman who has children does not desert her home" (*Barra*, 60). This means that bearing children gives the woman the security and joy of a family, of being taken care of in her old age, of being respected by the husband and the wider community. So another proverb states that "the woman whose sons have died is richer than a barren woman" (*Barra*, 61). This means that people will excuse a woman (mother) for losing her children through death, but the one who does not bear is hardly 'excused.' Consequently people say: "A barren wife never gives thanks" (*Kalugila*, 20) — nothing else is as valuable as having children; they are the deepest cause for giving thanks. If a woman has everything else, except children, she would have no cause or joy to give thanks. The sentiment is expressed in African societies that the more children one has the better. So the Ghanaians say: "A serviceable wife is often blessed with the birth of a tenth child" (*Bannerman*, 19). Parental blessings often run along the lines of "May you bear children like bees! May you bear as many children as calabash seeds!" Today's economic and educational pressure will force a change in these sentiments, where parents feel the pressure to reduce the number of children they can support and educate adequately. Nevertheless, African society is carried away by the proverb which says: "The satiety of a pregnant woman is off-spring" (*Dalfovo*, 238). This means that motherhood is the woman's fulfillment.

The mother or wife is probably the most important member of the family; she is the center of familyhood. So it is said by the Akamba of

Kenya, for example: "He who has not travelled thinks that his mother is the best cook in the world." This proverb, while attacking a narrow horizon in life, shows how central the person of the mother is. This same sentiment is expressed in another proverb, from the Gikuyu of Kenya: "The baby that refuses its mother's breast will never be full" (*Barra*, 33). This means that other people may feed the baby or the person concerned, but their food would never satisfy as well as that provided by the mother, who also provides warmth and security.

The place of the mother is further indicated by comparing her with other women or wives, whether she is alive or dead. The Swahili of eastern Africa say categorically: "The stepmother is not a real mother" (*Kalugila*, 17). This sentiment is shared by other peoples and is expressed in various ways. For example: "Somebody else's mother, however good she may be to you, can never be better than your own mother," or "A sheep does not lament the death of a goat's kid," or "Your stepmother is not your mother," (*p'Bitek*, 10, 14, 11), all from the Acholi of Uganda. Their neighbors the Lugbara put it this way: "There are not two mothers," or "There is not another mother" (*Dalfovo*, 78, 108). From southern Africa we hear: "The mother's breast cannot get leprosy" (*Junod*, 159). All these and many other proverbs indicate that the mother's role cannot be one hundred percent duplicated, for what she means personally: she provides (or should provide) the best love and tenderness, warmth, care, bodily and emotional nourishment, and much more. All this begins already, when the person is still inside the mother's womb and lasts (or should last) until the mother has died, or indeed, it continues when she dies and becomes a spirit, a living-dead.

It also means that the love, the care and tenderness should be reciprocated by everyone towards his or her own mother, since everyone has a mother. So we hear admonitions like these: "A child does not laugh at the ugliness of his mother" (*Dalfovo*, 208) from the Lugbara of Uganda; or "The mother of the big he-goat has no horns" (*Kimilu*, 115) from the Akamba of Kenya. This last proverb indicates that all the "big" men (such as artists, generals, presidents, singers, bishops, doctors, professors, inventors, scientists and so on) are each born of a woman, of a mother who may not herself be regarded as a "big" person in society. She may not "have horns," but she gives birth to a "big" person in society and deserves respect and recognition for it.

Women are human beings and as such they also have their weaknesses. African society knows these weaknesses and speaks about them openly. One of these is jealousy, especially when several wives live together in a polygamous family. Three proverbs from the Lugbara of

Uganda illustrate this weakness clearly: "The tongue of co-wives is bitter!" or "The tongue of co-wives is pointed" (which means that co-wives can sting each other with their talking), and "A co-wife is the owner of jealousy" (*Dalfovo*, 58, 59). Such domestic problems can affect the husband who has the task of pleasing each wife. So a Ghanaian proverb asserts: "Polygamy makes a husband a double-tongued man" (*Bannerman*, 18). The husband's role is not easy if the co-wives do not get on well with each other. He may be seen to favor one more than the others. In this case he could be rebuked with a proverb like "This polygamist ploughs one field only" (*Junod*, 179). This indicates that in fact the husband may provoke the co-wives to show jealousy, when they realize that he favors one of them more than the others.

However, the fact that jealousy may arise in polygamous families is not basis enough to condemn polygamy as such. There are many happy polygamous families, just as there are even more unhappy monogamous families. Jealousy is not confined to polygamy. Indeed, there are proverbs that show and urge respect for polygamous families. For example, the Lugbara (Uganda) remark "Uncriticized, are you the senior wife?" (*Dalfovo*, 51). This is a reminder to people that the senior wife is the focus of highest respect in the family; nevertheless, she is not so perfect that she cannot also be criticized. In any case, she has more respect by being a co-wife than she would have if she were the only wife in a monogamous family. It is said in Kenya: "Axes carried in the same bag cannot avoid rattling," to mean that, among other things, it is not so terrible if co-wives "rattle" with each other. They belong together as a family. Indeed, a proverb from the Tsonga of southern Africa can be applied to support the "value" or even "necessity" of co-wives: "A pole is strengthened by another pole" (*Junod*, 1910). If women in African society would have found polygamy to be unbearable, the custom would have died long ago. One proverb reminds us that in such families there are mutual support, love, care, and friendship: "The way to overcome cold is to warm each other" (*Junod*, 191).

There are also prejudices shown to women in African societies around the world. Here are some examples of prejudice and condemnation towards women. Among the Tsonga-Shangana people of southern Africa, it is sometimes said "This woman is a fire," or "This woman is a deceitful and ferocious crocodile" (*Junod*, 187). Even the beauty of women may earn them remarks like "Do not desire a woman with beautiful breasts, if you have no money!" (*Junod*, 187), to mean that beautiful women are expensive to win and maintain. The Gikuyu of Kenya say: "Women, like the weather, are unpredictable," and "Women

have no secure gourds, but only leaking, upside down ones" (*Njururi*, 1). The second of these sayings means that "women are given to letting out secrets. You can't trust women with secrets." The same point is expressed in another proverb of the Gikuyu: "Woman, remember that the mouth is sometimes covered with a branch" (*Barra*, 92), to mean that the woman does not know how to keep secrets, how to shut her mouth when it comes to letting out secrets.

It is thought that women ruin men. So the Maasai remind us: "The prostitute can make you useless" (*Massek and Sidai*, 32). This proverb is one-sided, in that it does not blame men for what they do to women! The Maasai also accuse the woman of being short-sighted by saying that "A woman cannot see her palm" (*Massek and Sidai*, 29). In Uganda the Acholi complain that "Women have no chiefs" (*p'Bitek*, 10), to mean that "women cannot allow another woman to be superior. In another sense, a chief is not a chief to his own wife or wives, or even to other women." Naturally, when the men occupy so many of the superior positions in society, what more is left for women? The woman is often blamed for disputes in a marriage, even though in most cases these disputes are caused by both partners. So there are proverbs in Tanzania, for example, which say: "A lazy wife does not miss going to her parents frequently," or "The good wife is at her husband's home, the other one is at her parents' home" (*Kalugila*, 19). But what happens to lazy men, or do they not exist? Women are also accused of domineering their husbands, whatever the realities may be: "No man is a hero to his wife" (*ibidem*).

African men complain that they cannot understand women. So the Ghanaians say "When women increase in wealth, they are silent. But when they fall into trouble, the whole world gets to know." In another saying we hear that "In a town where there are no men, even women praise a hunchback for being the fastest runner" (*Bannerman*, 19, 38).

There are men (and women) who fear women, considering them to be dangerous. So we hear proverbs like: "To marry is to put a snake in one's handbag," and even to take up contact with women is an evasive undertaking: "One does not follow the footprints in the water" (*Junod*, 177), which means that "following a woman is like following footprints in water" because "the way soon vanishes." It is even claimed that words of women have no legal value, as the women are not reliable: "Women have no court" (*Junod*, 175). Women are feared and said to ruin men. "Marriage roasts (hardens)" (*Junod*, 175), is said to mean that a man's heart hardens after marriage, because of his wife. Even beautiful women get a share of prejudice: "Beautiful from behind, ugly in front" (*ibidem*)—a proverb which warns that a person may look attractive or say

nice words at first, but after getting married turns out to be really 'ugly' in a deeper sense.

f) In spite of these and other prejudices against women, there are many beautiful things said about them. Some of these we have already encountered. Men will fight over women, to show how much they value the women concerned. So in Ghana we hear that: "Two bosom friends that vie one and the same lady have chosen a common road to be each other's enemy" (*Bannerman*, 19). It is also from Ghana where we have the beautiful comparison and mutual complement between the wife and the husband: "A woman is a flower in a garden; her husband, the fence around it" (*ibidem*). So the women need all the protection and care that men can give them. For this reason the Lugbara say: "The man dies in the wind, the woman in the house" (*Dalfovo*, 57). The woman and the man belong together; they can and do love each other; they need each other. So in another Lugbara proverb we are told: "The woman is the rib of man" (*op. cit.* 237). This statement is parallel to the biblical creation story in Gen. 2:21f., in which the woman, Eve, is said to have been made out of the rib of the man, Adam. The Akamba (Kenya) warn against the danger of remaining unmarried: "He who eats alone, dies alone," and this means that he leaves neither wife nor posterity to remember him in the world of the living.

Women and Prayers

In traditional African life the women play a significant role in the religious activities of society. One of the areas where this role is prominent is in offering prayers for their families in particular and their communities in general. In many areas there were (and still are) women priests (priestesses). Almost everywhere in Africa the mediums (who are so important in traditional medical practice) are nearly always women. In most cases it is also the women who experience spirit possession. Traditional healing is a profession of both men and women, but it is more often the women practitioners who handle children's and other women's medical needs. In this paper we have space for only a few prayers which illustrate how actively involved the women are in the spirituality of African religion. The examples are cited out of my own book: *The Prayers of African Religion*, 1975.

A woman's morning prayer runs: "Morning has risen. God, take away from us every pain, every ill, every mishap. God, let us come safely home" (*Mbiti*, II, 31). In this prayer the woman (mother) brings before

God her family and hands it over to God, believing that he will keep away all evil. It is a prayer from the Pygmies of Zaire.

The Aro women of Sierra Leone pray in a litany for a sick child. They address it specially to the departed members of the family who are taught to participate in the healing process by conveying the request to God. The mother prays: "O spirits of the past, this little one I hold is my child; she is your child also, therefore be gracious unto her." The other women chant: "She has come into a world of trouble: sickness is in the world, and cold and pain; the pain you knew, the sickness with which you were familiar." The mother prays on: "Let her sleep in peace, for there is healing in sleep. Let none among you be angry with me or with my child." The other women take up their chanting: "Let her grow, let her become strong. Let her become full-grown. Then will she offer such a sacrifice to you that will delight your heart" (*ibidem*, 50). In this prayer we see how close to the spirit world the women feel. They enter into it, they solicit help from it. The physical and spiritual worlds mingle here in a harmony of "going" and "coming." The women depict here a deep sensitivity towards the invisible and spiritual realities.

A woman whose husband is away fighting in war prays for his protection and safe return. She prays not just for him alone, but for others who are with him. Like all similar prayers all over the world, this is one-sided, favoring one's own side. It comes from the Banyarwanda and pleads: "Let him be saved with those who went with him! Let him stand firm with them. Let him return from the battle with them..." (*op. cit.*, 83). In this way the women participate in fighting on the side of their husbands. The husbands would be encouraged to get this form of spiritual support from their wives.

Recognizing that menstruation is intimately linked to the passing on of life, many African peoples perform a ceremony to mark the first menstruation. At one such ceremony in Ghana, the Ashanti mother of the concerned girl prays that she may grow to full maturity and bear children. This is the wish of every mother for her children. "Nyankonpon Tweaduapon Nyame (Supreme Sky God, Who alone is great), upon whom men lean and do not fall, receive this wine and drink. Earth Goddess, whose day of worship is Thursday, receive this wine and drink. This girl child whom God has given to me, today the Bara state has come upon her....Do not come and take her away, and do not have permitted her to menstruate only to die" (*op. cit.*, 96).

In many parts of Africa it does not always rain enough. Rainmaking ceremonies are performed at which sacrifices, offerings, and prayers are made to God, beseeching Him to give more rain or to let it rain if the rain has delayed. Here is one such prayer made by the Maasai women

of Kenya and Tanzania. The woman leader intones one part while other people who are present for the occasion sing or recite the other part:

Leader: "We need herbs on the earth's back!"

Others: "Hie! Wae! Almighty God."

Leader: "The father of Nasira has conquered, has conquered."

Others: "The highlands and also the lowlands of our vast country which belongs to thee, O God."

Leader: "May this be our year, ours in plenty (when you grant us rain!)."

Others: "O messenger of Mbatian's son" (*op. cit.*, 113).

This prayer is for the welfare of people, animals, and nature at large, since all depend on water for their survival.

Women express gratitude to God after childbirth. Then they know that life comes ultimately from Him and is sustained by Him. The following prayer is said by Pygmy women in a ceremony dedicating a baby to God. The mother and father lift the baby towards the sky and pray:

"To Thee, the Creator, to Thee, the Powerful, I offer this fresh bud, new fruit of the ancient tree. Thou art the Master, we thy children. To Thee, the Creator, to Thee, the Powerful: Khmvoum (God), Khmvoum, I offer this new plant" (*op. cit.*, 124).

The sorrows of being childless go very deep in the wife. There are many prayers for help in such situations. From an affected woman of the Barundi we get the following prayer, in which we feel with her the agony of her spirit:

"O Imana (God) of Urundi, if only you would help me! O Imana of pity, Imana of my father's home, if only you would help me!...O Imana, if only you would give me a homestead and children! I prostrate myself before you, Imana of Urundi. I cry to you: Give me offspring, give me as you give to others! Imana, what shall I do, where shall I go? I am in distress: where is there room for me? O Merciful, O Imana of mercy, help this once!" (*op. cit.*, 86).

Death also brings with it its own sorrows and problems, and many prayers are offered in such times. The following prayer pours out desperation with the same forcefulness as the previous prayer:

"My husband, you have abandoned me. My master is gone and will never return. I am lost. I have no hope. For you used to fetch water and collect firewood for me. You used to clothe and feed me with good things.... Where shall I go?" (*op. cit.*, 99).

This prayer comes from the Basoga of Uganda, but its echoes can be heard all over Africa.

It is clear that women both participate in the religious activities of society and make their own contributions for the spiritual welfare of

their lives, their families, and of society in general. Through prayers women express themselves as self-determining. The prayers are a small window that open into their spirituality which indeed is the spirituality of all human beings. As the women share with God in the great mysteries of passing on life, so they share also in giving human life a spiritual orientation. They are truly flowers in the garden. They give beauty, scent, and seed to life.