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Friendship with God in the African Context

The concept of friendship with God in the African context has many missiological implications. Some of the questions that are important to this issue include, how do we talk to God as a friend? And if we do, what kind of friendship are we talking about? Is it seeing God as a buddy or a peer like us whom we can manipulate or reason with as one who is on par with us as human beings? What do we do with his sacredness, holiness, awesomeness, and transcendence in this relationship? How does the African, so immersed in issues of transcendence and sacredness, express friendship with God? These constitute the backdrop of this article that attempts to explore the *friendship* relationship of the African with God to see how that understanding or discovery can impact the way contextualized mission is done in Africa. I begin with defining friendship and its sociological significance, followed by an exploration of the biblical understanding of the concept of prayer, the African understanding of friendship (particularly how it functions in the context of prayer), and finally by looking at some of the missiological implications of these concepts.

What Is Friendship?

Friendship is a human necessity because people are social beings. Friendship is the result of “human relationships that are authentic and mutual; reciprocal and intimate” (Ssettuuma 2010:57). An Akan (the largest ethnic group in Ghana) proverb beautifully expresses this sociological reciprocity of benefit in the words: *Hu m’enyiwado ma me ntsi na atwe ebien nam* (To have someone blow off the foreign object in the eye is the reason why two antelopes walk together). In the quest for world peace, Woodrow Wilson remarked that “friendship is the only cement that will ever hold the world together” (1905). Truly a kingdom is expanded with the building of friends not enemies.

The Greek word for friend is *hetairos* from the root word *etes* meaning “clans man” (Kittle and Friedrich 1985 s.v. *hetairos*), meaning someone who shares the same lineage with you. This kinship understanding is vividly mirrored in the Baganda culture. In their tradition, the concept of true friendship is a relationship “so great” that it is sealed with *Omukago*, a blood pact. Benedict Ssettuuma notes:

According to the Baganda culture, *Omukago* “blood pact” cements a commitment between that which is so great, that becoming enemies is unthinkable. . . . Within the Baganda tradition, *Ow’omukago* “one of blood pact” is treated like a blood relative and such a one, cannot be mistreated. Even the smallest thing or secret is shared with *Ow’omukago*. (Ssettuuma 2010:61)

Since blood is a sacred element in the African tradition, true friendship is a sacred trust indicating relationship at its apogee (Aquinas 1265-1274; Emerson n.d.). It is a life-for-life agreement where a person’s individuality and personality are completely submerged in the pursuit of the other’s safety and happiness. It is that which makes a stranger a true brother or sister, a full-fledged member of the family, with full rights and privileges just like the other members of the family. Ssettuuma is right when he asserts that “the understanding of friendship in the African heritage is founded on the human person as a network of relationships incarnated” (Ssettuuma 2010:60). The interesting thing is that all these concepts have divine undertones.

African Concepts of God

The African cosmos which portrays a delicate blend of the transcendence and immanence of the Creator God “is divided into ‘two interpenetrating and inseparable, yet distinguishable, parts’ (Okorocho 1987), namely, the world of spirits and the world of humans” (Larbi 2002). This broad two-fold classification is further divided into four additional parts “namely, [the realm of] the Supreme God, [the realm of] divinities or gods, [the realm of] ancestors, and a [the realm of] charms or amulets” (Larbi 2002). In this scheme of things the Supreme God is believed to be a transcendent spirit so holy, and surrounded by an inapproachable blinding light that he must be approached by spirit intermediaries invisible to mere humans or by specially chosen dedicated priests (Adotey Addo 2001). This is also the role of the lesser gods, venerated ancestors, and priests who function as intermediaries to link worshipers to the Supreme God.

Though transcendent and therefore not worshiped directly, African Traditional Religionists (ATR) strongly believe that God is actively

involved in the day to day mundane activities of humans. To the Akan, he is the *Totrobonsu*, “the giver of rain,” *Tvereduampon* “the dependable mighty tree on which you can lean and never fall,” *Onyankopon*, “the loftiest one denoting his supremacy,” *Onyame* or *Nyame*, “the ultimate satisfier,” or *Odomankoma*, the only one with infinite resources including his graciousness. “*Onyame* [also] implies the basic idea of Deity as understood in Christian theology” (Larbi 2002; Parrinder 1969a:16ff). Commenting on this Malcom McVeigh states:

God’s absence from the world is a very important theme in ATR. It would be wrong to see God’s absence as an absolute separation in a deistic sense. God does send the rain and is intimately connected with the crisis of life. Moreover, some of the epithets of God picture Him as being everywhere. Among the Ba-ila [of Zambia], for example He is called *Mutalabala*, which is derived from the verb *kutalabala*, “to be age-lasting, to be everywhere and all times, equivalent to the phrase, *Uina ng’aela* (He has nowhere, or no-when, that he comes to an end). (McVeigh 1974:53, 24, 101)

Visit to a Shrine

In 1972, my late mother took my elder brother and me to an animist shrine in a town along the southern coast of Ghana to have us spiritually-insulated against spiritual attacks. It was there I saw for the first time how animists revere their deities. On reaching the shrine we had to wait quietly at some distance from the entrance until the priest motioned us to quietly come in. He made sure we had removed our footwear for the place was sacred. Though young and full of energy, we were captured by the solemnity that characterized the priest’s actions. He addressed his deity by the title *Nana* meaning “king” or “grandpa.” This he did with lots of respect and humility. Although that event happened a long time ago, I still cherish the lessons from the experience.

Generally ATR priests announce their presence when they enter the deity’s premises by some incantations or appellations which are usually accompanied by libation pouring. Often times they approach their deities on a red carpet of blood sacrifice. It is a solemn sacred duty led out by special persons, preferably the priests who know how to appeal to the deity. The awareness of the sacredness and greatness of the deity is seen in most salutations in ATR prayers.

The attributes of God are expressed in ‘praise names,’ which are repeated and savoured like salutations to a great chief. . . . Anyone who has listened to African prayers must have been impressed by the sonorous rehearsals of divine qualities. *Olorun*, *Olodumare*, *Baba*,

Alaanu Julo: God, Almighty, Father, Most Merciful; so the Yorubas begin many prayers, and continue with rolling sentences in which praise and prayer are mingled. (Parrinder 1969:67)

Approaching deities in ATR involves formal rituals which are similar to how respected human representatives, particularly kings and chiefs, are perceived and related to in Africa.

ATR Social Concepts and Religious Practices

Kings and Their Role in Africa

Mary Douglas deduced from Durkheim's thesis the existence of intertwining relationships between social institutions and religions. In her exploration of different cosmologies, she discovered "how socialization and social relationships influence our perception of ourselves, our religion, and our social reality as a whole" (Obeng 1996:28, 29). Pashington Obeng shares Douglas' hypothesis in symbolic replication and suggests that "people seek to behave in a way which replicates their social structure" (Obeng 1996:29; Douglas 1970:10). This is especially true in ATR, for "religion cannot be separated from a people's economics, kinship, gender differentiation, and other aspects" (Douglas 1970:vii-viii) of life, particularly concepts of kingship. In many social structures of the African community, the king is the human link to the spiritual world. For example, to the indigenous Asante, social roles and social relations were invested with mystical elements; hence chiefs or kings were regarded as sacred (Obeng 1996:28). "As a king he is sacred in a special way because he sits on a stool of the *nsamanfo* (lit. ghosts; "ancestors") which bears the soul of the community" (31). Most kings were regarded as gods or as the descendants of gods and were spiritually related to the fertility of the land and to the welfare of the people (Olupona 2006:11).

Relation to Kings

According to Jacob Olupona, most myths about the origins of people groups attest to the sacredness of kings. The first kings are considered as priest-kings (2006:11). In light of this, most African chiefs or rulers are seen as gods because they mediate between the people and their deities. Relating to a king requires the highest sense of respect and dignity. They are therefore approached with the highest sense of awe and reverence because they are considered as occupying a divinely appointed office. As the Akan say: *wonfa nsa pan nko ahenfie* (you don't go to the king's palace empty-handed). You do not go to his palace just as you like. You must be

ushered in by following ritual and protocol. A king's palace, like the sanctuary of old, cannot be entered without a sacrifice and the aid of an usher.

In a typical Asante durbar, the king is the last to appear. The time of his presence and departure marks the beginning and ending of any communal event. This makes him the controller of time. In a tribal assembly such as the Asante, no one is to dress above him. He must be at the pinnacle of dressing. In terms of fabric and design, no one is supposed to put on the same *kente* (a special Ghanaian hand-woven cloth with several colors) as the king. On some occasions some are virtually asked to go and change to ensure that the king's dressing is not matched by anyone. To avoid this kind of embarrassing situation, the king's weave is not mass produced but reserved as sacred for him. In communication, he is not spoken to directly. He must be communicated with through a linguist and must be offered a sacrifice acknowledging his highness. He is the supreme judge of the people. When he closes a discussion on an issue or case—*Ohen dze ne nan asi asem no do* (the chief has put his foot on the case)—it is taboo to attempt to resurrect the case. Kings hold the power of life and death—whether they are the *Oba* of the Yoruba, the *Igwe* of the Igbo, the *Nana* of the Asante, the *Nii* of the Ga, or the *Pharaoh* of ancient Egypt or Haile Selassie of Ethiopia. In this milieu, how does one befriend a king and by transcendental extension, God? How does the African talk to God?

Prayer: The African Understanding

To the African, prayer, which is approaching a deity, is a serious matter. It is likened to approaching a king. One therefore does not go just as one pleases. *Womfa nsa pan nko Ahenfie* (no one enters the king's palace empty handed). Like the OT sanctuary system only the priests ordained or appointed can enter temple premises (the courtyard and the holy place). When it comes to accessing the most holy place, it is only the high priest who is allowed into the inner sanctum of the sanctuary. So if prayer is approaching or talking to God, in the Akan or the African hierarchical structure and understanding it is not a freeway nor an easy path. Like the high priest of the OT, it is only the chief's prerogative or his designated priest who can approach the god. Dominique Zahn notes the meticulousness attached to African prayer rituals.

The religious powers of the chief of the group are often numerous and complex. Theoretically and schematically, he alone is responsible for addressing "prayers," offerings, and sacrifices to the divinity. In reality, however, African societies have often opted for specialists in the "priesthood": "prayers" and offerings are frequently the responsibility of an old man, while the performance of sacrifices is entrusted to an appointed sacrifice. (Zahn 1979:32)

The choice of an old man is not accidental because Africans cherish the experience of the old and respect their words. When a division of responsibility in the area of rituals is necessary, specialization is required. Zahan notes some of these specializations among the *Moaga* society of Burkina Faso.

At times we even find specialization with the "oratory" function of African "ministers" of worship. In a single society, some members are in charge of general spiritual relations between the divinity and the ancestors, while other insure the performance of "prayers" for rain and harvests, and still others preside at rites concerning the harvest and threshing of the crops. Thus in the *Moaga* society these three functions are performed respectively by the *kim soba*, the Chief of the earth, and the *bugo*. (Zahan 1979:32)

Examples of African Prayers

According to Aylward Shorter, "African prayers, like those of other cultures, begin with an invocation or entry that takes one of two basic forms: presentation or invitation. The worshipper may present himself, and his community, with such phrases as: 'we are here in your compound'" (Shorter 1975:20). Shorter also adds that "it is rare that a petitionary prayer does not contain an attitude of praise or confidence, perhaps even a promise or vow" (21). For example, "The attributes of God [His divine qualities] are expressed in 'praise names,' which are repeated and savoured like salutations to a great chief . . . *Olorun, Olodumare, Baba, Alaanu julo*: God, Almighty, Father, Most Merciful" (Parrinder 1969b:67). Another typical example is

this prayer . . . recorded at an annual *Apo* purification ceremony in Ashanti: "Sky God, upon whom men lean and do not fall, Goddess of the Earth, Creature that rules the underworld, Leopard that possessed the forest, Tano River, by your kindness the edges of the year have met. . . . Stand behind us with a good standing. Let no bad thing whatever overtake us. We give our children. We give our wives. We give ourselves into your hand, let no evil come upon us." (71)

It is interesting to note that of all the prayers I have read, I discovered only one that addresses the Supreme God as friend: "Friend, God, who is in this village, We tell you about this wound. We tell you about the fight of this lad. Let the wound heal. Let it be ransomed, as you are very great, for you are God of our home in very truth" (Shorter 1975:61, 21). Even in this prayer that addressed God as "Friend" the prayer setting and context implies more of his immanence than intimacy. The line, "God who is in this

village” is a reflection of John 1:14 where the Word [God] became flesh and tabernacled among us. This is amplified by the corporate possessive pronoun “our” in the last line: “you are God of our home.”

Biblical Concepts of Friendship

The word “friend” in all its forms (friend, friendly, friendship) appears in the Bible 58 times. Interestingly, it is only in 2 Chr 20:7 that a mortal is described as a friend of God. “O our God, did you not drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel and give it forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend?” A closer look at the intent of the usage by King Jehoshaphat suggests an allusion to the covenant of God with Abraham. The king was claiming the promise of protection from enemies enshrined in the covenant. Abraham himself never addressed God with the salutation, “My Friend.” In Jesus’ ministry he called his disciples “friends” but they never addressed him as such. The concept of friendship in the Bible therefore suggests more of God’s condescension and accommodation to make himself accessible to fallen human beings in order to bring them to himself. So in the biblical perspective friendship “expresses one of the highest ways in which salvation is given, received and lived” (Ssettuuma, 2010:65).

“God’s friendship for all human beings should be realized in the respect for the fullness of life which He gives to us in communion” (74). Ssettuuma therefore notes that “God’s friendship with human beings is not just an ideology. It is a love of benevolence realized through history by Jesus Christ who is the true Sacrament of God’s friendship to the world. St. Paul captures this reality when he states, ‘In sending His son among us, God has shown Himself a friend of human beings (Ti 3:4)’” (65). In essence, the salvific friendship of God should be understood in the context of the Great Controversy which involves the issue of loyalty for “friendship with the world is enmity against God” (Jas 4:4).

Old Testament Concepts of Prayer

Prayer in the Old Testament can take several forms. It is the primary means by which humans approach and connect with their Creator, seeking his will for their lives. Prayer can also take the form of sacrifices. This can be seen in the sacrifices of the patriarchs (Gen 8:20; 12:7-8; Job 1:5). Later on the continual burnt offerings of the Levitical system were also forms of prayer (Exod 29:42). Apart from the concrete forms of prayer, several Hebrew terms express the idea of prayer. The verb עָתַר “entreat” can be used to denote prayer. Isaac also “pleaded” with the Lord for the blessing of his wife’s womb, and the Lord answered him (Gen 25:21). This verb

is also used several times in Exod 8-10 by Pharaoh when he asked Moses to “entreat” the Lord to refrain from punishing Egypt with the plagues. Manoah’s prayer in Judg 13:8 is introduced by the same verb. Similarly, the hithpael form of תָּנַח “plea” or “make supplication” is used to refer to prayer (Ps 30:9; 142:2).

Solomon’s prayer of dedication in 1 Kgs 8 is also called “supplication” (vv. 33, 47, 59). The Lord is also said to have heard the supplication of Solomon (1 Kgs 9:3). Of the Hebrew terminologies used for prayer, the verb פָּלַל (“pray”) with its cognates is a more technical term depicting prayer or the act thereof. The verb has several shades of meaning, namely “intervene, interpose, pray, mediate” (BDB פָּלַל). In the hithpael, it basically means “pray” whether for oneself or on behalf of someone (Gen 20:7, 17; Num 21:7; Deut 9:20, 26; 1 Sam 12:23; 2 Sam 2:27; 1 Kgs 8:33; 2 Kgs 6:17; Jer 29:7; Dan 9:20). A number of prayers have been recorded in the Old Testament (1 Sam 2; 1 Kgs 8; Jonah 2:2). The noun form, תְּפִלָּה “prayer,” commonly appears in the Psalms (4:1; 6:9; 55:1; 143:1).

A cursory reading of the Old Testament examples of 32 prayers indicates that prayer is a mode of communication (Gen 32:9- 12; 1 Kgs 17:17-24; 3:4-15; 2 Kgs 20:2-3; 3; Ezra 9:6-15; Neh 1:5-11; 9:6-37; Dan 9:4-19; Jonah 4:2-3). The concept of prayer as a communication with a “friend” does not seem to be attested to in the Old Testament. A number of prayers are simply introduced by the verb “said.” Such an introduction of prayer resembles ordinary conversational dialogue between persons. Despite the similarity of the introductory statement, the human-divine conversation is clearly distinguished from the human-human conversations in that the human-divine conversation presents a theologically loaded address to God in which the human servant seeks or appreciates the divine intervention.

Unlike the human-human conversations, prayer recognizes the sovereignty of God, his blessings, abiding presence, mercy, forgiveness, ability to provide for human need, and his ability to save. In prayer, humans may praise and thank God (Ps 150), lament (Jer 9), or cry for divine justice against the enemy (Ps 137). When believers pray to God or make supplication to him, they often stand in need of divine intervention rather than seeking a chat with a friend. Through prayer individuals may pour out their requests to God who alone is able to intervene or they may invoke the promises of God to protect and defend his people. In some critical situations, fasting is often associated with prayer and supplication (Neh 1:4; 9:1; 35:13; Ps 109:24; Dan 9:3). Some prayers also include the confession of individual (Ps 32, 51) or corporate sins (Dan 9). Although some prayers appear to be informal, most prayers in the Old Testament are offered in view of the awesomeness and majesty of God.

New Testament Concepts of Prayer

The New Testament teaching about prayer is explicit. It is seen in the life and teaching of Christ Jesus as presented by the Gospel writers and also in the writings of Paul. As observed by Felix Just, “There is no single word in biblical Hebrew or Greek that signifies ‘prayer’ in general, but rather a whole series of different words with related meanings, such as praise, give thanks, confess, bless, repent, ask, plea, beg, petition, sacrifice, bow down, worship, sing psalms, etc.” (2013).

Greek	English	Matt	Mark	Luke	John	Acts	Paul	Heb	Cath	Rev	NT Total
προσεύχομαι	to pray, speak to God	15	10	19	0	16	19	1	5	0	85
προσευχή	prayer, request	2	2	3	0	9	14	0	3	3	36
εὔχομαι	to pray, make a vow	0	0	0	0	2	3	0	2	0	7
εὐχή	prayer, vow	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	1	0	3
δέομαι	to ask, beg, plead	1	0	8	0	7	6	0	0	0	22
δέησις	prayer, plea, petition	0	0	3	0	0	12	1	2	0	18
δοξάζω	to praise, give glory	4	1	9	23	5	12	1	4	2	61
εὐλογέω	to bless	5	5	13	1	1	7	7	2	0	41
εὐλογητός	Blessed	0	1	1	0	0	5	0	1	0	8
εὐχαριστέω	to give thanks	2	2	4	3	2	24	0	0	1	38
εὐχαριστία	Thanksgiving	0	0	0	0	1	12	0	0	2	15
προσκυνέω	to bow down, worship	13	2	3	11	4	1	2	0	24	60
ᾄδω & ᾠδῆ	to sing / song	0	0	0	0	0	2/2	0	0	3/5	5+7
ὑμνέω & ὑμνός	to sing hymns / hymn	1/0	1/0	0	0	1/0	0/2	1/0	0	0	4+2
ψάλλω & ψαλμός	to sing psalms / psalm	0	0	0/2	0	0/2	4/3	0	1/0	0	5+7
ἐπαιτέω & προσαιτέω	to beg	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	2+1

In all these presentations of prayer there is nowhere that the earthly understanding of friendship is intimated. All the words demonstrate the finite nature of humanity as they stand before the infinite awesomeness of God. The words suggest prayer as “a disciplined communion (Matt 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4) or watchful communion with the Lord (Matt 26:41; Luke 18:1; 1 Thess 5:16-24), the struggle of the soul (Rom 8:26, 27), the mind seeking God’s mind (Jas 1:5-8), intercession (Jas 5:13-16), and petition to God (Matt 7:11; John 14:13-14)” (Stafford 1996:411-426).

Missiological Implication

The African understanding of friendship with God teaches that though God condescends to accommodate humanity, his immanence should not be taken for granted. Approaching God in any form or at any time, especially in the temple precincts, should be done in reverence and humility. It is important to remember that he is omnipresent. This understanding should inform the Christian witness on how to communicate with God, whether privately or corporately. It should also inform the way Christians relate to those who have specialized in communicating with God.

Like the African our friendship with God must be covenantal. It must be a relationship “so great” because it is sealed with an *Omukago* (blood pact) of Jesus’ blood.

Another implication for some Christians is that charismatics do not allow prayer to become a play thing. They seem to follow the ATR spiritual hierarchy that places God at the top as the transcendent (Creator) yet immanent (Redeemer), the priests and church leaders are next, followed by the members. Members hold their pastors or spiritual leaders in high esteem and serve them as kings. They do not allow them to do menial jobs when they are present. One charismatic remarked when she heard about a Seventh-day Adventist pastor who had to do security work to make ends meet in a foreign country: *Ebenadze ntsi na Osofo no ho kyere no?* (Why should the pastor suffer want?) She was surprised because that would not happen to any pastor of any well-established charismatic church. Further, they believe implicitly in their leaders’ pronouncements, for they are taken as *oracles* to be obeyed without question. In one church a businessman gave his one and only C-class Mercedes Benz to the pastor at the latter’s request and took a taxi home. Another, a graduate, when he was told his new car was demon infested, gave his car to his pastor to be cleansed of evil spirits and for a whole year the pastor used the car.

These illustrations show how some African’s spiritual relationship with God can be taken to the extreme, but there is much to learn from these stories on how to use the African’s understanding of their relationship with God to effectively reach them.

Conclusion

Friendship indicates intimacy. Among humans it is mostly casual and a mutual revealing of a symbiotic relationship with ramifications in the socio-economic and political spheres of life. With God it exhibits more of the suzerainty covenantal type of relationship where a mortal connects his/her limitation to the infinite provisions of God. The biblical understanding of prayer projects this concept. In this friendship the condescension of God is not taken for granted but is reverently recognized, ritually maintained,

and meticulously and carefully guarded. Such an understanding is seen in the African friendship with the Creator God and displayed in their kingship structures and in the way deities are approached in prayer.

The growth of Christianity in Africa can be traced to evangelical methods that employed the relationship concept that is in tandem with the African traditional understanding of friendship with a deity. Missionaries and Christian workers who intend to reach the heart of the African must of necessity explain this sacred relationship with God in word and especially in deed. Prayer time must be awe inspiring, indicating that the presence of someone more than an earthly king, the Creator God himself, is being invoked.

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