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**Evil and Salvation
in African Religion and Christianity**

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1. Introduction

1.1. The Challenge of Evil and the Hope of Salvation

From the beginning of time people have tried to explain the existence of evil and sought for measures to overcome it or at least to control it. Also, every religion has reflected upon an ideal state of being where humans live life to its fullest. These fundamental questions have to be examined carefully in the encounter between African Religion and Christianity. When I use the terms ‘evil’ and ‘salvation’, they have already a specific Christian meaning. In a comparative study in dialogue with African Religion, we have to use them in an analogous sense. The results of the field research will provide the African context in which these terms are given a meaning.

Scholars still debate if it is more appropriate to speak of One African Religion or many religions in sub-Saharan Africa. The influential anthropologist John Mbiti published one of his books with the title *African Religions and Philosophy*, arguing that the traditional beliefs and practices amount to diverse religious systems while having a single underlying philosophy (cf. Mbiti, 1969, p. 1). I follow Laurenti Magesa who replies that Mbiti, by affirming a common philosophy and thinking, has indirectly admitted what he wanted to explain away (cf. Magesa, 1998, p. 25-26). According to Magesa, the different religious expressions are better compared to the denominations in Christianity.

1.2. Methodology

The presentation of my field research is divided into four parts. The first part gives an overview of how Kenyan Africans understand their spiritual heritage in relation to the theme of this paper. In the second part, these testimonies are compared to beliefs of two African converts who are preparing themselves for baptism in the Catholic Church. Thirdly, I present the major points of continuity and discontinuity between Christianity and African Religion as seen by my informants. The fourth part portrays the challenge to translate the Bible in ‘Daasanach vernacular (an ethnic group in Kenya) as an example of encounter between the two religions.

The literature review presents African myths about the origin of evil and the after-life, collected by John Mbiti. Then the major aspects of continuity and discontinuity between

African Religion and Christianity shall be examined as my informants in the field research have indicated.

In the conclusion, I give my personal evaluation about an encounter between the two religions concerning the understanding of evil and salvation.

Since my informants are Kenyans, the field research might not represent in all aspects the religious experience of Africans in general. However, I did four interviews with scholars who have a broad knowledge of African Religion, and using Mbiti's ethnographic material from the whole continent, there prove to be patterns that justify the title of my paper.

It should be kept in mind that African Religion is transmitted through oral tradition of the clan. Scholars don't define but describe it. There is no holy book with doctrines and no institution with authority to decide on controversial issues. African Religion is what its followers are living and believing.

2. Field Research

2.1. Evil and Salvation in African Religion

2.1.1. The Concept of Evil

According to my informants, there is no abstract concept of evil in African Religion, only concrete evil actions (app.: research no. 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9). Every action or behavior that destroys the harmony of the community is considered evil; everything that promotes the well-being and the life-force of the community is good (app.: no. 4, 4/2/2006); "Good and evil actions are judged according to the benefit of the clan." (app.: no. 7, 24/2/2006); the individual asks always: "Does it bring me in good terms with society?" (app.: no. 3, 24/1/2006); evil is "not following the cultural norms and the commandments of culture ... an action, always with negative social implications." (app.: no. 1, 20/1/2006); it can only be identified by concrete examples (app.: no. 2, 21/1/2006); incest, premarital sex and to marry an older woman are evil (app.: no. 6, 19/2/2006); evil actions are: sex before initiation (without circumcision), sex between an old woman with a young man and not to respect the rites of passage (app.: no. 7). The last two opinions come from my oldest informants who were born in 1916 and 1936. This shows the importance of taboos in the traditional context, especially concerning the regulation of sexuality and marriage.

The judgment to identify a certain behavior as evil depends entirely on its visible outcome, i.e. if it affects the community negatively. There has been no evil committed if life on the outside – the public harmony – remains normal, and prosperity is a sign of goodness. Therefore, jealousy is not evil. Feelings are considered evil only if they become an obstacle to interact with others (app.: no. 1). In the same logic, adultery is only an evil action if it is discovered (app.: no. 1, 4). “Transparency is not an African value.” (app.: no. 4) An exception are secret taboo breaks (app.: no. 1, 2, 8).

So far, the examples have referred to moral behavior. But according to African Religion, evil in form of accidents, natural disasters and death with apparently no human involvement also has a human source (all interviews). These can be evil spirits or persons who control supernatural powers, i.e. witches and sorcerers. African Christians usually are not different in interpreting the events of life. “The modern world divides evil in personal evil actions and natural evil like a Tsunami. We African Christians force ourselves to accept natural explanations, but our instinct tells us differently.” (app.: no. 3)

2.1.2. The Interrelation between the Community, the Ancestors and God

The primary object of an offense is the community where the person is a member. It is not possible to do evil *only* against God or the ancestors (app.: no. 1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9), although to deny God’s existence is a grave offence (app.: no. 1). This is so because God is the giver of the moral order. Whoever denies God denies his order and threatens the foundation of society. The ancestors are offended only if the community is harmed (app.: no. 3, 4).

The primary guardians to discipline an evil action are the ancestors of the community. They can curse over several generations (app.: no. 1, 3, 4, 7, 8). But there is no general opinion on how far God is involved in this process. “An offense against the community is also an offense against God.” (app.: no. 1) Others deny that God is involved at all: “Evil affects only human realities; there is no offense against God. The ancestors are involved because they still belong to the human community.” (app.: no. 4) A third position draws comparison with the traditional social structure in Africa where things of less importance don’t reach the head of the family or the elders of the clan. In the same way, small offenses don’t reach God directly. He is only involved in extreme circumstances. The ancestors supervise the day-to-day occurrences (app.: no. 3). A fourth belief divides the moral order into customary law and supernatural law (app.: no. 8, 10/3/2006). The clan – in this case the Kamba people – lives with these two sets of orders. Customary law is controlled by the community. Under this category fall actions like disrespect towards elders, discovered

stealing or discovered adultery. Ancestors don't bother about secret transgressions of customary law. They only intervene if the supernatural law is broken. Then they correct the wrong-doer and punish secret or discovered transgressions by the power of God. Under this category fall actions like taboo breaks, incest and secret murder.

It is important to distinguish the work of evil spirits and of ancestors. The same sickness is evil in the first case but not in the second because ancestors punish justly for a transgression and expose it. In this way, they help the community to stay on the right path.

2.1.3. The Coming of Evil into this World

How does African Religion explain the existence of evil?

My informants couldn't tell me how evil came into this world. The Druma people know a story that remembers how God used to dwell among them (app.: no. 5, 14/2/2006). But because of their quarrels and wickedness, he was annoyed and walked away. The Druma people own a large rock with a "footprint" of God that makes them remember his withdrawal. But this story is not giving a reason how humans have become wicked.

Two other informants told me a myth how death came into the world (app.: no. 4, 7): God sent the Chameleon to announce to the humans that they wouldn't have to die. But the hawk was jealous and didn't want to grant humans this favor. So he hurried and announced, before the Chameleon could bring God's message, that also humans would have to die. This is the reason why there is death. God punished the Chameleon for its slowness and ordered that it would never conceive a second child. Therefore, Chameleons die while giving birth. In this story, death is the consequence of an unfortunate event, contrary to the African belief that it is always caused by a person or a spirit. According to another informant, God created good and evil as a way to make people learn and mature (app.: no. 8). Without the opposite, education would be incomplete.

The most surprising answer was that evil came to Africa with Christianity. People behave evil because the churches have rejected the traditions that guaranteed good moral behavior. "Today we've lost our principles: The authority system is not working anymore, the difference between age-groups [youth, adults, elders] is not respected, female circumcision has been abolished, there are high promiscuity and prostitution. Besides, the churches have separated the people in groups. Before, life was good and there was unity." (app.: no. 7) My informant, a follower of African Religion, observes the visible effects and judges concrete actions. I asked if Africans always had been good before the coming of Christianity. She believes that evil is in our hearts and that humans are essentially bad. But the old context was

able to control people. The clan system ensured good behavior through punishment and compensation. Respect and fear disciplined the people successfully. The woman believes that people are bad but, at the same time, are born innocent. The environment makes us evil.

The idea that children are pure is widespread in African tradition (app.: no. 1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9). The opinion that, according to African Religion, adults are bad is shared by another informant (app.: no. 9, 12/3/2006), but not by all. “Evil is under our control. It never can overwhelm humans that they become slaves of it. Africans are strong enough to do what is good. The justice system only makes sense if we are free and in control to choose good.” (app.: no. 4) But the figure of the witch assumes that, at least in some persons, evil is indeed part of their nature and that they only can do and want to do evil. It is believed that potentially everybody can become a witch if the person cultivates evil (app.: no. 3, 8). And prayers and ritual acts indicate that Africans are aware of their weakness and incapability to contain evil (app.: 1, 3, 7, 9).

2.1.4. Salvation and Condemnation in African Religion

African myths remember that there was a kind of paradise, a state when God and humans lived close together. Since God withdrew, we live in the “second best world” (app.: no. 8). But this condition is permanent. There is no salvation story that God would restore the paradise order with a new creation (app.: no. 3, 4, 8). A radical new form of life in the presence of God is not thought of. The highest goal people want to achieve in African Religion is ancestorship. But this is more a continuation of the earthly life.

One informant explained ancestorship is not an equivalent to the Christian concept of salvation in heaven. Likewise is the denial of ancestorship not like hell because it is not considered a punishment for the deceased person. Those who become evil spirits don’t suffer but “enjoy” their wickedness. It is only the living community that is bothered. (app.: no. 8).

There is no clear opinion if communion with the ancestors implies to live close to God (app.: no. 1, 2, 6). “Communion with God after death is not an African question.” (app.: no. 3) “God and the ancestors live in different spiritual houses.” (app.: no. 8) But one adherent of African Religion, the woman who criticizes Christianity for bringing evil, says that God is close to her in any circumstance, and this will be so when she dies. After death, the body decays and the spirit moves to the ancestral world. She has no idea how exactly the spirit will live with other ancestors or with God. Whatever God decides will be good.

Instead of speculating about life after death, salvation in African Religion is better located in this world. A big number of children who continue the family lineage, a healthy livestock

and a good harvest are the expression of salvation, the assurance that God and the ancestors are blessing the community (app.: no. 3, 4, 6, 7, 8). Blessing and curse are defined from the perspective of the community, not of the individual. It implies also the just recompense of good and evil deeds in this world. In African Religion, there are no heaven and hell. Every evil is punished directly and executed either on the individual, his community or his children (app.: no. 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8). The Luo tell a story of a family whose house was swallowed by the earth because they didn't receive an old woman looking for shelter at night. The people say that this happened in reality, and the place of the incident is remembered (app.: no. 1).

2.1.5. Cleansing Evil and Attaining Salvation

If diseases, bad harvests, natural catastrophes, accidents or quarrels disturb the harmony, the cause of evil has to be identified. Diviners help in this process of discernment. The correct ritual prescribed against a certain cause is always effective to cleanse the community. It is an automatism (app.: no. 1, 2, 4, 8). There is always a way to repair the damage of an evil action. Big offenses require animal sacrifices. Other rituals use herbs, for example manyasi among the Luo. Necessary is also the promise not to repeat the offense (app.: no. 2, 4). The consultation of diviners is alive as ever. Even people from the city, politicians and Christians consult them. If the ritual doesn't work to return health and fertility, there is a different source of evil, or the ancestors can be blamed for not fulfilling their duty. If this is the case, God as the highest authority is invoked (app.: no. 3).

The ritual reconciles the offender with the community and with the ancestors but not necessarily with the offended person or group (app.: no. 1). They are not obliged to forgive. But it is recommended because their refusal could enrage the ancestors invoking a curse.

Once reconciliation is performed, there is no need to seek God (app.: no. 4, 8). People are fully equipped to follow God's will that is expressed in the clan traditions. As long as they stay within this order, they consider themselves good and need no divine help to do what is right. Help is only important for reconciliation. Also the extent of possible alienation is limited. Whatever the transgression is, humans remain within God's creation that is sustained by his love for our well-being. "God is and was always with us. He comes in dreams and through mediators. He can renew our life through wisdom." (app.: no. 7)

I conclude with the testimony of a woman who was raised in a traditional African religious context (app.: no. 9, 12/3/2006). When she was young, her grandfather frequently performed cleansing rituals for himself and the family. He used to get up before dawn to welcome the sun with a prayer: "May the sun rise with blessing for us". At sunset, he prayed

for a blessing for the night. The family considered old men and young boys to be pure. Therefore, only they were allowed to sacrifice and to give libations to the ancestors. Only a blameless mediator could effectively restore the broken order.

2.2. African Converts to Christianity

I interviewed two elders, a Luo and a Meru, who are preparing to be baptized in the Catholic Church about their view on evil and salvation (app.: no. 6, 19/2/2006; no. 10, 14/3/2006). Both of them were born in 1946 and grew up in a traditional African context.

The Luo decided to enter the Church when his mother received a burial organized by Catholics. Although she was not a member, the Church assisted well. He has discovered that Christians have a deep respect towards every person. The Meru has observed how almost his entire family has converted to Christianity. At his old age, he feels lost and wants to find life in Jesus.

Asking about the concept of evil, he named spontaneously concrete actions like killing, stealing or cheating, as it is custom in African Religion. The Luo mentioned more inner attitudes like hatred and being jealous. But he added that these feelings have an impact on our relationships with others. Sin against the neighbor is always sin against God. There are no small offenses that would not reach God. I invited them to share a Bible text that illustrates the nature of evil. The Meru told the story of Ananias and Sapphira who died because they lied to the apostles about their hidden money (cf. Acts 5:1-11). The Luo gave the example of King Nebuchadnezzar who was humiliated by God because of his boasting and had to live like the wild animals (cf. Dan 4:25-34). Both stories illustrate evil in a narrative form. My informants didn't quote a theological discourse of the apostle Paul. This is typical for African culture to explain something with a story, not through theoretical reasoning.

Asking about salvation, the Meru answered: "Salvation is to see God." Interestingly, the Luo named concrete and earthly things: "Salvation means being good, polite and not to steal." This is the earthbound view of salvation in African Religion by establishing harmonious relationships. Because the man seems not to be used to theological terms, I invited him to describe his faith in Jesus. He answered that he wants to abandon himself to Jesus and wishes to die while praying to God. Heaven is a place of peace and rest where we will see God and Jesus face to face and our ancestors. The Luo believes that Jesus will judge his non-Christian ancestors justly according to their deeds. Concerning the fate of his

ancestors, the Meru only replied that this is a hard question. He can't say if or how they are saved by Jesus.

To overcome evil and reach salvation, both stress the need to pray constantly for God's grace and to ask for forgiveness. "We can't resist Satan relying on our own strength", said the Luo. Here is a difference to African Religion which assumes that we are able to do what is required from us.

2.3. Continuity and Discontinuity between African Religion and Christianity

I asked some of my informants about how they perceive continuity and discontinuity between African Religion and Christianity. They answered the following:

a) Continuity:

- The effects of evil actions are: no peace in the heart and mind, behavior becomes different, questionable deeds follow, suspicions arise, trust is lost (app.: no. 1).
- "Human weakness in Africa is perceived similar to the Christian conception of concupiscence. Adams excuse 'She made me do it!' shifts the responsibility to others. Africans understand this story. We always find excuses why we acted in a certain manner." (app.: no. 3) The inclination to bad behavior is inborn (app.: no. 7, 8, 9).
- The Bible supports the approach to move from human relations to the relation with God. 1 Jo 3:17 & 4:20: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? ... Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen." Africans are sensible how individual choices affect others (app.: no. 3).
- "A new behavior is integral part of salvation. African Religion and the Bible underline the importance of visible conversion." (app.: no. 3; cf. Lk 3:7-14; Jas 2:14-26)

b) Discontinuity:

- "In Christianity, the contact to God is an intimate father-child relation. In African Religion, God is sublime and far which is displayed in the structure of society, as there is a gap between parents and children, the young and the elders." (app.: no. 3)
- "In Christianity, sin is first of all rebellion against God, the Creator; in African Religion, the community is primarily offended." (app.: no. 1) "A sin against a person is

a sin against God in the Bible; and some actions only offend God, nobody else.” (app.: no. 2) “The biblical concept of sin against God is difficult to understand for Africans.” (app.: no. 3)

- In Christianity, the concept of evil and sin has become very abstract. African Religion only knows specific evil actions. The idea of an original sin is absent. Children are born innocent except in witch families. (app.: no. 3, 4, 8)
- “The African is free to choose or reject evil and to fulfill community obligations.” (app.: no. 8) “In Christianity, evil infects us as persons in our very being; sin is there and always separating from God. Original Sin assumes that we have lost control and are slaves of sin. In African Religion, humans are free. Christ is only relevant under the premise of a lost state of humanity. Because Africans don’t have this worldview, the mediatorship of Christ is difficult to grasp.” (app.: no. 4) “The mediating role of Christ is problematic for African spirituality. Maybe, the role of ancestors is a first step to explain who Jesus is.” (app.: no. 3)
- “Forgiveness as a free act of love is unknown; the African ritual is like a payment to obtain a right to be blessed by the ancestors.” (app.: no. 2) “Cleansing of sins happens in the Bible through grace, it is difficult for some African Christians to accept forgiveness as a free gift.” (app.: no. 1) “African rituals are very elaborate and the community is involved to restore the harmonious order. In Christianity, personal repentance and prayer are enough.” (app.: no. 8)
- “Because Africans take community norms seriously, they are more radical to exclude notorious wrong-doers. Bad habits in Christianity are more tolerated.” (app.: no. 8)
- “In African Religion, punishment from God and ritual acts of reconciliation are effective in this life. The result of a valid ritual is verified soon. In Christianity, you have to wait until after death.” (app.: no. 8; similar no. 2)
- “Even after reconciliation, a Christian constantly needs to live by grace. The African, after being cleansed through a ritual, is free; as long as the person doesn’t commit an evil action again, there is no need for God’s help.” (app.: no. 8)
- “Salvation in African Religion is communion in the circle of ancestors; the communion with God after death, as expressed in the Bible, does not appear.” (app.: no. 3)
- “In the gospels, prosperity is not necessarily a sign of goodness. In African Religion, it is a proof of one’s righteousness.” (app.: no. 1; cf. Lk 6:24; 12:20; 18:24)

2.4. The Work of Bible Translation & Literacy of East Africa (BTL)

(int.: Wycliffe Bible Translators)

As an example of how the Christian faith enters into dialogue with African Religion, I visited Bible Translation & Literacy interviewing a linguist who is translating the Bible for the 'Daasanach people in Kenya (app.: no. 5, 14/2/2006).

The Greek word 'hamartia' which is translated in English with 'sin' – including the idea of missing the mark, stepping across the line, breaking God's law, an infraction, iniquity – has no direct equivalent in 'Daasanach. Instead of a global term – this is common for most African languages – there is the choice of four different options with decreasing gravity:

/nyuogich/ = guilt of murder

/adthaab/ = guilt of lesser infraction (including sexual trespasses)

/feen/ = bearing a curse

/saas/ = a blemish

Since African Religion has no metaphysical category of sin, it is not surprising that evil actions are grouped under specific categories. Depending on the context, a bible translator has to choose one of the options. For example, the Hebrew word 'chattat' (= sin, in the sense of 'to miss a mark') in Gen 4:7 is translated with: "/nyuogich/ is crouching at your door." /nyuogich/ is chosen because the attitude of Cain was leading to the murder of his brother. If /adthaab/, /feen/, or /saas/ are "crouching at the door", it would not be comprehensible why Cain killed Abel. For the 'Daasanach, the worst action is killing another member of their community. Another difficulty is that there is no grammatical form of the verb 'to sin' or 'to murder'. The murderer has or bears the 'guilt of murder'.

The Letter to the Romans is not yet translated into 'Daasanach. To describe the universal power of sin, maybe /feen/ will be used because the meaning of a curse comes close to the idea of Original Sin. But /feen/ doesn't have the gravity like /nyuogich/. It could be misunderstood that, for Paul, sin is a minor problem as long as /nyuogich/ is not committed.

'Salvation' is translated in 'Daasanach with /bisach/ and has the notion of 'rescuing from danger, reconciliation with somebody, healing'. The expression was chosen because it relates well to the experience of daily life.

'Faith' is translated in 'Daasanach with /iiy yeen/ and means 'agreement' (with the words of somebody); in the biblical sense that a person agrees with Christ's promise. Therefore, to be saved by faith means for a 'Daasanach that he agrees on what Christ has done for him.

The concept of grace is more difficult to transmit. So far, the expression /'dú 'dííniny/ is used, literally meaning 'a favor; lying, leaning on'. But this word is lacking the aspect of 'being a free gift, something that cannot be earned', which is an intrinsic dimension of the biblical meaning (cf. Rm 4:4; 11:6; Eph 2:8). Without the gift-character, God's intervention in Christ for the salvation of humanity cannot be understood. The BTL-translators have not come to a definite decision.

Usually, it is the objective to use local expressions as much as possible with the conviction that any language can communicate anything that is desired. But sometimes, vernacular words have to be opened to embrace a (new) Christian meaning. Or a biblical expression is introduced and explained in the footnote. Many European languages also have adopted Greek vocabulary that now has become natural to people, for example 'angel'.

3. Literature Review

3.1. African Myths about the Original State of Mankind and the Separation from God

3.1.1. The Original State

The Anglican scholar John Mbiti has collected sacred stories from the whole continent that express beliefs about the original state of humankind and how this state was lost (cf. Mbiti, 1970, pp. 166-177). The myths remember a paradise where humans lived in happiness, peace, childlike ignorance and immortality. God was in direct contact with them and provided for all necessities. The Ashanti (Ghana) and the Bacongo (Angola) explicitly underline the privileged position of humans over animals in the creation and that they had a special intimate relation with God. Often, the paradise is a life that is commonly known to the people, but in a perfect way. The Pygmies (Congo), for example, who are hunters imagine a rich game park in the original state of the world and that God taught them the art of using weapons and other necessary skills to survive. Also magic arts are from God. It is not certain if God gave these skills already in paradise or to the descendants after the Fall, so the Bemba (Zambia) or Lango (Uganda). The Azande (Sudan), however, say that humans received magic in paradise to avenge crimes. This is worth noting because the myth tells that there was no evil activity at the beginning before the Fall.

3.1.2. The Loss of Paradise because of an Unfortunate Event

The chameleon story, reported by my informants, exists in many versions. There is always a messenger of life who doesn't arrive in time because the messenger of death has been faster.

The Lugbara (Congo) believe that there was originally a link between the sky, God's dwelling place, and the earth to move freely up and down. But the link broke, and humankind was scattered into different parts of the world. The myth of a rope uniting earth and sky, symbol of the communication between humans and God, is widespread. A hyena cut the rope to interrupt the communication. The Ashanti (Ghana) tell a story that the sky was very near to the earth. But a woman who knocked with her pestle against the sky preparing fufu, the national food, disturbed God so that he withdrew. Since then the sky is high above the earth. The Yao (Malawi) say that God withdrew himself into heaven when humans learned how to make fire. In order to meet God again, they have to die.

3.1.3. The Loss of Paradise because of Disobedience

So far, the stories about the separation of God don't contain any guilt; it was an unfortunate event. But others underline the responsibility of the first humans because they disobeyed God.

The Kaonde (Zambia) remember that God gave three pots to the first human couple which they opened, disobeying God's instruction to keep them closed. Out of the first one came death, disease and evil, but the other two contained herbs and medicine that the people would not be destroyed. According to the Banyarwanda (Rwanda), death entered paradise in form of an animal. God was about to chase and kill it, but a woman had pity and hid the animal under her skirt. Therefore, God punished humans by letting them keep death among them. The Bambuti (Congo) believe that God lived with humans as a parent with his children, only that they were not allowed to see him. Humankind was made of two sons and one daughter. The daughter had to bring water to God's house. One day, she became curious and watched how God took the pot of water with his hand. But the act was discovered and the three children were punished for the disobedience of the girl. Since then, humans have to live without God, and all happiness and peace are gone. They have to die and work hard for their daily food which God gave freely before. The Tswana (Botswana) say that humans lost immortality because they made God angry. Still, God provided them with the gift of resurrection which they also lost. The original ability to resurrect from death after the Fall is also reported among the Hottentots (South Africa) and the Meru (Kenya).

Some groups know of forbidden food that was eaten by the first humans: ula-yam among the Chagga (Tanzania), eggs among the Pare (Tanzania), animals – given as brothers to humankind – among the Barotse (Zambia) or just an unspecified fruit making people sick among the Shilluk (Sudan). The Shilluk lived in God’s land but were sent to earth when they became sick. In the last myth, though, there is no indication of a guilt committed by humans. The Chagga continue the story that God gave humans a second chance in a rejuvenation process by shedding the skin like snakes do. But the elderly person would have to do it in secret. When the time of the grandfather had come to shed the skin, it was observed by the granddaughter, and the process was stopped. He died cursing his offspring: “I have died, all of you will die!” The Bambuti (Congo) believe that God allowed humans to eat from all the trees, except the tahu tree. A pregnant woman who desired to eat the forbidden fruit persuaded her husband to get it. As a consequence, God left the people alone and sent death among them. Finally, the Elgeyo (Kenya) say that humans were ordered to refrain totally from eating until God would arrive. But the snake persuaded them to eat, and God punished them for their disobedience.

A story that is not located specifically in paradise reports of a path (of behavior) that God has indicated to the Zulu (South Africa); but they don’t know that path anymore. Only some customs, like circumcision and marriage, are remembered as divine institutions and are observed carefully.

3.2. African Myths about Life after Death

In another chapter, Mbiti has collected all the “eschatological concepts” in Africa (cf. *ibid.* pp. 253-271). This is a theological term and has to be used in an analogous sense.

It is believed that God causes people to die, either directly or through his intermediaries in the spiritual world. We have to accept God’s will, and death is the only way to unite with him again. But evil spirits or witches may also cause death against God’s intentions. Especially people who die at a young age or under strange circumstances are considered to be killed by evil forces.

Often, the passage to the spiritual world is described as crossing a river. The deceased have to pay admission which is provided by the sacrifices of the community. The proper burial rites are absolutely necessary so that a person can become an ancestor and live in peace. Wrong burials make the spirit return and haunt the community.

3.2.1. Characteristics of Life after Death

The spirit world is similar to our visible world. People keep their character traits and weaknesses, they quarrel and fight. Since they do the same activities, the deceased are buried with useful items that will serve them. The Bacongo (Angola) even assume that the spirits marry and get children; the Banyarwanda (Rwanda) believe exactly the opposite. The Chagga (Tanzania) think that the state of being rich and poor is prolonged to the after-life, although a poor person can sacrifice an animal and receive it later after death. Some groups expect a life in happiness without suffering, and the Bachwa (Congo) name this place “city of God”. The Kagoro (Nigeria), instead, believe that the spirits suffer because they are hungry and thirsty.

A widespread conviction is that spirits – especially clan founders and heroes – have power over the living and execute God’s will. They can possess people, in particular diviners and others who act as intermediaries, and appear to relatives to give orders, to warn and to inquire. However, the Dinka (Sudan) believe that the power of ancestors diminishes as time passes because they become forgotten.

Another commonly shared conviction is that relatives and friends meet after death.

3.2.2. The Location of Life after Death

The spirit world can be located beneath the earth, in nature (mountains, woods, bushes, rivers, lakes, rocks...), near the house of the deceased or literally on earth beyond a known river or the ocean.

If people consider spirits to be living around the home, it can be temporarily or indefinitely. Some beliefs are: spirits are ubiquitous (Barundi of Burundi), the spirit remains in the skull (Bamileke of Cameroon), the spirit lives under the house of his first wife (Kuku of Sudan), the spirit comes during dawn (Bemba of Zambia), the spirit comes during evening (Kikuyu of Kenya), the spirit comes for 40 days (Ga of Ghana).

Places associated with the deceased are avoided. Ancestors prove to be ancestors by not visiting the community like evil spirits (although they keep the power to bless and to curse). Only the living-dead, the recently deceased relatives, are welcomed for some time.

Several groups believe that the deceased will live with God, who dwells above the clouds.

3.2.3. Judgment and Retribution

Usually, African Religion doesn’t know of a judgment after death. Retribution is done on earth. The only exceptions Mbiti has found are among the Yoruba (Nigeria), the Lodagaa (Ghana), the Gumuz (Ethiopia) and the Bacongo (Angola). The last group might have

developed the teaching under Christian influence (cf. *ibid.* p. 260). According to them, the moon will be the place of coolness and happiness and the sun the place of heat that punishes evil-doers, torturing them forever. Differently, the Lodagaa believe that God's punishment will be only for a certain period, depending on the gravity of the evil that has been committed on earth. Eventually, everybody will enter paradise. The Lodagaa fear more God's punishment which comes in this life than that after death.

3.2.4. Immortality and Resurrection

Usually, immortality of the spirits in African Religion is not explicitly reflected upon. What happens to the living-dead once their names are not remembered anymore remains vague. Resurrection myths in Africa refer all to the past. Humans have lost that gift, and there is no indication that God has promised to regain it. However, the Sonjo (Tanzania) have a Christ-like figure. They remember their hero Khambageu who died, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven and became identified with God. But it is not a messianic hope that humans would participate in the hero's resurrection.

Instead of rising again, there exist beliefs of nominal reincarnation in the children of the clan (character inheritance) and transmigration of souls in animals.

3.2.5. Evaluation by John Mbiti

Mbiti concludes his survey with the following observation: "It is remarkable that out of these many myths concerning the primeval man and the loss of his original state, there is not a single myth, to my knowledge, which even attempts to suggest a solution or reversal of this great loss. Man accepted the separation between him and God; and in some societies God has been 'left' in the distance of the Zamani [Past], coming into the Sasa [Present] period only in times of men's crises and needs. In varying degrees the majority of African peoples (if not all) attempt to go after God in the acts of worship such as we have already outlined... We saw, however, no evidence of man seeking after God for His own sake; or of the spirit of man 'thirsting' after God as the pure and absolute expression of being.

Would it be legitimate to suggest, perhaps, that African acts of worship are basically utilitarian, searching primarily for the lost paradise rather than for God himself? Since in these acts, people are searching for something past, something in the distant Zamani period, it follows that there cannot be myths about the future recovery of the lost paradise... Relative to the people in the Sasa period, the lost paradise withdraws further into the Zamani until they lose sight of it even mythologically. Indeed this has already happened to many societies

whose picture of man's original state is 'forgotten'... Yet behind these fleeting glimpses of the original state and bliss of man, whether they are rich or shadowy, there lie the tantalizing and unattained gift of the resurrection, the loss of human immortality and the monster of death. Here African religions and philosophy must admit a defeat: they have supplied no solution... It is perhaps here then that we find the greatest weakness and poverty of our traditional religions compared to world religions like Christianity..." (Mbiti, 1969, p. 98-99)

3.3. Continuity: African Religious Thinking in the Old Testament

The creation myths in Africa, especially those that explain the fallen state of mankind as a result of disobedience by the first humans, have many parallels with the Genesis account (Gen 2-4). The most important are:

- the direct contact with God in paradise
- the state of childlike innocence and immortality in paradise and the privileged position of humans over animals
- disobedience symbolized by eating forbidden food, sometimes a fruit from a tree
- the loss of happiness, peace and immortality as a consequence of disobedience. Since then, humans have to work hard for their daily bread.
- God's care for humanity outside the paradise, symbolized by a container with herbs and medicine. In Gen 3:21, God makes clothing for Adam and Eve as a protection.

Even if the setting of many African myths is different, it seems to me that their message originates from the same source like the biblical story.

The idea that salvation is an earthly blessing from God and that blessing and punishment are executed in this life is rooted in the Old Testament, too. I have selected two texts that illustrate this thinking:

a) Psalm 65:5.9-13:

"By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation... You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it. You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth. You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness.

The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.”

Africans will find this prayer very familiar because it relates to their daily life. God manifests his salvation through an abundant harvest and through the forces of nature. The outlook for salvation is not a theological speculation about life after death but a concrete experience here and now (cf. Ps 104:10-15; 144:12-15; 145:12-18; Is 30:23-26; Ez 34:25-31).

b) Deuteronomy 28:1-4.15-20

“If you will only obey the LORD your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth; all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the LORD your God:

Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your livestock, both the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock...

But if you will not obey the LORD your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you:

Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field... Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock... The LORD will send upon you disaster, panic, and frustration in everything you attempt to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly, on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me...”

Obedience and disobedience have direct consequences for the community (cf. Lev 26; Ps 78; 1 Kg 8:33-51). Vital areas of life like children, farming and livestock are affected. Calamities remember the community that they have abandoned God’s commandment. The difference lies in the exclusive focus on God’s action. Ancestors don’t intervene in the Bible. But since they are nothing else but God’s executors, Africans can agree that, ultimately, God himself is the source of retribution. Naturally, my informant, who denies any involvement of God in human affairs, can’t see a parallel between the Bible and African Religion (cf. app.: no. 4).

3.4. Discontinuity: African Religion, Original Sin and the Christian Concept of Salvation

According to the field research, Africans see a major discontinuity between the two religions concerning the goodness or sinfulness of human nature. Mbiti additionally concludes in his survey that African Religion has made no attempts to suggest a reversal of the loss of paradise. In this section, the biblical beliefs about sin and salvation are presented without going into the extensive debate of Christian scholarship. Although the New Testament contains different pictures to describe the fallen state of humankind and different soteriological models, there is a unanimous affirmation that redemption is necessary to be in communion with God and that this redemption is found through Jesus Christ.

3.4.1. Original Sin

Like African Religion, the biblical understanding of evil can be described in terms of broken relationships. But the focus lies on the lost communion with God, not the community whose harmony has been disrupted. Human relations are spoiled as a consequence of the alienation from God (cf. Gen 3-4).

Jesus states that out of the human heart come “fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, evil eye, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within.” (Mk 7:21-23) Evil doesn’t come from outside to deceive a naturally good person but grows from within. Jesus, therefore, generalizes about the human condition speaking to his listeners: “If you then, who are evil...” (Mt 7:11) and “No one is good but God alone.” (Lk 18:19) That means all humans are under the power of evil (cf. Rm 3:23; Eph 2:1-3; 1 Jo 5:19). This has not necessarily to do with personal guilt. In the encounter with the blind man, whose blindness is a symbol for the human condition under sin, the disciples ask Jesus if it was the man’s fault or that of his parents that he was born blind. Jesus answers, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” (Jo 9:2-3)

The apostle Paul describes in the letter to the Romans the internal conflict of every person: “I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh... For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do... I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin.” (Rm 7:18-23) The expression ‘flesh’ refers to the dimension of

human reality that is opposed to the will of God. The reason for our sinful condition is, according to Paul, the disobedience of the first human: “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned.” (Rm 5:12) This passage is the most explicit reference in the Bible to what has been developed then as the concept of Original Sin.

3.4.2. Salvation

Salvation, in contrast, means to be in full communion with God and through God with others. Instead of understanding salvation as a good to be possessed, the relational aspect has to be underlined. By exchanging the heart of stone with a heart of flesh (cf. Ez 36:26) God enables men and women to live in true and loving relationships with him and with each other.

Jesus explained that the blindness of the man was meant to reveal God’s work, i.e. his saving action. In the interpretation of the New Testament authors, salvation is a free gift of God accomplished through Jesus’ offering of his life on the cross and his resurrection. “Through Christ God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.” (Col 1:20; cf. Mk 10:45; Jo 3:16; Rm 4:24-25, 5:6-11; Gal 1:4; Eph 2:4-8; Col 2:11-15; 2 Tm 1:9-10; 1 Pt 1:3; Rev 5:9...) It is love which has moved God to act on our behalf (cf. 1 Jo 4:9-10). Because his intervention changes the very being of a person, salvation is also compared to a new birth (cf. Jo 3:3-6; Tt 3:5) or to a new creation (cf. 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). The various texts usually focus on Christ’s death, in other instances on his resurrection, but I suggest from a systematic point of view to interpret Christ’s incarnation, his earthly life, his death and his new life in the Spirit as the One Saving Action of God to reconcile humanity with himself. Eventually, the whole creation is included in this transformation process (cf. Rm 8:19-23; 2 Pt 3:13).

The Bible claims that human initiatives can’t reconcile us with God. Salvation is a one-way movement from God towards the lost (cf. Mt 9:9; Lk 19:10; 2 Cor 5:18-19). Humanity is passive like the deceased Lazarus had to be called out of the grave (cf. Jo 11; Col 2:13).

Crucial to the Christian soteriology is the belief that God personally entered history in Jesus Christ. Only by identifying himself with the fallen human race, God broke the power of sin and death (cf. Lk 1:68.78-79; Rm 8:1-4; 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 2:10-18). He acted in Jesus for all humankind (cf. Rm 5:15-21; 1 Cor 15:21-22; 1 Jo 2:2), but there is a responsibility to convert and to answer in obedience that the promise of salvation becomes a reality in a person’s life (cf. Mt 19:21-22; Acts 2:37-38; 5:30-31; 16:30-31). This is what the apostle Paul calls justification through faith (cf. Rm 1:16-17; 3:23-26; 10:9-13, Gal 2:16).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church links both aspects – the sinfulness of humanity and the salvation through Christ – intrinsically together: “The doctrine of original sin is, so to speak, the ‘reverse side’ of the Good News that Jesus is the Savior of all men, that all need salvation and that salvation is offered to all through Christ... we cannot tamper with the revelation of original sin without undermining the mystery of Christ.” (CIC 389) The coming of a savior only makes sense if we live under a ‘cruse’ from where there is no escape by our own effort. Africans who reject Christianity usually point to this discontinuity (see 2.3.).

Njia Teh (2005, p. 29-30) compares the two religions and concludes that both are aware of our vulnerability to evil. But in African Religion, sin cannot be inherited. Everybody receives his/her punishment directly, and following generations live without the burden of an original sin. Analyzing the idea of salvation, Njia Teh describes the African spirituality mainly as a way to restore broken relationships through rituals or sacrifices. Because there is no original sin, African restoration is not understood as a transformation of the human being.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Basic Beliefs in African Religion

- There existed a paradise where humankind lived together with God, the Creator.
- After the Fall, God is still present among the people. We are surrounded by a sacred environment.
- Salvation is what is good for the family lineage. It is mainly an immanent concern. God’s blessing is sought for this life, and a restoration of the paradise is not thought of.
- African Religion can only recognize the absence of salvation if visible problems occur.
- Evil is committed as an act of free will when we step out of God’s presence and forget him. There is no inherited sinful human nature. Children are born innocent. But our heart has an inclination to commit evil. Attitudes and intentions are considered evil only when they have a visible negative effect on society.
- Cleansing and reconciliation happen through prescribed rituals under the guidance of a spiritual leader (diviner or another pure person). The correct ritual always brings a positive result within a short period of time. If the desired effect doesn’t come, the source of affliction is different or the client has hidden vital information.

- God's help is only needed to be cleansed from a trespass. The person who lives in harmony with the community doesn't depend on God to do well.

4.2. Evil and Original Sin

In my interviews, several informants said that Africans would have great difficulties of understanding the concept of Original Sin. Humanism and many religions, not only African Religion, believe that humans are free to improve morally through their own will and effort. But I think that it is more a task to define clearly what is meant with sin. Traditionally, Africans judge evil by its practical outcome. Evil is a doing and, therefore, it is obvious that babies can't be evil because they have not started acting. But Original Sin doesn't refer to our actions. It points to something deeper than specific acts: We are not sinners because we (occasionally) sin, but we sin because we are sinners. Specific sins (evil actions) are only manifestations of Original Sin. The doctrine is not primarily concerned with how the human condition got the way it is, but it wants to explain what the human condition is: that we are born under a 'curse' (to speak in African terms).

Exactly here, several of my informants confirm the conviction that our inclination to evil is inborn. Babies don't learn to be jealous, they are. And witch families literally generate evil babies. The strict rules in African societies have the function to domesticate the evil human nature and to contain the social evil through sanctions and punishment. What African Religion calls evil is a segment of what Christianity considers the reality of evil. The acknowledgement that the human heart wants evil – without necessarily putting it into practice – comes close to a Christian understanding and could be fruitful for a dialogue.

African culture functions deductively, always beginning from real life experiences. I am convinced that Original Sin can be approached in this way. There is no need of an abstract theory, but it is observed and experienced in daily life. There has never been a culture or group of people who have lived without evil. Its negative consequences are omnipresent. A contemporary example is the use and indoctrination of child soldiers in wars that aren't simply acts of free people who tomorrow could choose to behave differently, but there is a tragic interaction of different forces so that individuals can't step out of the deadly machinery. The testimonies of former child soldiers give a vivid illustration of that reality. Only a graceful intervention from outside gave/gives some of them the chance to escape. This extreme example stands for all situations where we are trapped in a vicious cycle, and I

believe that this is a quite normal human experience. In the end, it doesn't matter how this reality is named.

In a lecture at the Maryknoll Institute, a professor said that, in African terms, we are all considered "sick", not physically sick, but there is something not in order in our lives. No African, and no person in the world, has ever lived in full harmony with others after the Fall of mankind. Here, the assumption of the freedom of choice is put into question. Why has nobody ever used his/her freedom for acting only in a perfectly righteous manner? This is what the concept of Original Sin wants to express: All humans are trapped and need God's saving help. My informants said that African Religion only calls upon God's help if somebody has fallen. But if coveting and jealousy are expressions of a sinful being, then it becomes clear that humans need God's help independently of committing visible sins.

My reflection doesn't assume that the two religions can agree if inclinations and intentions fall under the category of evil, or not. I only believe that the Christian conception is comprehensible to a follower of African Religion – without the need to accept it –, as the African religious conception is comprehensible to a Christian – without the need to accept it.

4.3. Salvation in this Life and after Death

The major difference between the two religions is the (lacking) transforming outlook. African Religion doesn't expect a restoration of the lost paradise. The world will always continue to be as it is now, and God sanctifies life without the need to renew the human nature. Evil that is committed by individuals or groups can never be so big that they couldn't repair the damage. The African rituals, designed to restore salvation for the community, operate on a quasi-mechanical basis.

In contrast, Christianity emphasizes on God's sovereign intervention for the salvation of a helpless humanity. God offers transformation as a free gift. There is no ritual that could oblige him to act on demand. Salvation is first of all reconciliation and communion with God and then, as a consequence, reconciliation with oneself and other people. Being nurtured by God's grace is like breathing air and therefore a constant condition, not just after committing a sin.

The strict immanent outlook to salvation in African Religion (family lineage, health and harvest) seems different to the Christian focus on a relationship with God and the forgiveness of sins, but I think that Christianity in this issue is inclusive. God's Kingdom has a

transcendent and an immanent dimension. Only that the things of this world are temporary, pointing to the everlasting realities and receiving their proper meaning from above.

Mbiti asks if African Religion is utilitarian because it doesn't seek God for his own sake, only in his function to bless life (see 3.2.5.). I believe that this is a risk for followers of any religion. In the context of Africa, tradition teaches to continue the family lineage as a holy command from God. To guard this value is not utilitarian because it is the way to relate to God and his creation.

Naturally, salvation, as it appears in the Christian revelation, is not reflected upon in African Religion. However, the testimony about the mediating grandfather (app.: no. 9) is enlightening because the requirement of a pure mediator between the community and the spiritual world prefigures the role of Christ. The people were aware that they are not worthy to be accepted by their ancestors or God because of their iniquities.

The experience of the Christian mission has shown that many Africans have welcomed easily the good news of a salvation that extends its promise after death. They have done this without abandoning the focus of an integral view of life where God is the sustainer in every aspect of human reality. I believe that this is an important contribution Africans can make to the Christian faith. World Christianity often has spiritualized too much the message of salvation as if it would be totally a reality after death. But many Bible passages, especially in the Old Testament, emphasize that God's blessing wants to give wholeness in this life. The integral reality of salvation is displayed in reconciled relationships among us. In the New Testament, it is the visible side of the Kingdom of God where the community of believers is united in "one heart and soul" (Acts 4:32).

Also, some Christian movements tend to privatize the relationship with God and forget the communitarian dimension of faith. This is another contribution of African spirituality. Our choices affect others, and we reach the house of the Father only together.

Appendix: Field Research Summary

1. 20/1/2006, Organization of African Instituted Churches – Nairobi: Interview with a coordinator about the concept of evil and salvation in African Religion and Christianity and how African Independent Churches (AICs) integrate the different beliefs in their theology.
2. 21/1/2006, city center – Nairobi: Interview with a Bishop of the Nomiya Church (AIC) about his understanding of evil and salvation and particular practices of his church.
3. 24/1/2006, Lang'ata – Nairobi: Interview with an African Catholic priest about how African Christians deal with the dichotomy between African Religion and Christianity.
4. 4/2/2006, Lang'ata – Nairobi: Interview with a scholar who is a follower of African Religion about his religious experience.
5. 14/2/2006, Bible Translation & Literacy – Nairobi: Interview with a translator about difficulties to communicate biblical ideas in vernacular. He works on a publication of the Bible in 'Daasanach.
6. 19/2/2006, Korogocho – Nairobi: Interview with a convert to Christianity about his faith.
7. 24/2/2006: Kerwa – Limuru: Interview with a follower of African Religion about her faith.
8. 10/3/2006, Lang'ata – Nairobi: Interview with a professor of Religion and Philosophy about the concept of evil and salvation in African Religion and Christianity.
9. 12/3/2006, Kariobangi – Nairobi: Interview with a woman who grew up in an African religious context about rituals of reconciliation.
10. 14/3/2006: Kariobangi – Nairobi: Interview with a convert to Christianity about his faith.

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