

## Chapter 27

# The Primal Metaphor of Sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa is the birth place of our species. The Primal Metaphor beneath the creation of religion on this continent is probably the oldest of the six. It has to do with the motions of the body and the motions of the inner being. It has to do with drum beats and dances. It has to do with the primary energies of nature, with the way an antelope moves or a lion moves or an elephant moves or a human moves.

**Intimacy with the Infinite Communicator** and **Ordering the Absolute Wonder** are the primal metaphors that have characterized the cultures we often call the West. **Uniting with the Infinite Silence** and **Balance within the Inclusive Community** are the primal metaphors that have characterized the cultures we often call the East. The cultures of Sub-Saharan Africa are clearly something else, driven by a quite different primal metaphor. I will name this primal metaphor **Attunement with the Final Rhythm**.

The contrast of the primal metaphor of Sub-Saharan Africa with the above four is stark. A Greece-influenced Europe was preoccupied with the intelligibility of Final Reality; Arabia was preoccupied with a We-Thou dialogue with Final Reality, Sub-Asia with states of consciousness; the Orient with communal balancing. Sub-Saharan Africa was preoccupied with whole body vitality and with the Final Vitality to which our bodies can be attuned. All five of these preoccupations exist in some measure in all cultures, but the primal metaphorical material in each of these five sets of human cultures employs a different basic preoccupation.

The Christian West painted halos around the heads of its saintly exemplars. If Africa were to indicate saintliness with a halo, it would have to be painted around the entire body. The movement of limbs, the torso, the head, the blood, the breath, the sensations, the emotions, all these moving parts and the interactions between them constitute the "place" of human authenticity. In this primal African sensibility, Final Reality is raw movement, raw vitality. Rhythm, the rhythms expressed in drum beats, are a religious method for awakening this whole body vitality and enabling a push toward an ecstatic union with the Inclusive Vitality of the cosmos. If the French philosopher Descartes could say, "I think, therefore I am," a reflective African shaman might say, "I dance, thereby I be."

Some of the oldest known paintings of humanity appear in French caves. In spite of their European location, those paintings probably reflect the ancient Prime Metaphor of Africa. On the uneven walls of one cave, expressively painted animals seem to move. Two bison fight each other. The place is almost alive with motion. This cave was not where people lived. It was a place for ritual. It breathes the Awe of a place of worship. It may give us a hint of 30,000-year-old Africa.

We can further understand the essence of the Sub-Saharan African Primal Metaphor by comparing it with the other four primal metaphors already described.

### Africa and Sub-Asia

**Attunement with the Final Rhythm** and **Uniting with the Infinite Silence** have an underlying compatibility with one another. Both seek ecstasy beyond the mind, beyond the body, a trans-body, trans-mind union with what is fully Real. "Ecstasy," in the sense meant here, is not a jazzing up of ordinary life. It simply means an out-of-body type of awareness, an out-of-mind type of awareness. Africa and Sub-Asia both see the practical usefulness of the mind but view Final Reality as more irrational than rational, more beyond comprehension than intelligible, more an inward realization

than a practical result, more a here and now experience than a program for living.

The noisiness of African music and the stillness of Sub-Asian meditation allude to the contrast between these primal metaphors. Sub-Asia has a reserve that is wild underneath, and Africa has a wildness up front and overt. Yet if we contemplate deeply the experience of African ecstatic dancing, we can discern a certain stillness about it. And if Sub-Asian dance dramatizes stillness, it also dances that stillness with an intriguing vitality. If we contemplate deeply the experience of Sub-Asian meditation, we can discern a certain wildness, an *Emptiness Dancing* as the writer Adyashanti titles one of his books.

## Africa and Europe

**Attunement with the Final Rhythm and Ordering the Absolute Wonder** are Primal metaphors that are almost opposite each another. Hellenized Europe views the body in the context of the mind. Sub-Saharan Africa views the mind in the context of the body. Europe pushes the limits of the mind to find Final Reality. Africa pushes the limits of the body to find Final Reality. It is difficult to see that the same Mysterious Wonderfulness is found in both cases. Africa returns from Wonder to a more realistically active dance of living. Europe returns from Wonder to a more realistic intelligence for living.

But in real life, the body and the mind are not separate, they are two parts of one wondrous being. The Africans that Americans imported as slaves were held in contempt – their culture seen as primitive, naive, worthless. Nevertheless, it has happened that the US slave culture integrated Protestant Christianity and African culture into a musical explosion that has restored the rhythms of the body to an arid over-mental Western culture. Millions of European Americas have been healed in the depths of their body/spirit by the cultural gifts imported with these slaves. Similar gifts made their way into Europe.

The designs of the mind have been altered by experiences of and reflection upon the rhythms of the body. And the rhythms of Western experience have been given expression by those who were forced to feel them most deeply. These experiences have forced many descendants of the Greek-influenced primal metaphor to take the Primal Metaphor of Sub-Saharan Africa seriously. Many Westerners now know that life is more than the life of the mind and that there are other-than-Western ways of accessing that profound “I Am” life.

## Africa and Arabia

**Attunement with the Final Rhythm** and the Arabian primal metaphor, **Intimacy with the Infinite Communicator**, share a sense of the wildness of human life and the ultimate wildness of Final Reality. Unlike the Greek overemphasis on the mind, **Intimacy with the Infinite Communicator** is more preoccupied with will and freedom than with rationally formulated truth. This Arabian Infinite Communication is a personal address, aimed at awakening the heart with horror, repentance, love, and commitment. The voice of the human speaker can become the Communication of the Infinite when that Onrushing Reality amplifies the human voice.

In the Protestantism of Luther and even more so in the first and second Great-Awakenings of Protestantism in the Americas we can see a recovery of this Arabian voicing. If with emotionally grounded sensibilities, we read aloud the poetry of the Genesis stories, the Psalms, and the Prophets, we sense this quality of strong speech characteristic of the Arabian primal metaphor. The African slave communities of the Americas were able to resonate with the emotional qualities of this strong speech in Evangelical Protestantism. They could feel the emotional depths of their African

rhythms being awakened. They were able to put their Christian teachings into rhythmic songs. A deep integration of these two quite different primal metaphors took place. Perhaps the deepest interaction has been the identification of the sufferings of slavery with the suffering servant of Hebrew culture and the cross in Christian practice.

Similar experiences have happened in other ways in other parts of the world. I have not studied the story of the spread of Arabian Islam into parts of sub-Saharan Africa, but there is surely wisdom to be learned about both primal metaphors in that story.

My point in this brief overview is that the African primal metaphor has not been extinguished by the horrific mistreatment of African peoples. Rather it has resisted death and given life to all of its conquering peoples. Africa was the home of a primal metaphor that has standing with all the others. Africa was not only the birth place of the human species, Africa has preserved and brought to intricate sophistication the cultural childhood of us all. As the various parts of humanity migrated out of Africa, we began to specialize in various aspects of our humanity and reshape our approaches to Final Reality. In doing so, our African origins were obscured. The whole-body vitality of Africa and its heart beat of sensual and emotional rhythms is an ancient root that each of the other primal metaphors have in some measure carried with them and in some measure lost. It is important for our entire human authenticity that humanity recover this treasure.

## **Africa and the Orient**

The Orient has had less interchange with African energies than the other cultures described above. Nevertheless, the Orient carries with it an emphasis on intimate communal life that we also find in the African cultures. The family life, the village life, the group music of the Orient carries an echo of something also African. Both primal metaphors support the emphasis that people reach Spirit maturity together, not as hermits.

But there is also a vast difference between the quality of communal life in African with that of the Orient. **Balance within Inclusive Community** is more practical and reserved than the wildness of African communal dancing and drumming and expressive living. **Attunement with the Final Rhythm** manifests a more open expressiveness of feelings and sensations, ecstasies, and rages. The Orient is more polite, more subtle and reserved, in the expression of its harsh and delicate feelings.

Nevertheless, both cultural groups seek a type of obedience to the way life is. African Attunement is an obedience to the Rhythm of the cosmos. Oriental balancing is an obedience to the Way Final Reality is balanced. Both of these modes of obedience are creative means of being communally workable societies. In each of these approaches to Final Reality, humans are seeking to find a personal and social peace, contentment, happiness that heals the horrific perversions that are also found in all human societies.