WORD AND SPIRIT IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AND THOUGHT

Some issues raised by translation into Swahili

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During research into contemporary African religious practice in East Africa it became apparent that what may be broadly called spirit possession was common in many different forms of traditional religious practice, but that conversion to Islam and Christianity, particularly in the independent churches, brought about markedly different forms of religious activity. Spirit possession is present in Islam but not as a valued and common form of religious expression, while it continues to be very common in modern adaptations of traditional religious practices and in the shape of pentecostalism in the local forms of Christianity.

A possible clue to these differences came to me when I was interviewing in 1969 the Reverend P. D. Z. Kivuli, the founder and High Priest of the African Israel Church Nineveh at his headquarters in western Kenya. The Reverend Kivuli sat through the whole interview with his right hand on a leather bound Bible on the table beside him. At the end of the interview the windows and doors were shut so that prayers could be said for the future following John 20.19 when Jesus appeared to his disciples in a closed room.

This suggested to me the hypothesis that Christian pentecostalism in the independent churches may have been due to the careful reading of vernacular translations of the New Testament published cheaply in both national and tribal languages. The comparisons being made to the Moslems who just as carefully read or recite the Qur’an which is not available in any vernacular other than the Swahili edition published by the Ahmadiyya sect which the Muslim establishment regard as heretical and who do not have this pentecostalism. ¹

Possession in African traditional religions

It is hard to find a community in sub-Saharan Africa in which some form of spirit possession is not so much common as an accepted mode of self-expression in religious and personal matters for a significant number of persons. The literature of this type of activity is enormous not so much because it formed a major and important part of the societies which were being observed but more probably because the anthropologists have been attracted to such activity which they saw as a bizarre contrast to religious activities in their own societies.

At the lower end of the scale there is temporary possession such as might occur among the onlookers at a religious ceremony. Then there is spirit possession in which a person assumes a state of apparent auto-hypnosis or dissociation; his behaviour is recognised as not that of his ordinary self and this is understood to be due to control by some spiritual agent normally outside him. This state is accompanied by a wide range of behaviour varying from trance-like coma to shouting, singing and dancing.

In spirit mediumship the presumed spirit not only possesses someone but also communicates with other people through the possessed person, usually in a voice, accent and language not used by that person in ordinary life, but culturally accepted as appropriate to the mediated spirit.

A rare and more intense form is shamanism in which the medium is not only a vehicle for spirits but is believed to be able to command them. Lastly the prophet in which the individual comes to believe that he is in communion with his deity from which he has received divine mandates to perform certain tasks through visions, dreams, trances and direct verbal communication.

From this it can be appreciated that the background of traditional African religions provides a wide variety of spirit possession activities.

Contemporary religious trends

In the colonial and post-colonial period there has been a fading away of traditional religious practices in the countryside as economic, political and religious power became centred on the towns and industrialised areas. Traditional practices have been adapted to the needs of the people living there with some skill and increased popularity so that they contribute substantially to their concepts of personal well-being. While those who are possessed by spirits may not be as commonly found as before, spirit mediums have adjusted themselves easily in