

AS IT IS IN HEAVEN MIMETIC THEORY, RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATION AND SOCIAL CRISIS IN AFRICA*

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Abstract

This paper is an overview of Rene Girard's mimetic theory and its application to and implications for conflict in Africa. It accepts Girard's basic idea that imitation is a feature of all individuals but disagrees with his view that the Christian gospel can adequately eliminate mimetic rivalry and thereby lead to a non-sacrificial culture. Drawing from the concept of culture and the African experience of Christianity, it argues that the Christian influence in Africa has only produce a hybrid culture which draws heavily from the traditional culture. Thus, instead of demythologizing the culture, the gospel has actually introduces new myths into the African setting, which generate a new type of mimetic crisis that traditional forms of intervention are incapable of ameliorating. It argues that the Christian gospel as the precursor of the new myths cannot, in its current form, diffuse the crisis. The paper suggests a re-engineering of the gospel to cater for this new reality and thus diffuse the crisis.

INTRODUCTION

The social situation in Africa has been very turbulent in the past century. There have been civil strife resulting first from colonial pacification, then the birth pangs of independence, followed by several rebellions and other forms of civil unrest. It is such states of perpetual crisis in society that Girard and other theorists seek to explain and in this paper I will be looking at how Girard's explanation applies to the African crisis. Girard's theory of mimetic rivalry is unique in the sense that it originates from desire, which is a basic human feeling. It is this mimetic desire that gives rise to mimetic rivalry and is ultimately

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responsible for the mimetic crisis that engulfs the whole society. Girard's view is that the resolution of such crisis usually requires a scapegoat and has employed some literary and historical events for examples of such sacrificial scapegoats. In a bid to remove the phenomenon of scapegoating from the human psychic, Girard suggests a grand imitation, the imitation of Christ, as one that will end all sacrificial violence.

Girard's theory has been used variously to explain historical events as well as literary plots and in most cases such explanations have shown an uncanny ability to unearth hidden suggestions and subtle relationships. I cannot pretend to be attempting such a grandiose project in this paper, rather I intend to evaluate Girard's basic postulate and how they apply to Africa. First, I argue, following Girard that mimetic rivalry is a common feature of the African social environment. I also argue that much of the social crisis that we now witness within the African continent could be understood as originating from mimesis; to thus corroborating Girard's position. My major departure from his positions centres around Girard's claim that the gospel can guarantee a radical demythification of the culture and can thereby eliminates every form of vengeance and reprisal in the relation between men. My initial argument against this position is theoretical and draws from the resilience of culture in the face of social change. I argue that since mimesis and its accompanying crisis is an aspect of culture and culture cannot be destroyed, it follows that the culture of mimesis and the resultant scapegoating can only be mediated and not completely eliminated by any process or intervention. I also argue that the gospel cannot be relied upon to dispense with mimetic rivalry and its accompanying crisis because mimetic rivalry is an aspect of culture and since culture

cannot be completely destroyed, all that we can hope for is a hybrid culture which will still include some elements of mimesis and the resultant sacrificial culture. Also, drawing from the African experience of Christianity, I argue that the African experience of Christianity and its message contributes as much to the current social crisis as other major social influences and that since we cannot isolate the gospel from this experience, a non-sacrificial reading of the gospel, within the African context, can only be utopian. Rather than contribute to demythification, I argue that the gospel generates its own myths and that by their nature these myths tend to subvert the foundation of society and undermine the basis for social cohesion. Thus rather than be a panacea for the crisis in Africa, the gospel actually contributes to the crisis.

MIMETIC DESIRE IN AFRICA

Girard does not give mimetic rivalry in Africa the depth of treatment that he gives to the rivalries in the West. The African novel does not feature in his examples neither does he make reference to any real events in Africa. For him, Africa represents the reservoir of archaic societies to which references can be made concerning archaic laws(Girard 2001:12) and other social practices that are only attributable to primitive societies. Africa thus becomes the world's attic where Girard rummages for evidence of foundational violence that will support the universality of the scapegoating phenomenon. This neglect of mimesis in Africa, however, does not invalidate his basic assertions about mimetic desire and scapegoating and African literature is replete with examples of this. Ngugi wa Thiongo for instance, presents such a rivalry in *The River Between*(Ngugi 1965), in which he portrays both Waiyaki and Kabonyi as locked in such a contest, the price of

which is leadership of the tribe which is now made up of Christians and non-Christians. Kabonyi, as one of the Christian converts could not aspire to leadership because being a Christian involves abandoning the ways of the tribe. His Christian faith, however, does not suppress his desire especially when he observes the popularity of Waiyaki and his efforts to unite the tribe. His desire to supplant Waiyaki is heightened by the prophecy that a saviour will come to save the tribe and he is afraid that Waiyaki and not him could be the prophesied messiah. In an imitation of the leadership of Waiyaki, Kabonyi withdraws from the group of converts to form the council of elders through which he could aspire to lead the tribe. In classic Girardian style, Waiyaki thus becomes both his model and the obstacle to his leadership. Their rivalry turns into a sacrificial crisis as the colonial authorities introduced the hated *hut tax*, and the rift grows between those who favour traditional initiation ceremonies and others who favour Christian revival meetings. A point is reached in the rivalry between the two where the leadership and welfare of the tribe becomes secondary to their desire to destroy one another. As it is typical of mimetic rivalry, the crisis is resolved when Waiyaki is singled out as the scapegoat and expelled from the tribe.

Also in *The Voice*, Gabriel Okara (1970) lays out a vivid and compelling image of a scapegoat marked out for persecution because of his “knowing too much book”, “walking too much in the bush” and “staying too long alone by the river”. These eccentric characteristics which in an educated society would have been commonplace but which in an illiterate society is little else but bizarre mark Okolo out from the rest of society and generate suspicions that lead to what Girard would refer to as a ‘distortion of

persecution'. This is mirrored in the views of the villagers who regarded Okolo as a man who "had no chest", 'His chest was not strong', and even more ridiculous, that "he had no shadow". Perhaps these attributes in themselves would not have marked him out for persecution if he were not perceived to be attacking the very foundation of social order by searching for *it*¹. His search for *it* pitches him against the elders but more specifically against Chief Izongo, the head of the village, whose position is directly threatened by Okolo's search. This is because getting people to agree with him concerning the need for *it* would eclipse Chief Izongo's position as the leader of opinion in the community. A crisis engulfs the community as the two protagonists struggle with one another for power. As it is normal in such situations, elders and other members of the community become drawn in thus widening its scope and creating the atmosphere of a crisis. There is a temporary respite and great rejoicing as Okolo is banished from the community. The village folk even celebrate the anniversary of his banishment, a move towards sacralisation and divinisation. But the trials that surround Okolo's sojourn in the city forces him to return to the village, even though he knows that he will face almost certain death. His reappearance not only returns the community to its initial state of crisis but leads to such escalation of the crisis as the elders disagreeing among themselves. Okolo's status as a scapegoat is re-enacted as Chief Izongo blames all the problems of the community on him. The crisis is resolved when Okolo along with Tuere, his main supporter, are tied to a boat and left adrift in the river where they are sucked into a whirlpool and drowned.

¹ Although Okara does not say what *it* means, some commentators regard this as 'the essence of life.'

The scapegoating mechanism and its importance in diffusing crisis in African societies is aptly illustrated by Soyinka in his play, *Jero's Metamorphosis*. While resolving a crisis between the warring beachfront prophets in the play he enjoins the prophets that “in times of trouble it behoves us to come together, to forget old enmities and bury the hatchet in the head of the common enemy.” (Soyinka 1978:47) The idea of people coming together to ‘burying the hatchet’ is a common everyday notion. But the suggestion that it should be buried in the ‘head of the common enemy’ is a special twist, which Soyinka introduces to illustrate the importance of a scapegoat in resolving a crisis. Soyinka firmly identifies mimetic desire as the basis of the crisis by showing that all the characters involved are prophets angling for a piece of the beachfront and trying to undo one another in attracting ‘customers’ The rivalry between them is evident in the confrontation between Prophet Jeroboam and his erstwhile master. From the confrontation, the beach prophets are always trying to supplant one another in terms of influence and following and it is the resulting mimetic crisis is what the meeting of the prophets is called to resolve. The coming together of the prophets represents a communal ritual of cleansing where an innocent victim, the government agent, is identified for the sacrifice. The identity of the victim vividly illustrates the arbitrariness in the choice of victim since it is clear that the government agent is merely implementing a policy. Again, Soyinka’s suggestion that the hatchet be buried in the head makes the sacrifice absolute and final.

Mimetic desire has also been played out in the real life of Africans and this is especially evident as political office holders jostle for power and positions. Jean Bendel Bokkassa, for instance elects Napoleon Bonaparte as his mediator and thus sets out to organise his

rule of the Central African Republic in the manner of Napoleon's rule of France. He organises his coronation to replicate the coronation of Napoleon and changes the name of the country to Central African Empire to suit his adopted status. The model in this case is external and thus does not elicit a mimetic rivalry. But the same cannot be said of the palace coups by different military officers in African states. A case in point is the rivalry between the two Nigerian military dictators, Ibrahim Babangida and Sanni Abacha. Both entered and progressed in the Nigerian Army through political patrimony and concordat nepotism in the game of musical chairs that defined military rule in Nigeria. Their common origin and meteoric rise into the ruling army elite within the Nigerian state placed them on the same plane, which, as Girard suggests, is necessary for mimetic rivalry. When Babangida made himself a military president, he achieved something, which in view of their humble beginnings was nothing short of miraculous. Babangida thus became a model for Abacha's desire and later when he refused to vacate the presidency became the obstacle to his ascendancy. The rivalry between the two boiled over in the last days of the Babangida regime when Abacha became the hidden hand in the "June 12" election crisis. As the crisis engulfs the whole country, Babangida is identified as the scapegoat as all the problems of the country are heaped upon him. His eventual 'stepping aside' from the presidential office could be regarded and the sacrifice of expelling which in Girard's theory signals and end to the crisis.

The above examples show that mimetic rivalry and the ensuing crisis are alive and well in Africa. Not only is this reflected in the literary traditions of Africa but is often played out in real life both at national and local levels, often with disastrous consequences.

Mimetic rivalry in Africa also acquits Girard's distinction between external and internal mediators even though the net effect of such rivalry has always been the same for Africans. For instance, the effects of Bokkassa's mimesis of Napoleon or of Félix Houphouët-Boigny's mimesis of Emperor Constantine have been no different from the mimetic rivalry between Augustino Neto and Jonas Savimbi or between Abacha and Babangida. The net effect of these rivalries has always been the impoverishment of the citizenry even in external mimesis where the potential for conflict and loss of life is less (though not completely absent). Girard's view that society chooses a scapegoat as a sacrifice that will end mimetic crisis also appears to be borne out both in literature and in real life. The sacrifice of the scapegoat always seems to resolve a crisis – that is, until a new crisis arises out of its ashes. This is why it is strange for Girard to suggest that we can have a world without scapegoats and that a mere non-sacrificial reading of the gospel can overturn a deeply entrenched culture.

Culture and the African Experience of Christianity

Christianity has been very successful in Africa especially in terms of the number of people that flock to Christian congregations. Africans represent a sizable chunk of the world's Catholics and their numbers have been known to decisively sway the opinion of the Anglican synod on such issues as priestly homosexuality. The reason for this is obvious. Africans are and have always been very religious and for them religion is not merely an aspect of life but permeates the whole of their existence such that it is difficult to make a distinction between purely secular and purely religious ritual. As Brathwaite

(1974:71) observes, “a study of the African culture reveals that it is based upon religion ... that, in fact, it is within the religious framework that the entire culture resides.

This avid religiosity is one of the enduring cultural traits that have survived the transition from traditional to modern Africa and can be said to be the single most important element in the success of Christianity in Africa. But Christianity and the Christian experience is not the same in Africa as Christianity and the Christian experience anywhere else. This is because of the intricate interplay of history and culture that underlie the African experience of Christianity. This interplay makes it impossible to appreciate the African experience of Christianity without a prior understanding of the kaleidoscope mix (that is the African culture) and the history of Christianity in Africa. This is to say that the message of the gospel cannot be divorced from the vehicle of the message neither can one disregard the cultural antecedents of the people to whom the gospel is delivered when surveying its impact. In the light of this, it would be reasonable to expect that the perception of gospel in Africa would be different from the perception of the gospel elsewhere and there could never be a homogeneous reaction to the message of the gospel. It would also be reasonable to expect that history and culture will not only affect people’s perception of Christianity but also the impact of the gospel and its capacity to function in mitigating a mimetic crisis within the environment.

Culture is sometimes defined as “learned, adaptable symbolic behaviour, based on a full fledged language, associated with technical inventiveness, a complex of skills that in turn depends on a capacity to organize exchange relationships between communities”(Kuper 1994:90). The concept of culture as a learned behaviour portrays it as something

persistent, sustainable and stable. By this definition, culture is descriptive in the sense that it gives a holistic picture of a people and emphasises on those aspects of their lives that set them apart from others. But culture is not only descriptive but also prescriptive in the sense that a people's heritage normally dictates behaviour, controls the ideas that may be entertained and generally specifies the epistemic direction of a society. It is this prescriptive view of culture that is captured by Montague (1961:20) when he says, "Man experiences everything in the light of his culture which stamps and moulds his experiences by generating the conceptions which informs him when he perceives the world and himself or his fellow man.

But culture does not only have the capacity to persist but also has the capacity to change and mutate in line with external influences and its internal dynamics. The dynamic of culture and its characteristic persistence makes it inevitable that aspects of the existing culture should persist through cultural change and when new influences impact upon the culture. This makes it inevitable that different people should receive the Christian faith differently and in doing so add local colour to Christianity. It is obvious that the distinctions that now exist between Orthodox Christians, Catholics, Protestants, Pentecostals, and more recently African Independent churches, are as a result of various cultural influences on Christianity.

In Africa, Christianity has been profoundly influenced by the traditional culture and this is evident not only in the local content that has been introduced into Christianity but also in the number of Christian churches that have a predominantly African orientation. But it would be untrue to assume that it is only the traditional African culture that has affected

Christianity in Africa This is because in the past decade, Africa has not only had to deal with the Christian influence but also with Islamic, colonial and ideological influences. More recently Africa has been influenced by the American consumerist culture as well as various Eastern and Oriental cultures. Africa thus becomes the new melting pot of cultures with the Christian experience as only a part of this concocted brew. It is from this background that the African understands the message of the gospel and it is from this background that we approach Girard's theory concerning the imitation of Christ and the end of the sacrificial culture. Thus the imitation of Christ within the African context, cannot be a pure imitation. Indeed one can argue that there could never be a pure imitation of Christ by any group within any context, since the context always contributes something to the imitation.

Although Africa has come under a variety of influences in the past, none of these influences has been more profound and pervading as the colonial influence. An unfortunate aspect of the colonial influence has been the bastardisation of the African mind. Under colonial mentorship and the slave economy that predated it, Africans bought into the idea that everything about their traditions and culture were either bad or inferior and that adopting the colonialist's culture was the best way to achieve development. The French for instance consolidated this belief with their policy of *assimilation*, which was designed to turn French African colonies into overseas provinces of France and its inhabitants into overseas Frenchmen. The British cultivated the same belief but did not adopt the same policy because they had no intention of spending the British taxpayer's money to develop its overseas territories. The net result of these Euro-centric policies and

practices have been the growth of the culture of difference, which in this case involves the distinction between what is aligned to the western culture and is therefore good and what is not aligned to that culture and is bad. This perception was further reinforced in the post independence era by such developmental theories as *modernisation*, and by modernisation here is meant “a total transformation of traditional or pre-modern society into the type of technology and associated social organisation that characterises the advanced, economically prosperous, and relatively politically stable nations of the western world” (Wilbert Moore, Quoted in Macpherson 1982:24). Thus, a mindset was created whereby all forms of development, including Christian development, was measured in terms of western ideals even when, in some cases, the faith in such ideals was misplaced.

Girard’s Final Solution

Girard’s final solution to mimetic rivalry, scapegoating and allied practices such as mythic crystallisation, sacralisation and divinisation lies in biblical revelation (in both the old and new testaments). He contends that this revelation exposes the sacred violence as the collective murder of the innocent by narrating the story from the point of view of the victim. Using the biblical stories of Cain and Abel, Moses, Joseph, Job and of course Jesus, Girard demonstrates how the biblical revelation demythologise the culture by presenting the scapegoat as ordinary human victims of collective violence. This vindication of the innocent removes the need for a sacrificial culture by exposing the destructive power of mimetic desire. He portrays the gospel as stressing that

reconciliation with God as well as harmonious relationship between human beings can take place without a sacrificial intermediary.

Girard's non-sacrificial interpretation of the bible appears to compartmentalise mimetic rivalry in the bible and treat each instance of mimetic rivalry in isolation. A closer look at these isolated cases, suggest that they may be symptomatic of a more profound rivalry, which summarises the entire biblical revelation. The mimetic rivalries evident in Girard's reading of the Exodus, the stories of Cain and Abel, Joseph and other biblical stories referred to by him appear to be aspects of the monumental rivalry which in traditional African culture represents the struggle between the forces of good and evil as represented in Christianity by God and Satan. This view of mimetic rivalry within the gospel accounts, does not only apply to the stories referred to by Girard but to other biblical stories such as Adam and Eve, David and Saul, Saul and the early Christians, etc. If we accept Girard's view that "like Jesus, Satan seeks to have others imitate him"(2001:32), and his view of Satan as "the source not merely of rivalry and disorder but of all forms of lying order inside which humanity lives", it becomes clear that the battle is not between the isolated figures referred to by Girard. Instead, it is a battle between the two powerful adversaries, God and Satan, for the minds of men.

It could be argued that the notion of an epic rivalry between God and Satan is incompatible with Girard's interpretation of the Bible, especially since Girard does not consider Satan as having a 'personal being'.² Indeed Girard (2001:44) contends "the

² I thank Wolfgang Palavar of the University of Innsbruck for drawing my attention to this reading of Girard.

mimetic concept of Satan enables the New Testament to give evil its due without granting it any reality or ontological substance in its own right that would make of Satan a kind of god of evil.” Satan by this reading is a collective force of human being not humbly following Jesus but try to become like gods themselves. This reading, however, is difficult to reconcile with Girard’s consistent personification of Satan and the relationship that he establishes between Satan on the one hand, and Christ and God on the other. His characterisation of Satan is no different from his characterisation of God and this makes his refusal to accord Satan some ontological status very strange. If Satan were merely a collective force of evil, God would by the same token be a collective force for good because one cannot make a distinction in the ontological status of both beings without running the risk of sounding like an apologist of God. In other words, it is only within the framework of faith that one can stipulate as Girard does, that God has an ontological status and Satan has none. There is no rational basis for distinguishing the ontological status of either being from the other. If we characterise Satan as a collective force of humans not humbly following Jesus, we could equally characterise God as a collective force of humans humbly following Jesus. By this reading, both God and Satan would be abstract entities and we could still attempt a holistic interpretation of rivalries in the bible without absurdity.

From a holistic standpoint, the biblical account of events from the point of view of the victim represents a triumph of good over evil and of God over Satan. Upon this view, the scriptures still possess a “formidable constraining influence” (Girard 1987:138) in the sense that it portrays the ultimate triumph of good over evil. Where there are isolated

victories of evil over good, such as is evident in the story of Cain, they are portrayed as temporary and subject to his idea that “the culture born of violence must return to violence” (Girard 1987:148) This formidable constraining influence of the scriptures continues in the gospels where Girard’s portrayal of Christ as an innocent victim of sacrificial violence is also a temporary triumph of evil over good. To this end one could argue that the travails of the Jews since the persecution of Christ could be seen as confirming the above view concerning the culture born of violence. Thus the scriptures help in ensuring the establishment or reestablishment of social order by subverting the redeeming qualities of sacrificial violence through ensuring the ultimate triumph of each innocent victim of such violence.

This reading of the gospel while acknowledging ultimately the theoretical possibility of a world without scapegoats, does not accept that this as practicable outside the heavenly utopia. The reason for this is that even if we collectively imitate Christ, there is no guarantee that everyone will imitate him in exactly the same way and for the same reasons. The reasons for this are obvious, first, the fountain of mimetic desire and supreme mediator of all desires is God and as Girard observes, “Satan imitates the same model as Jesus, God himself, but in the spirit of arrogance and rivalry for power” (Girard 2001:44). What this shows is that two imitators of the same model can turn out to be the exact opposites of one another. If this can happen in a first order the imitation of God, there is no reason to assume that it cannot happen in a second order imitation of Christ. Also, with Satan running loose as an *accuser* and *adversary* there is no guarantee that even a well-intentioned imitation of Christ will come out successfully. Upon this

interpretation, Girard's vision of a world completely free of sacrificial crisis and its attendant ills appears to be strictly utopian.

Girard's *mimetic interpretation of history* portrays society as originating from a sacrificial culture and progressing through the persecution stage, where sacralisation is absent, towards the stage of "radical demythification" where there is "complete and definitive elimination of every form of vengeance and every form of reprisal in the relation between men" (Girard 1987:195) He contends that we can bring about the kingdom of God by merely "bringing together the warring brothers and putting an end to the mimetic crisis by a universal renunciation of violence" (Girard 1987:195). But like the Marxian materialist interpretation of history before it, this progression has neither been borne out in some of his examples nor has it been acquitted by history. His discussion of the Venda myth (Girard 2002) violates this progression because, presumably, Venda is one of the archaic societies that belong to the mythologizing stage and is thereby shielded from the impact of biblical revelation. Despite this, neither his version of the story nor the original version by Luc de Heusch reports the deification of the sacrificial victim. This non-deification would seem to suggest that the Venda society has moved away from the mythologizing stage without the benefit of the gospel.

Again despite two centuries of the gospel in the West, the world is neither closer to the renunciation of violence nor to the end of its frantic search for scapegoats and sacrificial victims. For instance, there is always some warlord, terrorist, war criminal or rouge government, which from time to time is collectively identified as the world's scapegoat

whether the crisis is political, economic or even climatic. In all this, the influence of the gospel appears to be weaning rather than mounting. The multiplication and magnification of sacrificial crisis in recent times do not reflect the two thousand years of gospel influence on western culture neither do they suggest any future radical demythification of the western culture. Given the above, there is no reason to believe that the progression of western societies from the mythologizing stage to the persecution stage may have benefited from biblical influence and that their relationship is not merely coincidental. Thus Girard's *mimetic interpretation of history* like the Marxian interpretation of history before it appears to be uncorroborated in reality.

Whether we accept the alternative interpretation of the bible as an epic detailing the rivalry between good and evil (God and Satan) or Girard's non-sacrificial reading, there is no escaping the conclusion that human beings are pawns in the crisis within divinity. Girard's view of Satan as "an imitator in the rivalistic sense of the word"(Girard 2001:45) and his contention that "like Jesus, Satan seeks to have others imitate him," portrays humans as mere victims in the mimetic rivalry between God/Jesus and Satan. This explanation becomes more tenable given the "extraordinary powers" of Satan and its abilities as an *accuser*, a *seducer*, an *adversary* and an *expeller of self*. Since Girard does not portray human beings as having comparable powers, they cannot be expected to stand up to Satan. What the bible inadvertently does is to portray human beings as surrogate scapegoats of a divine crisis and this exonerates them from the consequences of their actions. The story of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Joseph, Job, John the Baptist, and even Peter in his denial of Christ portray human beings as innocent victims of this eternal

struggle. In the case of Job for instance, God even enters into dialogue with the devil concerning his persecution. Thus unlike in Guillaume de Machaut's *Judgement of the King of Navarre* that Girard discusses, where the divine inspiration for the persecution of the Jews are fabrications and distortions, the divine origin of the trials of Job is as real as the fabrications and distortions by the crowd.

The existence and status of Satan also creates a fatalistic environment that is confirmed and affirmed by the gospel. Adam and Eve were powerless against the deceiver whose existence they had never been warned. Cain could not help but kill his brother because he was conceived in sin and born into iniquity. Peter, despite being the pillar on which the church is to be built, could not help himself in denying Christ because it had been so decreed by Christ. The travails of Joseph and the sin of his brothers are all part of the grand plan of God and nothing they could have done would have changed this. The pestilence in Egypt and the destruction of Pharaoh's army at the red sea are all part of God's plan as he is the one who 'hardened' Pharaoh's resolve. The story of Job shows that even a good man cannot escape this blanket fatalism and purpose of God. The Canites could not help being born into the sins of their father and by this sin had been earmarked for destruction, even before they were born. This destruction is even extended to innocent animals, reptiles and birds of the air. Here lies the origin of the American concept of 'collateral damage'. If God cannot avoid collateral damage why should the Americans or even the Africans in their bush wars? This portrayal of man as manipulated by fate has important implications for social harmony in Africa.

The Gospel and Society in Africa.

In the traditional religions of Africa, God is all-powerful and does not admit of an opposing power. Due to his power, God does not relate directly with people but rather through a number of spirits and mediums that punish or reward individuals according to their deeds. According to Godfrey Wilson (1960:348),

If a man is mean, inhospitable, quarrelsome, rude, sullen, disloyal, disrespectful to elders and careless of unfortunates beyond a certain point, then frequently he is believed to be punished by ancestors, witchcraft, or magic. ...The specifically religious or moral sanctions of custom are believed to be punishments. These sanctions are actual misfortunes interpreted by the light of faith as the effects of sin; a sin being the breach of a rule of morality.

Under this regime, the message from God is simple. All transgressions will be punished swiftly and brutally. Thus “indigenous religion is a powerful sanction for moral control” and “the well-being and prosperity of the living depends on the continuous goodwill of the dead”(Hammond-Tooke 1962:262) Africans had always been conscious of this responsibility until the advent of Christianity and its strange doctrine that exonerates man of responsibility for his actions. The Christian God though all-powerful, admits of opposition from Satan. He does not punish but allows all to grow together until an indeterminable day of harvest. The Christian ancestors have no powers of sanction and seem completely oblivious of the transgressions of their people. John Paul II and Mother Theresa may have been outspoken against injustice in their lifetime, but once the Catholic Church declares them as ancestors, they will remain docile and unconcerned about the affairs of humanity.

The difference in the traditional and Christian religious conceptions of both God and the ancestors leaves the African perplexed and confused. He comes into Christianity with the idea of a powerful God who is indifferent to the affairs of men but meets a Christian God who though powerful is involved in a mimetic struggle with Satan and thus leaves issues of human morality until judgment day. He comes to Christianity expecting powerful ancestors that assume the disciplinary functions of God only to meet ancestors whose presence are restricted to engravings on cheap medallions that are handed out free after mass. Under this new regime, transgressions are not punished except by fines and jail terms, which a smart lawyer can quickly overturn. One is free to covert the house, wife, female or male slave, ox, ass and everything that belongs to other people, so long as such people are not their neighbours. Even when one makes the mistake and covert the things of his neighbour, one will not answer for it until at some indeterminable date in the after life when he will face a benevolent God in judgment. In all this the African is incapable of rejecting the strange and unwholesome tenets of Christianity because of the mindset nurtured by colonialism and Euro-centric believes about the African past. Thus, as it flourishes in Africa, Christianity generates new myths that contribute to the weakening of the foundations of society and sets it up for an unending crisis.

Christianity and the New Myth

Girard in his interview with Philippe Muray, contends that the bible “is not a text to be dissected with modern critical tools but is itself a scalpel which cuts through the misconceptions of la vieille modernité (old modernity) to get to the fundamental truths of humanity”(Golsan 1993:85) What Girard is advocating is an uncritical acceptance of the

bible. The same view, which was peddled by early Christian missionaries in Africa, continues to be promoted by Christian organisations despite the bewildering nature of the Christian message. Such bewilderment is captured by Okot P' Bitek (1967:87) about the biblical story of creation.

When Skyland was not yet there
And Earth was not yet moulded
Nor the Stars
Nor the Moon
When there was nothing,
Where did the Hunchback³ live?

Where did the Hunchback
Dig the clay for moulding things?
The clay for moulding Skyland
The clay for Moulding Earth
The clay for moulding the Stars
Where is the spot
Where it was dug?
On the mouth of which river?

The requirement that the gospel be accepted uncritically has led to an interpretation of the scriptures in ways that generate new myths, which, though slightly different from the Girardian myth have the same effect of generating a new culture of violence. The first of these myths is the myth of difference. With its distinction between Jews and gentiles, believers and unbelievers, the gospel becomes the basis of social differentiation thus defining the in-group from the out-group within once homogeneous communities. The best example of this is Lesotho, a small country with a common people, language, culture and history but which is now divided into two by political parties that are affiliated to the Catholic and Lesotho Evangelical churches. The two parties have no ideological differences; neither do they present radically different political programmes. Their denominational affiliation is thus only major source of differentiation and the crisis of

³ Jesus Christ (See Biteks book for an explanation for this reference)

1998 in which the city of Maseru was completely burnt shows the depth of resentment emanating from this difference. This scenario is played out at various corners of Africa between Christian denominations, or between Christians and Moslems or Christians and traditional worshipers. In the ensuing melee, whatever Christian virtue should have distinguished one group from the other is lost as each group tries to inflict a proportionally greater amount of violence upon the other. A mimetic rivalry ensues in which lives are lost and whole communities are impoverished. Ngugi's portrayal of the rift between Makuyu and Kameno (1965) illustrates a mimetic crisis that arises from such a myth of differentiation and shows the crisis as assuming a life of its own since traditional ways of ameliorating the crisis are no longer effective.

The second myth of the gospel is the unilateralist myth, which gradually erodes the culture of consensus for which Africa has been noted (see Wiredu 1995). It starts with the act of creation where God, without consulting with his lieutenants makes heaven and earth and everything that is in it. His attempt at consensus (let us make man in our own image) comes too little too late as he becomes a model for Lucifer who also treads the unilateralist path in his revolt against heaven. This myth is celebrated in Noah, Abraham, Moses, and many other powerful figures of the Old Testament. The New Testament celebrates this myth in the ministry of Christ, especially in his violence against the moneylenders at the temple. Unilateralist tendencies are also encouraged by the example of the apostles and actively entreated in the several epistles of Paul. This tendency continued with the missionaries who encouraged their converts to break communal taboos, desecrate communal shrines and disobey communal authority. Okara portrays the

effect of this consistent encouragement of unilateral action in the unilateral determination of Okolo to find *it*, despite opposition from the community. Ngugi also illustrates the crisis potential of such unilateralist tendencies as he shows Joshua sowing the seeds of discord in the community with his single-minded pursuit of the Christian ideal. The real life consequences of this myth has been the breakdown of the culture of consensus and this has resulted in individuals pursuing their own agenda, even when such an agenda endangers the existence of whole communities.

The Third myth of the gospel is the myth of the absence of consequences, which has eroded the traditional belief in a swift and brutal retributive punishment by the ancestors for transgressions against individuals or the community. The foundation for this myth is laid in the crisis in heaven where Satan's punishment for his rebellion is to be released from the ascetic life of heaven to sample the fleshpots of sin and experiment with variations of iniquity. The attempt to mediate this myth with a retributionist regime in the Old Testament is thwarted by the grace regime of the New Testament. Earthly transgressions are no longer visited by earthly retributions but are reserved for a distant afterlife, which in the cutthroat competitive environment of the free market appears so unreal. The New Testament also pursues a decadent theology that encourages the belief that a lifetime of crime can be wiped clean by a few pleasantries, such as was uttered by the thief on the cross. By this theology, a person's salvation does not depend on his good works but is by grace; in fact our virtuous deeds are like "filthy rags" before God. Given this, the idea of working for salvation becomes superfluous and the lucre of sin appears less damning since "He is always faithful and just to forgive."

Conclusion

It is evident from the above that the legacy of the gospel in Africa has been profoundly subversive of social harmony. The abdication by Christian ancestors of the policing functions of ancestors of traditional religion leaves the society unprotected from the unwieldy desires of people. The suggestion in the gospel that man is actually a surrogate scapegoat and the attendant suggestion of fatalism encourages incontinent action and fuels mimetic competition especially in the struggle for political power. The notion that all authority comes from God, including the despotic and corrupt authority that has become the hallmark of some African politics gives encouragement to rebel leaders who cannot see why the God invests authority on such despicable leaders cannot invest them with the same authority. The unilateralist myth supports the actions of a few against the whole society in so far as they have access to the instruments of violence that can enable them impose their will on the populace. The myth of the absence of consequences supports the “pawn” concept of human beings and encourages the lack of feeling of responsibility. All of this, coupled with the structural problem of Girard’s theory tarnishes the gospel and renders it incapable of demystifying of the culture.

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