

The Sukuma Sacrificial Goat and Christianity: A Basis for Inculturation in Africa

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In the Sukuma language of the Sukuma Ethnic Group¹ in Western Tanzania there is a proverb: *Mbuli ya kitambo ikachaga yumela*. The English translation is: *The sacrificial goat² dies while screaming in anguish*. This proverb can be used to demonstrate what inculturation of the Gospel in Africa is all about. This and other proverbs and examples of African oral literature (sayings, riddles, stories and songs) are a very powerful way to explain the sometimes complex ideas of theology, catechesis, morality and spirituality in an African context. This process can be a real African contribution to the World Church.

I. The First African Synod's Call for Inculturation

The Church in Africa, St. John Paul II's *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation* (from the First African Synod in 1994), has important sections on the "Urgent Need for Inculturation" (No. 59) and "Areas of Inculturation" (No. 62). The document states:

The Synod Fathers stressed the particular importance for evangelization of inculturation, the process by which catechesis takes flesh in the various cultures. Inculturation includes two dimensions: on the one hand, the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and, on the other, the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures (No. 59).³

This central text stresses "Christianizing Africa," but a shortcoming of the document is that there is little emphasis on "Africanizing Christianity." In a critique of this section the Ugandan theologian John Waliggo states: "The third important dimension of inserting cultural values in Christianity is to be developed by theologians."⁴ This recalls Bishop Peter Sarpong of Kumasi, Ghana's famous statement: "If Christianity's claim to be universal is to be believed, then it is not Africa that must be Christianized, but Christianity that must be Africanized."⁵ Stated another way, the priority is to be an African Christian rather than a Christian African.

It is not a matter of taking the traditional customs of African culture and making the best ones *fit into* Christianity. It is not a matter of African cultural values being mediated through Western culture and thought patterns. Rather it is to start from the graced reality of the African context. This includes deep respect for African popular religiosity and sensitivity to African religious sensibilities. This is radical inculturation.⁶

In another section entitled "Positive Values of African Culture" (Nos. 42 and 43), the pope states: "Africa is endowed with a wealth of cultural values and priceless human qualities which it can offer to the churches and to humanity as a whole. The Synod Fathers highlighted some of these cultural values which are truly a providential preparation for the transmission of the Gospel." The pope identified some of these African cultural values as a

profound religious sense, a sense of the sacred and the spiritual world and the need for rites of purification and expiation. In No. 67 St. John Paul II states:

With regard to African Traditional Religion, a serene and prudent dialogue will be able ... to foster the assimilation of positive values such as belief in a Supreme Being who is Eternal, Creator, Provident and Just Judge, values which are readily harmonized with the content of the faith ... They can even be seen as a preparation for the Gospel, because they contain precious *Semina Verbi*.

He goes on to state in No. 43: "This love of life leads them [African people] to give great importance to the veneration of the ancestors. They believe intuitively that the dead continue to live and remain in communion with them. Is this not in some way a preparation for belief in the Communion of the Saints?"

The *Apostolic Exhortation* identifies proverbs and other types of African oral literature as one of the sources and vehicles of these positive African cultural values:

The traditional forms of social communication must never be underestimated. In many places in Africa they are still very useful and effective. Moreover they are "less costly and more accessible." These forms include songs and music, mimes and the theater, proverbs and fables. As vehicles of the wisdom and soul of the people, they are a precious source of material and of inspiration for the modern media (No. 123).

II. History and Explanation of the Sukuma Proverb⁷

The Sukuma and other ethnic groups in Africa have a deep faith in the indigenous diviner-healer⁸ and in the power of the medicine that he or she gives out. In the African tradition diviners use mysterious power for finding the cause of a person's misfortune. A healer uses this same power for making magical curative and protective medicines. Often a person combines these two functions and so is called an indigenous diviner-healer or a local doctor. For the Sukuma people to be bewitched is worse than anything else. Research indicates that the Sukuma have at least forty-nine different types of magical medicine. The people believe that the most powerful type of medicine is the kind that prevents witches from harming them.

In the Sukuma tradition when an indigenous diviner-healer dies, all his or her medical instruments and paraphernalia e.g. medicine, medicine boxes, bags, calabashes, flywhisk, etc. are temporarily not allowed to be used. They are covered and stored in his or her ancestral house. After one to two months the clan or family members call a meeting to interview the sons and daughters. After succeeding in selecting the person who will take over these possessions, a big clan ritual ceremony called "Isabigula" (which means "Uncovering") is arranged.⁹

This ceremony is performed when a famous indigenous diviner-healer dies or one of the leaders of the Bagalu or Bagika Dance Societies dies. The ceremony was also performed

as part of the memorial rite for Father David Clement, MAfr, a famous Canadian missionary priest who lived and worked among the Sukuma people for many years. More research needs to be carried out on this ceremony especially concerning the meaning of "covering" and "uncovering" in this rite. This responds to Pope John Paul II's call in *The Church in Africa* for "the need for research in the field of African cultures in all their complexity" (No. 62).

The Isabigula Ceremony is a post-burial ceremony when the medical instruments and paraphernalia are uncovered and publicly handed over to the new indigenous diviner-healer. Many people within and outside the clan are invited to come and witness this "handing over" rite. First and foremost, the tombstone area gets cleaned. Then early in the morning prayers are led by the master of ceremony, usually a great indigenous diviner-healer assisted by other recognized healers, herbalists, fortunetellers, etc.

During the sequence of events the chief ceremonial leader will be presented with a totally white (meaning "innocent" and "pure") female goat. The leader will then bless the special ceremonial goat by first sprinkling white flour mixed with water contained in a small white basket. The leader sprinkles the flour in the four directions of the universe, patiently asking the ancestors to be the official guests of the occasion. The leader asks the ancestors to bless the ceremony and bring the people rain, peace, fertility, an abundant harvest, etc.

Having finished this prayer, the sacrificial goat is then killed facing the eastern side of the universe by either using a spiral head spear (*ichimu lya bubote*), an indigenous diviner-healer's razor blade (*lughwa*) or a smaller knife (*lushu lwa mugibili*). The spear is very slowly driven in the left fore chest of the goat taking care not to pierce its heart. When the sacrificial goat emits its screaming and piercing cry (an agonized bleating), all the people sorrowfully respond by humming "mmm." This ritual may take half an hour. After the death of the sacrificial goat, the blood and heart portion is prepared. It is mixed with medicine, that is later used for cleansing the other medicine, the flywhisk, the calabashes and all the people in the family.

In short, the white ("innocent") female goat's death while screaming is a symbolic act that restores power to the medicine and peace to the family of the deceased person. This is an important example of a Sukuma sacrifice of reconciliation. This type of sacrifice brings special peace and restores a right relationship with the ancestors.

III. Parallels Between the Sukuma Tradition and the Christian Tradition

There are close parallels between the sacrificial goat in the Sukuma tradition and Jesus Christ who is the sacrificial lamb led to the slaughter in the Christian tradition. Both undergo innocent deaths. Some parallels (including the similarities and contrasts) are as follows:

1. Both the sacrificial goat and Jesus Christ are brought before the people. The goat is dragged unwillingly and protests. Jesus comes silently. "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth" (*Isaiah 53:7*). "Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was

this: 'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth'" (*Acts* 8:32).

2. Both are innocent victims who must die so that the rest of the people may live. "You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed" (*John* 11:50). "Much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ" (*Romans* 5:17).

3. Both are sacrificial victims who take on the sin, weakness and death of the people. The teaching staff at the AMECEA Pastoral Institute (Gaba) in Kenya states:

The symbolism of Christ the lamb who was slain is very meaningful for Africa. A sacrificial victim is slaughtered mainly to remove evil and sin from the community, and to prevent death. The actual killing marks the peak moment of the sacrifice. Among certain ethnic groups the animal symbolically becomes the "scapegoat" for the sins of the community before being slain. People touch the animal to indicate their wish to cast off their sins and heap them onto the sacrificial victim. In a similar way, Christ has become such a victim who freely and lovingly accepts to bear the sins of the world upon himself and dies on our behalf. His death is thus a liberating action of forgiveness for all people.¹⁰

The *New Testament* describes Jesus in these words: "Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross" (*Philippians* 2:6-8). "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (*John* 1:29).

4. Both actually die. It is not like the story of Abraham and Isaac where the son is saved from physical death. In fact, both the sacrificial goat and Jesus undergo painful, agonizing and violent deaths. They are both slowly tortured and bleed profusely before they die. Before dying the goat cries out for help in a piercing scream. When Jesus feels abandoned on the cross he cries out for help to his Father with a loud voice: "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" (*Matthew* 27:46).

5. Participants in the Sukuma ceremony are really emotionally involved in this rite of passage when the goat dies in anguish. In particular, the Sukuma women actually weep as they sorrowfully hum "mmm" during this part of the ritual. The biblical parallel is the faithful women in the Gospel who accompanied Jesus on his "Way of the Cross." "But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children" (*Luke* 23:28). The women wept at Jesus' anguish and were sorrowfully present at the foot of the cross. They actually shared in Christ's suffering and death.

IV. Christian Teaching on the Eucharistic Sacrifice

The Sukuma ritual of the sacrificial goat leads to the Christian teaching on the eucharistic sacrifice. But the Christian teaching takes the African cultural example of the

sacrificial victim to a higher level in a process which *The Church in Africa*, Pope John Paul II's *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation*, describes as the first dimension of inculturation: "The intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity" (No 59).

Jesus Christ as the sacrificial lamb goes beyond the rite of purification and expiation of the sacrificial lamb or goat of the African tradition. Jesus "is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (*John* 1:29). He is not just a special lamb or goat, but he is the *definitive, the ultimate, the one and only Lamb of God*. He died for all people everywhere.

Today theologians are taking a fresh look at sacrifice, for example the books *The Power of Sacrifice* by Ian Bradley and *Sacrifice and the Death of Christ* by Frances Young. St. Anselm's classic theology of satisfaction, appeasement and expiation is being questioned in a new light. Fergus Kerr states that Bradley

has a very simple thesis. Once and for all, we must rid ourselves of the "heresy" (as he calls it) that sacrifice is primarily something we human beings do to God in an attempt to placate or propitiate him, so that we can begin at last to understand that the sacrificial principle lies at the heart of creation as well as Calvary. Indeed, sacrifice in the sense of self-giving is the principle which is eternally at work in the life of the Trinity itself.¹¹

This view leads to some challenging observations. Sacrifice is loving self-giving and something, which God is the first to do. Calvary was the supreme expression of the power of sacrifice, but Jesus' death was the last bloody sacrifice. The *New Testament* "buries" the violent sacrifice of the *Old Testament*. The strict theology of appeasement is questionable. The scapegoat principle and model that historically have legitimated violence (especially as a catharsis for the community) is not valid anymore. The Gospel exposes the concept of sacred violence and its supposed moral legitimacy. Violent acts (murder, genocide, capital punishment, public execution, torture and mob justice) are no longer justified in any form. Violence cannot breed violence.¹²

This relates to the well-known French cultural theorist Rene Girard's fundamental idea is that desire is mimetic (all of our desires are borrowed from other people), that all conflict originates in mimetic desire (mimetic rivalry), that the scapegoat mechanism is the origin of sacrifice and the foundation of human culture, and religion was necessary in human evolution to control the violence that can come from mimetic rivalry, and that the *Bible* reveals these ideas and denounces the scapegoat mechanism.¹³

Thus Christianity is called to elevate the Sukuma (and similar groups) sacrifices to a new and higher level. This is a concrete example of what *The Church in Africa* says about the encounter of cultures with Christ and his Gospel: "Every culture needs to be transformed by Gospel values in the light of the Paschal Mystery" (No. 61). The Sukuma are challenged to come up with a new, unbloody type of sacrifice (even with animals). In this way Christianity will free the Sukuma people from deep-rooted fears and confusion related to the "appeasement of the ancestors mentality" of traditional bloody sacrifices like the killing of the goat described above.

The eucharistic sacrifice perfect all sacrifices. "I will not accept an offering from your hands. For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering" (*Malachi* 1:10-11 -- see *Eucharistic Prayer II*). "Christ died for our sins to make of us an offering to God" (*Responsorial* after the reading in Friday Vespers). See *Romans* 3:23.

Christ made it possible for us to offer ourselves in union with him to the Father. In the Eucharist the sacrifice of the cross is made present here and now so that in union with Christ we might make an offering of ourselves to the Father. The sacrifice is through the self-offering of those who celebrate the Eucharist. That self-offering/self-giving is that of a whole person dedicated to the Kingdom and the will of God. Pope Paul VI states: "The mystery of the Eucharist, the sacrifice of the cross, which was once offered on Calvary, is remarkably re-enacted and constantly recalled ... The whole church, in union with Christ in his role as Priest and Victim, offers the sacrifice of the mass and is offered in it."¹⁴ The priest and the assembly are the sacrament of Christ's own self-offering. We are a priestly people and share in the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

The prayer of the Sukuma ritual sacrifice entreats the ancestors to cleanse the special instruments of the deceased indigenous diviner-healer and re-empowers the medicine and the new person responsible for using it. The most important type of medicine is the kind that frees people from being bewitched.

The Eucharist is the medicine of eternal life and goes far beyond the power of the Sukuma medicine. The prayer for the consecration of the wine in the eucharistic liturgy says: "Take this, all of you, and drink from it: this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memory of me." The Eucharist is the medicine that takes away the curse of sin. Through his sacrifice and death on the cross Jesus Christ took away the curse of the Devil who is often portrayed as a witch in Sukuma culture.

There is a related Sukuma thanksgiving song, *The Self-reliant Orphan Lamb*, which tells the story of a baby sheep whose mother dies. The lamb has learned from its mother not to depend on milk alone but also to eat tender and moist grass. After its mother's death the lamb can take care of itself. The song contains the proverb *The orphan lamb does not die of hunger*.¹⁵

This song is applied to the indigenous Sukuma master diviner-healer and his or her disciple. The master has taught the disciple to care of himself or herself. Even after the master's death the disciple can manage for the rest of life because of his or her knowledge of medicine. In fact, the disciple is not afraid because he or she has complete faith in the medicine given by the master.

The Sukuma song leader Kadulyu composed this song of thanksgiving to his master diviner-healer Sita. Before dying Sita instructed his disciple Kadulyu on the use of various types of magical medicine especially the medicine that prevents witches from harming him. A part of the song goes: "The orphan lamb who was taught by its mother before her death to graze on tender shoots of grass (and not just to depend on its mother's milk) will not die of hunger."

This song-proverb on the lamb can be applied to Jesus Christ who before his death left humankind the medicine of eternal life in the Eucharist. He gave as nourishment his body and blood as the food and drink of everlasting life. On the evening before he died Jesus left his disciples food to sustain them saying "Take, eat; this is my body" (*Matthew 26:26*). "Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever" (*John 6:49-51*).

In another part of the Sukuma song Kadulyu sings:

What can my enemies do to me? They are powerless against the magical medicine left to me by my master. Just look at the way I walk. I swagger like one in complete control of the situation without fear. I swat my enemies like so many flies. If they put magical medicine in my path to trap me, I pass without being harmed in the least.

Jesus left his disciples the "medicine of immortality" as the church fathers called the Eucharist. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day" (*John 6:54*). The Eucharist is the medicine of eternal life. In African languages Jesus himself has the applied Christian name of the "Medicine of Eternal Life."

In the *Missal* before receiving *Communion* there is a prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ with faith in your love and mercy I eat your body and drink your blood. May this holy sacrament bring me not condemnation but health [healing] in body and soul." Later the priest prays quietly: "Lord may I receive these gifts [the sacred body and the precious blood of our Lord Jesus Christ] in purity of heart. May they bring me healing and strength now and forever." The same Christ who healed while on earth is present with his healing power in this sacrament¹⁶ and is inviting all people: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (*Matthew 11:28*).

"I ate powerful medicine" is an expression used by an African warrior who after taking special medicine courageously goes into battle without the fear of dying. After partaking of the Eucharist, the early Christians said: "We have eaten fire" because they experienced the power of Jesus present in the Eucharist. St. Leo the Great said: "The effect of sharing in the body and blood of Christ is to change us into what we receive." The Eucharist transforms us into Christ.

Kadulyu had such strong belief in the power of the magical medicine left to him by his master Sita that it even affected the way he walked. "Just look at the way I walk. I swagger like one in complete control of the situation without fear." The least that Jesus asks of his disciples is not to be afraid. Christians who partake in the Eucharist should be recognized by the way they walk -- with the self-confident stride of people who, though weak, can do all things in Jesus who gives strength in the Eucharist. As Kadulyu sang a song of praise and thanks to his master, Christians should spend the rest of their lives thanking Jesus for the "inexpressible gift" of the Eucharist. Jesus Christ, the "Chief Diviner-Healer," before his death left to his disciples the medicine of immortality. The medicine that he left is himself.

These Sukuma examples of the sacrificial goat and the self-reliant orphan lamb can be used as a step toward an inculturated Christianity in Africa. *The Church in Africa*, Pope John Paul II's *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation*, states: "Inculturation includes the whole life of the Church and the whole process of evangelization. It includes theology, liturgy, the Church's life and structures" (No. 62). Let us move forward boldly so that the Church in Africa is truly "a new homeland for Christ" (Nos. 6 and 56) and "Christ, in the members of his body, is himself African" (No. 127).

NOTES

1. The Sukuma Ethnic Group is the largest ethnic group (approximately six million people) in Tanzania. The Sukuma live mainly in rural areas in the northwestern part of the country on or near the southern shores of Lake Victoria, located mainly in Mwanza Archdiocese and Geita and Shinyanga Dioceses. They are agricultural-pastoralists whose lives focus on farming (maize, sorghum, cassava, sweet potatoes, cotton, etc.) and herding cows.

2. In the biblical tradition sheep are associated with the good, the righteous, the saved and eternal life while goats are associated with the evil, the accursed and eternal punishment (see *Matthew* 25:31-46). In the African tradition both sheep and goats are valued. Goats are usually more important in ceremonies and celebrations.

As a personal anecdote one morning I was celebrating the Eucharist in an outstation of Iramba Parish in Musoma Diocese in Western Tanzania. Goats were very common in the local area and even the Catholic Parish had a few goats kept aside for big feasts. During my homily I presented the traditional interpretation of the "Final Judgment" passage in *Matthew* 25 and the negative symbolism attributed to goats. After the Eucharist was finished an old Tanzanian man came up to me and said: "Padre, since you don't like goats, will you give me yours?"

3. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa (The Church in Africa) -- Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995). This has been published in Africa as *The Church in Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1995). See also *The African Synod Comes Home -- A Simplified Text* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1995).

4. John Waliggo, "Inculturation," *New People*, 39 (November-December, 1995): 22.

5. Peter Sarpong, as quoted in Joseph G. Healey, *A Fifth Gospel: The Experience of Black Christian Values* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1981), p. xi. Also in *African Ecclesial Review (AFER)*, 17, 6 (November, 1975): 322.

6. Summarized from a letter of Laurenti Magesa to one of the authors, 23 November, 1995.

7. Mainly adapted from Joseph M. Lupande, "Sukuma Proverbs and African Traditional Medicine, a "Forum Paper" at the African Proverbs Project-sponsored *Symposium on The African Proverb in the Twenty-First Century* (Pretoria, South Africa, 1995).

8. There are many names for this person: witchdoctor (a positive name for the diviner-healer as opposed to a witch, sorcerer, or wizard who uses magic in an evil way), medicine man or medicine woman. Today the term "indigenous" is preferred to "traditional."

9. A video and colored slides of this Sukuma ritual ceremony are available from the Sukuma Cultural Museum, Bujora, P.O. Box 76, Mwanza, Tanzania.

10. *The Paschal Mystery of Christ and of All Humankind* (Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba Publications *Spearhead* 59 (October, 1993), p. 52.

11. Fergus Kerr, "What Darwin Forgot," *Tablet*, 248, 8050 (2 September, 1995): 1113.

12. This is conveyed in a powerful and poignant story from Kigali, Rwanda (Tom McDonnell as told to Joseph Healey):

In a particular section of Kigali of mixed Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups, the genocidal war broke out with a bloody vengeance. Neighbors attacked neighbors. In one area a Hutu man murdered his Tutsi neighbor. Later after the Rwandan Patriotic Front won the war and took over the government, local investigations of the atrocities started. The wife of the dead Tutsi man was asked to identify her husband's murderer. She refused knowing that the Hutu man would be arrested, imprisoned and perhaps killed in return. The woman said that she preferred to remain silent to save another life. She said: "This is enough. This killing has to stop somewhere. One murder does not justify another killing. We have to break the cycle of violence and end this genocide." So she chose to forgive.

13. See Rene Girard's books *Violence and the Sacred*, *The Scapegoat* and *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. For further background reading, Gil Ballie presents the insightful views of Girard on culture, religion and violence in *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad, 1995).

14. Paul VI, *On Eucharistic Doctrine and Worship (Mysterium Fidei)* (Glen Rock, NJ: Paulist Press, 1966), Nos. 27 and 31.

15. This Sukuma proverb and song are explained in Chapters Two and Six of *Towards An African Narrative Theology* by Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1996 and Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997). Available as an Ebook on Amazon (for Kindle), Google and Barnes and Noble (for Nook).

16. Sometimes the Swahili translation brings out a richness not found in the original. Compare the *Prayer Over the Gifts* during the *Easter Vigil Midnight Eucharist*:

a. English: "May this Easter mystery of our redemption bring to perfection the saving work you have begun in us."

b. Swahili (translation): "Through the Eucharist may this Easter Mystery heal us body and soul to bring us to everlasting life."

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