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# **‘LIFE-FORCE’: AN AFRICAN CONCEPT OF S(S)PIRIT, RELATIONALITY AND WHOLENESS**

*Kuzipa Nalwamba*

## **Introduction**

African philosophical thought, grounded in the notion of wholeness, construes life as a constant flow of a force or energy throughout the entire cosmos. That life-force enfolds all modes of organic and inorganic life. Africanist theologians, thinkers and philosophers have explored and appropriated themes of the integrative African worldview suggested by a cosmic view of the life-force or s(S)pirit.

Nyambura Njoroge’s life-work as theologian, activist, ethicist, administrator and ecumenist exemplifies that approach. In its variedness, her work self-evidently presupposes the interconnectedness of the African view of reality. Through an integrative approach, she has sought to identify patterns by searching for connections that tie her endeavours together as a contribution to the wholeness of life. Her own words capture that attempt as a:

... struggle to articulate within a biblical and theological framework, the dilemmas presented in the African context in the last fifty years, especially in the 1990s. My reflections are undertaken as an African Christian woman in search of a metaphor or metaphors that will lead us to engage in restoring our human dignity and respect for life (Njoroge 2001: 67).

This contribution, therefore, honours Njoroge’s work by reflecting on the holistic African worldview as a relational, life-affirming theological and ethical model. It takes the totality of life into account, thereby transcending reductionist foundationalism. That view of life that transcends confined binary and fragmented notions.

## **The Bondedness of Life**

In African understanding, human life is inseparably embedded within the cosmos. To that extent, human life is defined by its connectedness to the

totality of the entire community of life (Gitau 2000). Such a bio-centric theology and philosophy presupposes an inseparable reality. The kinship within the community of life that such a view entails resonates with Njoroge's rallying call for life-giving theologies. It is the thread that runs through her theological articulation and formulation of ethical responses towards children and women's issues, HIV & AIDS, ecumenism, disability and sexual diversity.

Malawian theologian, Harvey Sindima (1990), underlines the importance of such an underlying belief being constitutive of a life-centred understanding of reality. Kagame (1956), Jahn (1961), and Nyamiti (1976), have all enunciated this theme as an expression of African ontology. As all aspects of life are apprehended within the matrix of the life-force, the African worldview offers a holistic hermeneutical lens for pneuma-theologies that link every aspect of life to the divine.

Vincent Mulago (1962) presents this holistic view of life as *union vitale* or *participation vitale*, capturing the elements of the unified and participative nature of the worldview that underlies it. *Union vitale* and *participation vitale* nuance the understanding that God - in whatever way God is understood in various African cultures - is essentially a life-force or s(S)pirit. That s(S)pirit which imbues all creatures and connects the "dynamic and intricate relationships" (Kaoma 2013: 17) within the cosmos understood as a community of life. The union-of-life-in-participation that Mulago advances is instructive in that regard. Within it we identify a pneuma-theological category of relationship and participation that echoes the biblical tradition that concepts like *pneuma* and *ruach* suggest.

Other African theologians have underlined the need to harness this life-centred insight within the ambit of eco-theology. Ghanaian theologian and ethicist, Emmanuel Asante, who coined the term *pan-vitalism*, further nuances Mulago's notion of *union vitale*. His emphasis on the kinship that exists within the community of life aptly captures that notion, when he avers;

Reality is inseparable. The African is kin to all creatures – gods, spirits and nature ... The whole of nature must be understood as sacred because it derives its being from the Supreme Being who is the Creator-Animator of the Universe (Asante 1985: 289).

Njoroge's work illustrates her quest for fullness of life in the midst of threats to life such as gender-based injustice, disease, poverty and poor

leadership. Her search for a life-affirming metaphor has led her to a spirituality of resistance and transformation. She highlights the need for peace-making and transformation as the building block in the incremental quest for fullness of life. She has reclaimed biblical narrative by highlighting the role of obscure women like Rizpah (2 Samuel 3:6-8) and other marginal characters as symbols of resistance and contributors to the wholeness of communities. By juxtaposing biblical narratives with stories of, for instance, African women as nurturers of life, she valorises a spirituality of resistance and transformation that could emerge from the seemingly weak and marginalised people to challenge life-threatening forces.

Such a spirituality of resistance is nurtured in a context where there is no dichotomy between the spiritual and the secular. Because of the bondedness of African life, it is imbued with a 'this-worldliness' that links the divine and the mundane in an abiding vital participation. That reality includes God and humans in an abiding relationship which is the divine destiny of humankind, as well as the purpose and goal of the universe (Bediako 1995). In other words, the mundane, everyday life experiences and actions are unified. Out of that, new experiences become incorporated and infused with spiritual meaning and inclusiveness (Balcomb 2005). There is, therefore, no aspect of human endeavour that is outside of the realm of the participative action of God and humans. That is the source of hope, namely, that life-defying, ethical action is possible in the midst self-centredness and greed.

### **Life-force as Connector of the Divine, the Living, the Living-dead and Nature**

In the African universe, the life-force within connects everything - the divine, the ancestors, the living and nature. It is the milieu in which acts of resistance to life-threats are undertaken. Because life cannot be understood without reference to the divine, every aspect of life has significance. This is exemplified in the rituals of the lifecycle in which all living beings, including God, spirits and ancestors share in rites of intensification that reveal the foundational beliefs and identity of the community. The rites signified the underlying belief that all organic and inorganic 'things' are imbued with potency. In that regard, every object serves as a religious

symbol. The material world and the unseen transcendent realm are interwoven in a mutually influencing dynamic flow. In traditional Christian parlance we could thus speak of a realm in which every external act, ritual and entity communicates God and is a medium through which we encounter God.

In such an interconnected belief system, even misfortune has multidimensional sources. Living in an enchanted universe in which there are multiple human and non-human actors imbued with potency means each has the potential to impact life in diverse and invisible ways. The intertwined interplay of the life-force in African cosmology, as earlier suggested, is not limited to organic life. Inanimate (or inorganic) entities such as artefacts and charms are understood to be imbued with potency and can impact life in diverse ways.<sup>1</sup>

It is thus, not uncommon for newly born babies to be adorned with beads and charms which are believed to ward off malevolent spirits. The potency that the beads or charms have, in that respect, may be said to be 'sacramental'. Through that 'seen' object, the unseen transcendent realm is brought closer to human consciousness. The attribution of power to objects and actions has latent subversive elements that could inform tacit resistance and inspire transformation.

A case in point is the work of Reformed theologian, Marthinus Daneel, who served as a theological educator in Mashonaland. He has made a distinct contribution by bridging the realms of African Initiated Churches (AICs) and African Traditional Religions, which has resulted in the formation of an interreligious grassroots' organisation, the Zimbabwean Institute for Religious Research and Ecological Conservation. Together with its affiliates, the Association of Zimbabwean Traditional Ecologists and the Association of African Earth-keeping Churches and through interfaith cooperation and dialogue, they embody a holistic, communal approach to earth-keeping<sup>2</sup> that appropriates African spirituality. Njoroge's spirituality of resistance and transformation resonates with this kind of appropriation.

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<sup>1</sup> Charms and some certain artefacts are understood to be imbued with power to ward off evil (i.e. preserve life) or indeed to inflict evil (i.e. deny life). Their potency is derived from their presence within the 'realm' of the life-force or as it is situationally summoned.

<sup>2</sup> See Marthinus Daneel, *African Earthkeepers: Wholistic Interfaith Mission*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001) for an engagement of the traditional African from a Christian theological

In her ground-breaking investigation of the encounter between local people and development policy on the Copperbelt in Zambia, Parsons makes an observation that further indicates the prevalence of this way of construing reality. She examines the response of mine workers to mine accidents and the preventive measures they employ to avert the ever-present danger. They use physical objects they believe to have potency as protection from misfortunes and especially of mine accidents. These practices have been updated to include Christian prayers and Christian symbols such as crosses, rosaries and the Bible. Miners engage in prayer rituals and carry what they consider to be auspicious objects with them as they go underground to ward off misfortune (Parsons 2010).

Even their way of relating to the mine itself and the rocks within it is such that each is ascribed with agency. As Parsons' informants told her, 'The underground was fine by itself, the rocks were peaceful and dignified until we provoked and aggravated them ...' (Parsons 2010: iii). The miners bemoan the excesses of mining as an extractive industry which promotes a utilitarian attitude towards the earth's resources. The belief that the mine and rocks respond with vengeance echoes the underlying reverence for the presumed connectedness of everything to the divine. Therein lies the potential for tacit resistance. When creation is valued for being imbued with the s(S)pirit of God, there is potential to shape ethical responsibility. Zambian theologian, Jackson Chibuye, in his 2016 PhD thesis assessed the environmental impact of mining activities in Zambia with a goal to develop theological resources as a platform for entry into national dialogue about environmental stewardship. His research includes an assessment of the cosmology of the Lamba people of the Copperbelt province. He uses that as an entry point into understanding the ecological wisdom embedded in the Lamba culture that finds expression in a communal ethic. He presents that as a hermeneutical lens for interpreting biblical material and systematises that into theological reflection that challenges the basic assumptions that have led to environmental degradation caused by the mines (Chibuye 2016).

Nkemnkia aptly captures the prevalent dynamic communal view of the life in African thought when he opines that 'African thought has a unified vision of reality in which there is no room for irreducible dichotomies of matter and spirit, religious tension and daily life between soul and body'

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point of view, highlighting the Spirit's role as the oasis of life and healer of the land whose presence and action is directed against the life-denying forces in the universe.

(Nkemnkia 1999: 165). Thus, the African ontological and metaphysical conception of reality renders its universe sacred and bio-centric. It is so suffused with life that even inanimate objects are potent because they exist in a world ‘charged’ with the life-force. It therefore, “is the creative force behind all human and non-human action” (Nel, 2008:40) that fuels a spirituality of resistance of death-dealing forces in preference for life. Conversely and critically, one may ask why the spirituality of resistance and transformation is not prevalent in society.

According to the African theologian, Gabriel Setiloane, the ‘interpenetrating and permeating’ (1998: 80) influence that saturates the community of life tends towards a harmonious existence of the whole. He asserts that:

[T]he term community is inclusive of all life (*bios*): animals, the habitat (the land), flora, and even the elements. The success of life is found in the ability to maintain a healthy relationship with all (Setiloane 1998: 79).

Setiloane’s cosmological assertion frames relational inclusivity in terms that confirm that an ethic of responsibility and commitment to the well-being of the whole, emanates from African cosmology. As a result, all activities are informed by a holistic understanding. Every aspect of life has potential to singularly or jointly maintain and transform life’s landscape. In this realm, an act cannot be separated from its environmental, societal, or spiritual influence. Within traditional African society this view informed acts of technology, agriculture, animal keeping, music, song, dance, ritual, and family among others. It is a system of thought rooted in action and its thought structure is embodied. In other words, a spirituality built on this insight cannot but lead to concrete action and transformation. This is a latent resource within the culture that could enrich Christian spirituality and ethical action in the world as exemplified in Njoroge’s life-work. Such a ‘sacramental’ sensibility speaks of a world that lives within God and a God who lives in the world. God and the world are not fragmented into two separate realities that are independent of each other. Rather, they somehow find each other in a milieu so “charged” with God, that a spirituality of resistance and transformation towards a life-affirming goal may flourish.

## Living in the s(S)pirit as Reverence for Life

Acts 17 postulates that everything exists within the milieu of the Spirit of God. That theological insight undergirds Christian reverence for life. In

incarnational terms, we speak of life as being *with* and *in* God. The scriptures use metaphors of water, breath and air to indicate creation's dependence on God for its growth and flourishing. The interpenetrating and permeating realm of the Spirit is what constitutes what American theologian McFague says is "the body of God . . . (and that) God as Spirit is the power of life and love within which all bodies exist (McFague 1993: 116). The inclusivity suggested by the interpenetrating and permeating power of the S(s)pirit in the universe affirms the embedded and embodied nature of life. Ethical action in the world that concerns itself with the well-being of the whole, then, tends to the body of God, thereby elevating any life-affirming action in the world.

The implication is that an integrative imperative is implied for ethical and moral responsibility because everything subsists in God. This convergence between African thought and Christian tradition challenges utilitarian and transactional ways of relating that have historically distorted Christian practice and that curtail the reverence for life that view conveys.

Though the ideas about the sacramental nature of creation in Christian tradition and that of the life-force in African thought are conceptually and cosmologically spaced out, they are compatible and can be theologically appropriated in a nuanced way because of some of the convergence points outlined thus far. They make for a viable conversation about theological articulation in terms of relational categories that nurture life-giving theologies.

African cosmology postulates a dynamic ontological and epistemological quest for equilibrium. There is, therefore, within it an in-built persistent pursuit of harmony in the varied inter-subjective relations within the cosmos. Harmony in relationships is the ultimate goal whenever there is disequilibrium. The need to prevent it summons and galvanises the entire community of life. Njoroge's quest for a spirituality of peace-making and transformation seems to be galvanised by and is a response to these summons for an epistemology and ontology that spurs all towards equilibrium as a constant call to action for the wellbeing of the whole because the meaning of life is bound up in the dialectic of the collective. As a result, when humans are spoken of as subject, they can only be spoken of in terms of relationship with other(kind)s. Human beings are, therefore, not subjects in the abstract but subjects in relation to other subjects: '*Umuntu*



*nga bantu*’ (A person *is* in relation to others and by extension to other-kind within the web of life).

Thus, whether it be in the fight against the HIV pandemic, gender-based violence, war and the ecological crisis - to mention a few of the themes in Njoroge’s body of work – relationships are implied. As long as there is divine connection to, and the inter-subjective relationship within, the web of life is kept in view, there is a reverence for life that underpins the movement toward life-affirming alternatives.

Living justly and sustainably in recognition of inter-subjective relationships imputes value to everything. Within that is the humbling recognition that without that the other there can be no life. That imperative for the life of the other (kind)s has a self-evident societal dimension. Everything is interrelated and so the flourishing of all is the affirmation of life for all and has religious, social, cultural, economic and political implications.

## Relational Participation: *Creatio Continua*

The life-cycle and its accompanying communal rites of intensification<sup>3</sup> that mark the various stages and seasons of life in African traditional life are at the core of life. Religion is so deeply embedded in daily life that separating religion from other aspects of life seems superfluous. Rites of passage and communal rites exemplify the ubiquitous nature of religion in life. In an African sense, all vicissitudes of life hinge on the interaction between the divine and the mundane as the ‘realm’ of life.

The rites, practices, customs and ceremonies performed to mark the various human transitions from conception to death heighten the sense of sacredness of each stage. During the ritual practices, the participation and presence of the divine. What the Banyarwanda and Barundi of East Africa

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<sup>3</sup> This concept is applied to congregational studies, but it also describes what we are discussing here (see Nancy T. Ammerman, “Culture and Identity in the Congregation,” in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, ed. Nancy Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll and Carl S. Dudley, 1998). Rites of intensification are rituals that focus the community and strengthen (intensify) the community’s commitment to its beliefs and shared meanings. These include especially those rituals, which celebrate or focus on the core values of the community. In African traditional life these include all the rituals that mark the cycle of life from conception to after-life; the cycle of seasons and the celebration around the sacred object within nature like trees, rivers, mountains, animals and the spirits which are revered and understood to sustain and nourish life.

called *Amziy'mana* (God's water) is an example of such an intensified reminder of the divine-human participation in the life-cycle. In anticipation of conception, a woman puts a bowl of water in her room before going to bed. The water symbolises the cooperative action that preserves the life of the foetus during pregnancy. It is a co-operative venture. The woman and the water function in concert to give, nurture and preserve life. The mother-to-be is additionally, subjected to food taboos and other restrictions intended to preserve the life of the unborn child. The pregnant woman herself is chosen for the sacred duty of bringing a new life to the community in a co-operative act with natural elements as media for divine action (Lugira 2009). In John 3, the mother's womb and water symbolise re-birth.

The water is a symbol of cleansing in the new-born's transition from the mother's womb into the world. Later in life, water marks other life-cycle transitions like the initiation of boys and girls into adulthood in some cultures. The initiate may wash in a stream and emerge from it as a man or woman, ready to be incorporated into the community as an adult with adult responsibilities. The ritual washing echoes the symbolic initiation through the water of baptism, which initiates and incorporates the believer into the body of Christ.

At birth, a midwife who may also be a medicine woman<sup>4</sup> and regarded as sacred, attends to the mother-to-be and conducts the rituals associated with birth. Among them are the first baby bath, the disposal (not in the sense of 'dumping' as these items are imbued with ritual symbolism that pertains to the life of the new-born) of the placenta and the umbilical cord. Their disposal is a sacred ritual symbol that signifies the baby's transition from confinement in the mother's womb into another realm as a new life that is part of the community.

In some cultures, the placenta and umbilical cord of the newly born are buried under a tree. From then on, until it bears fruit, that tree is considered sacred. When the fruit matures, it is used to prepare a sacred feast

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<sup>4</sup> The role of medicine men and women evokes the idea of healing. In the traditional African sense, healing is not confined to mental and physical health. It is the total sum of the person's interpersonal relations with the family, community (including the living-dead) and nature. 'Sickness implies that there is an imbalance between the metaphysical and the human world as the flow of the supernatural life force may have been disturbed' See, Obinna, "Life is Superior to Wealth?": Indigenous Healers in an African Community, Amasiri, Nigeria" in *African Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa*, ed. Afe Adogame, Ezra Chitando and Bolaji Bateye (London: Routledge, 2012).

for the community. The tree is linked to this mysterious act as recipient of the same nourishment as the newly born, but also as bearer of the fruit that in turn nourishes the community. The significance of the tree being nourished by the bodily elements of a human is that even in death, interdependence within the cycle of life remains constant. Dead creatures and organisms become nourishment for plants and other creatures in the lower bands of the food chain. Within such an interdependent web, even death is an acceptable natural part of the life cycle. The life cycle is just that - a LIFE-cycle. Even death leads to and becomes life.

The relational life-giving process in which the divine is participant is reminiscent of the act of creation, as a relational participatory process, *creatio continua*. From it, we may derive an ethic that 'subjectifies' everything, including elements such as water that tend to be commodified. The use of water as ritual symbol indicates that it is more than a commodity for human utility. It is ritually connected to our very being. Its participative link to the divine in the act of conception and characterisation as the 'primal water' of the womb, the incubator of life accords it agency. It neither competes with nor nullifies the Creator's agency.

In the human quest for cosmological congruence through science, philosophy and religion, water is a major factor. In Chinese philosophy, water is one of the five basic elements of life together with earth, fire, wood and metal. Many religions, including Christianity, understand water to be the source of life. In the Genesis 1 creation narrative, the *ruach* of God<sup>5</sup> is presented as hovering over the chaotic primordial waters. Water also serves as a religious ritual cleansing element and as a symbol of renewal or rebirth (c.f. John 3; 1 John 5:6-8). In science, the example of the 'Follow the Water' themesthat guides the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Mars Exploration Project (MEP) in its quest to establish how habitable the planet Mars is, is another case in point. The existence of water as vapour, ice or in liquid form would authenticate, or otherwise, the planet's ability to support (or to have supported?) life.

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<sup>5</sup> Karl Barth contends that the *ruach* of Genesis 1 is mere wind and cannot be said to be the Spirit of God. In that vein, he sees discontinuity between *ruach* and the Spirit of God and certainly between the Spirit of God and other conceptions of the s(S)pirit. See, *Church Dogmatics III* by Karl Barth, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark. 1953).

The relational principle speaks to the interactive nature of life. It engenders self-extension as varied interrelations regenerate and renew as "a genealogical filiation of forms of beings, engendering or relating to one another, all of them witnessing to the original source that made them possible" (Mudimbe 1990: 190). Within the milieu of the S(s)pirit, the on-going dynamic interaction supports an integrative approach oriented towards life.

## Conclusion

This contribution sets out the African worldview with reference to what is presumed to be the epistemological and ontological underpinning of Njoroge's life-work. Her contribution to scholarship and activism is a quest for a congruent spirituality that affirms life. What is set out is not a critical appraisal of the African worldview in totality, rather, it is a retrieval of salient points of reference towards the foundational assumptions for a holistic worldview.

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