

Mysticism in African Traditional Religion and in the Bahá'í Faith:
Classification of Concepts and Practices

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Introduction

It can be inferred from the Bahá'í Writings that African Traditional Religion (henceforth, "ATR") is divine in its origin. Two passages are cited below in support of this inference:

[T]he peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source . . .¹

[T]he divers communions of the earth, and the manifold systems of religious belief . . . have proceeded from one Source . . .²

The Bahá'í Faith further teaches that:

The Bahá'í Faith, like all other Divine Religions, is thus fundamentally mystic in character.³

African Traditional Religion can, therefore, also be said to be mystical in character.

As the topic implies, the object of this paper is to classify the concepts and practices of mysticism in both religions. But, to classify in what manner?

To answer this question, the author is presenting four main steps:

- i. to examine the dictionary or popular understanding of the term mysticism
- ii. to determine the classification or major types of mysticism as derived from the Bahá'í Writings
- iii. to locate or identify the concepts in ATR can be considered "mystical"
- iv. to place the ATR concepts within the classification derived from Bahá'í Writings.

Following these four steps, the concepts of mysticism in ATR are classified in the light of the Bahá'í teachings.

The Meanings of the Term "Mysticism"

A look at the dictionary meaning of the word *mysticism* would lead us to also seek the meanings of the words *mystical*, *mystic*, *magic*, and *occult*. The meanings are as follows:

mysticism n. 1: the experience of mystical union or direct communion with ultimate reality reported by mystics 2a: religion based on mystical communion b: a theory of mystical knowledge 3a: obscure or irrational speculation b: a theory postulating the possibility of direct and intuitive acquisition of ineffable knowledge or power.

mystical adj. 1: having a spiritual meaning or reality that is neither apparent to the senses nor obvious to the intelligence 2a: of, relating to, or resulting from an individual's direct communion with God or ultimate reality b: based upon intuition, insight, or similar subjective experience 3. UNINTELLIGIBLE, CRYPTIC 4: MYSTIC 2.

mystic adj. 1: MYSTICAL 1 2: of or relating to mysteries or esoteric rites: OCCULT 3: of or relating to mysticism or mystics 4a: MYSTERIOUS b: ENIGMATIC, OBSCURE c: Inducing a feeling of awe or wonder d: having magical properties.

magic n. 1a: the use of means (as charms, spells) believed to have supernatural power over natural forces . . . 2a: an extraordinary power or influence seemingly from a supernatural source b: something that seems to cast a spell: ENCHANTMENT

occultism n. a belief in or study of supernatural powers and the possibility of subjecting them to human control.

occult adj. 1: not revealed. Secret 2: ABSTRUSE, MYSTERIOUS 3: not able to be seen or detected: concealed 4: of or relating to supernatural agencies, their effects, and knowledge of them.⁴

An examination of the words *mysticism*, *mystical*, and *mystic* reveals six key features associated with the word or concept *mysticism*. They are:

1. the experience of mystical union or direct communion with ultimate reality,
2. inducing a feeling of awe or wonder,
3. having a spiritual meaning or reality that is neither apparent to the senses nor obvious to the intelligence,
4. anything based upon intuition, insight, or similar subjective experience,
5. of or relating to mysteries or esoteric rites: occult,
6. having magical powers.

In this paper, the first two features would constitute what this author terms types one and two mysticism. The third and the fourth features constitute the third type of mysticism. The fourth type mysticism is unique and not described in the dictionary as *mysticism*. Features five and six form the fifth and the sixth type mysticism collectively, not respectively.

The Types of Mysticism—A Classification Inferred from Bahá'í Writings

There are six types or classes of mysticism:

Class One or “True Mysticism”: The ecstatic joy that results from communion with the Souls of the Manifestations leading to physical martyrdom⁵ or the living of a life of self-sacrifice and saintliness.⁶ This is a more refined state of Incipient True Mysticism. (The meaning of self-sacrifice is explained under the discussion on *self-surrender* and in note 1.)

Class Two or “Incipient True Mysticism”: The state of spiritual communion or feeling (which is the core of religious faith) which can be chiefly brought about and maintained by means of worship, prayer and meditation, for the sake of union with God and the acquisition of human virtues and powers for the development of the individual and society.⁷

Class Three or “Cognitive or Coronary Mysticism”: The realm of spiritual meanings and realities not apparent to the senses or obvious to the intelligence. This has to do with reflection upon scriptural and religious writings, and striving to unravel the abstruse or the mystic meanings of the words and symbols in the Holy Writ, the profound emanations of sages and mystics, or the spiritual significance of certain religious acts. (The reason for describing this type of mysticism as “*coronary*” is explained in note 4.)

Class Four or “Biological and Societal Mysticism”: This is the adolescent, developmental stage of an individual or the stage

in the evolution of the organisation of human society . . . in the collective life of mankind . . . endowing the whole human race with such potentialities of well-being as shall provide . . . the chief incentive required for the eventual fulfillment of its high destiny.⁸

Class Five or “Natural” or “Mundane Mysticism”: Mystic concepts and practices not purely for communion with God and the development of human virtues, but aimed basically at solving mundane and orthodox occult problems and, in some cases, keeping harmony between the living world on one hand, and the world of spirit and the spirit of ancestors on the other. These concepts are, largely, either upheld in a general way by the Bahá'í teachings or they are neutral, meaning that the Bahá'í teachings are silent over them. They are basically true.

Class Six or “Orthodox Occultism”: Mystic concepts and practices not purely for union with God and the development of human virtues, but aimed basically at giving free rein to the ego, or at seeking to appear mys-

terious and powerful before other mortals. They are often used for nefarious or inimical activities, and are either prohibited by the Bahá'í teachings or discouraged.

Having outlined a Bahá'í classification of *mysticism*, the next task is to identify African Traditional Religion's concepts of *mysticism*. After consulting a number of books,⁹ the concepts mentioned are: Ancestral Reverence, Dreams and Visions, Healing, Herbalism, Libation, Magic, Medicine, Miracles, Prayer, Sacrifice, Soothsaying, Sorcery, Spirit-possession, Traditional medicine, Talismans and Charms, Witchcraft and Worship. Ancestral Reverence, in this author's opinion, is implicit in ATR mysticism. This theme is, usually, not treated under mystical or mysterious forces.

The Application of the Terms "Mystic," "Occult," and "Psychic" to Cultural Practices

This classification was made because there is no explicit, authoritative Bahá'í classification. The difficulty of applying such terms as *mystic*, *occult*, and *psychic* to cultural practices is acknowledged by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice in the extract below:

We have not been able to locate any explicit definition of "occult" in the Bahá'í Writings. While we understand the difficulties which can arise when one tries to apply such terms as "psychic" and "occult" to specific cultural practices, the most explicit guidance we have located appears in the statement from the Universal House of Justice letter quoted . . .¹⁰(as):

It is clear that what 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi had in mind when warning the believers against meddling with psychic forces were those that spiritualists believe come from a deliberate effort on the part of individuals to establish communication with the departed.¹¹

The guidance then continues that

[T]he meaning of "mystic" is dependent upon the context in which it occurs. Occasionally "occult" and "mystic" do refer to the same type of phenomena. For example . . . we are discouraged from seeking "occult experiences" and "the hearing of mystic voices. . . ."¹²

On the other hand, "mystic" is also used to refer to a very different sphere of human experience, the reality and importance of which is frequently emphasized. For example, in another statement we are encouraged to seek "that mystic feeling that unites man with God" and to "cultivate the sense of spirituality through meditation and prayer,

[f]or the core of religious faith is that mystic feeling that unites man with God. . . . Otherwise religion will degenerate into a mere organization, and become a dead thing.¹³

The epitome of this guidance is that *mystic* has two major meanings. In one sense, it is synonymous with "occult." This meaning of the concept *mystic* or *occult* includes *psychicism* or *psychic phenomena*. The concepts in this group are discouraged. In the second major sense, *mystic* is not synonymous with "occult," is highly encouraged, and seeking this kind of *mystic* experience is vital to the individual's spiritual development. How to identify "that mystic feeling that unites man with God" varies from one individual to the other, and this is expressed in note 3. The full text of this guidance is reproduced in note 2 for the reader's benefit.

First and Second Class Mysticism

Worship, Prayer, and Meditation

In this section, two things will be attempted. First of all, the author will try to show that the concepts in each class really fit into their class by definition. Secondly, the author will try to show whether or not a given concept applies to both religions, and the extent to which it applies.

The supreme and most exalted goal of man is to get near to and to be united with God. Bahá'u'lláh wrote:

Let the flame of search burn with such fierceness within your hearts as to enable you to attain your supreme and most exalted goal—the station at which ye can draw nigh unto, and be united with, your Best-Beloved. . . .¹⁴

Attaining to this station requires intense search. But we must also learn to commune with the Souls of the Manifestations of God as they are the intermediaries between us and God, and God cannot be known directly

by us puny mortals. This “True Mysticism” is expressed in the Bahá'í teachings thus:

We liken God to the Sun, which gives us all our life. So the Spirit of God reaches us through the Souls of the Manifestations. We must learn to commune with Their Souls, and this is what the Martyrs seemed to have done, and what brought them such ecstasy of joy that life became nothing. This is the true mysticism, and the secret, inner meaning of life which humanity has at present, drifted so far from.¹⁵

True mysticism is not mentioned in the African Traditional Religions. The class of Bahá'í mysticism to which ATR gets very close is the less refined, lower degree, second class or “Incipient True Mysticism.” To attain this state of communion and union with God, this Incipient True Mysticism, the best and the chief instrument is worship (respect or reverence paid to a divine being or a form of religious practice with its creed and ritual) which includes prayer and meditation. Meditation, as a spiritual exercise, is not stressed at all in ATR. The converse is true in the Bahá'í teachings. The cardinal role of worship—which includes prayer and meditation—in mysticism are made clear in reference number 17. In ATR, worship and prayer are basic in mysticism, as can be seen in this passage of Mbiti in which he defines worship as

a means of renewing contact between people and God, or between people and the invisible world.¹⁶

Self-Surrender

Essentially united with God through worship, prayer, and meditation, is self-surrender, for this quality is absolutely essential for the attainment of union with God. The Bahá'í teachings say that:

By self-surrender and perpetual union with God is meant that men should merge their will wholly in the Will of God, and regard their desires as utter nothingness beside His Purpose. Whatsoever the Creator commandeth His creatures to observe, the same must they diligently, and with the utmost joy and eagerness, arise and fulfil.¹⁷

Essentially, ATR also stresses submission to the Will of God. But with its submission to the dominating influence of adulteration due to changing times and minds divergent from the original teachings, whatever they might have been, we have in the tenets of ATR, concepts and practices which are at variance with the Will of God.

Third Class or Cognitive Mysticism

African Traditional Religion has no Holy Scripture as such, in the sense of a Bible for Christians or the Kitáb-i-Aqdas for the Bahá'ís, but its proverbs, songs and emblems contain great wisdom that might be traced to a divine Source.

An example of a wise saying from Sierra Leone, in West Africa, is

If God dishes you rice in a basket, do not wish to eat soup!¹⁸

One obvious meaning of this proverb is contentment with the Will of God. Pithy though this saying may be, without the clear backing of authentic scripture, it does not rise above the heaven of poetry.

On the contrary, this citation from the Bahá'í teachings gives a clear example of the third type of mysticism:

[T]he heart is endowed with four stages, which would be recounted should a kindred soul be found.¹⁹

How can the heart have four stages? The fact that the Author of this verse states that these four stages of the heart can only be recounted if a kindred soul is found indicates that the meaning of that citation transcends human understanding and intelligence.

Fourth Class or Biological and Societal Mysticism

In the Bahá'í teachings, coming of age, adolescence, is described as:

That mystic, all-pervasive, yet indefinable change, which we associate with the stage of maturity inevitable in the life of the individual and . . . must . . . have its counterpart in the evolution of the organisation of human society.²⁰

This stage is, therefore, considered to form a special class of mysticism.

According to the Bahá'í teachings, for the individual, this is the age of spiritual maturity fixed at the age of

fifteen: “it marks that point in life at which the believer takes firmly into his own hands the responsibility for his spiritual destiny. At age fifteen, the individual has the privilege of affirming, in his own name, his faith in Bahá’u’lláh.”²¹ Starting from this age, the recitation of the obligatory prayer is obligatory,²² fasting during the prescribed month of fasting is binding,²³ marriage may be contracted,²⁴ the obligatory, congregational Prayer for the Dead must be recited for the departed before burial,²⁵ and the burial ring worn on the finger of the corpse before burial.²⁶ Administratively, this is the age for the assumption of some administrative responsibilities, precisely, serving on committees.²⁷

The significance of the age of maturity, however, goes far beyond the fulfillment of responsibilities. The following extract from a tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá links the attainment of maturity with the deepening of one’s understanding and comprehension of the realities of life, and the enhancement of one’s very capacity for understanding:

Know thou that before maturity man liveth from day to day and comprehendeth only such matters as are superficial and outwardly obvious. However, when he cometh of age he understandeth the realities of things and the inner truths. Indeed, in his comprehension, his feelings, his deductions and his discoveries, every day of his life after maturity is equal to a year before it.²⁸

In the collective life of human society, this is the stage “endowing the whole human race with such potentialities of well-being as shall provide . . . the chief incentive required for the eventual fulfillment of its high destiny.”²⁹ This Bahá’í meaning of mysticism in the collective life of mankind has no parallel in ATR. But on the individual plane, this period in ATR is referred to as the initiation period, and in

. . . that period a person goes through physical, emotional and psychological changes, which take him from childhood to adolescence and adulthood.³¹

Fifth Class, Natural or Mundane Mysticism

Medicine

In African Traditional Religion, medicine is defined differently from medicine in the Western culture, as the use of the neutral, vital, supernatural force in the universe to fight witchcraft, to diagnose and to cure diseases, to prepare good luck charms, and, in some cases, to cause *harm*.³¹

The definition above tells us that the main thrust of medicine in ATR is to solve mundane and orthodox occult problems, and, not to seek union with God or to acquire human virtues.

Considering this definition from the Bahá’í point of view, three elements have to be addressed—the nature of the supernatural force, the fight against witchcraft, the diagnosis and the cure of diseases, the preparation of good luck charms, and the causing of harm. If this supernatural force is from the invocation of the spirit of the departed, which is strongly discouraged (see section under *necromancy*), whatever use that force is put to cannot be approved. But if this supernatural force is from some other source, its effects are acceptable. The aspects of fighting witchcraft, diagnosing and curing diseases, and the preparation of good luck charms are discussed in this paper. Even though no religion approves of causing harm to any soul, power in the hands of either a Bahá’í or a non-Bahá’í can be misused. Medicine may, therefore, either be upheld or disapproved of by the Bahá’í teachings depending upon the source of the supernatural force animating the work of the medicine man.

Traditional Medicine

In ATR, traditional medicine “is the art of using the available forces of nature to prevent diseases and to restore and preserve health.”³² Traditional medicine men, therefore, “carry out the work of healing the sick . . .”³³ Persistent and serious complaints are “usually said to be magic, sorcery, witchcraft, broken taboos or the work of spirits.”³⁴ In this case, the medicine man “prescribes a cure which may include herbs, religious rituals and the observance of certain prohibitions or directions.”³⁵

Traditional medicine, therefore, entails healing the sick and fighting witchcraft and sorcery.

As for the aspect of healing the sick, the Bahá’í Faith teaches that:

It is clear from . . . statements made by the Guardian, as well as from the practice of Bahá’u’lláh, the Master and the Guardian himself, that by “a scientific system of medicine” he was not limiting this choice

to the medical theories currently dominant in western countries. The House of Justice, therefore, does not exclude the use of traditional native healers, . . . There is, nevertheless, an important borderline between unorthodox medical practice and sheer quackery or superstition, and this we should be careful not to cross.³⁶

As to the matter of fighting witchcraft and sorcery, the Bahá'í Faith acknowledges the existence of these forces and recommends the method of quelling them.

The Bahá'í teachings state that there is no independent force of evil in the world. However, there are negative forces which are described as evil and which can affect an individual adversely. It is reassuring to note that in a letter of 26 November 1939 written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer there appears the statement:

Evil forces do take control of our life, but it is within our power to free ourselves from falling under their subjection.³⁷

How to free one's self from falling under their subjection is elaborated on the same page in which reference 43 is found and in another memorandum dated 13 June 1999. To enter into the details would be a digression.

It can be seen from the above discussion that the concept of traditional medicine is common to both religions even though they differ from each other in some details of practices. It can also be seen that the main objective of traditional medicine is to solve mundane problems, and not to seek union with God or to acquire human virtues. It, therefore, falls under the fifth class.

The Gift of Healing

In several African societies, there are people reputed to be solely healers, and to possess the gift of healing which they may harness by any method, one of which is the laying on of hands or massaging the affected part.

As to a definition of the "gift of healing," the Research Department wrote that it ". . . *has not found a precise definition of the phrase 'the gift of healing' in the Bahá'í Writings.*"³⁸ Even though there is no precise definition, there is some guidance:

The so-called "gift of healing" is a God-given talent. . . . There is nothing in the Teachings to prohibit the friends from discovering, either for themselves or with the help of experts if they wish, that they have such a gift . . . a Bahá'í is free to practice such powers as long as he does so without attributing his or her powers to the Faith or to Bahá'u'lláh. . . . Bahá'ís are free to accept treatment from individuals whom they believe to be endowed with such a gift.³⁹

The guidance further explains that:

It appears to us that this phrase is associated with different aspects of 'spiritual' healing, depending upon the context in which it is used.⁴⁰

With this approval of the *gift of healing* which, obviously, seeks to heal illnesses and, thus, solve a mundane problem, this concept fits into the fifth class.

Herbalism

Herbalism, the application of herbs and other plant parts for the treatment of diseases is a common practice in African societies.

The Bahá'í Faith upholds pure herbalism in the words below:

Treat disease through diet, by preference, refraining from the use of drugs; and if you find what is required in a single herb, do not resort to a compounded medicament.⁴¹

But, when herbalism is combined with religious elements,⁴² the Bahá'í Faith sounds a note of caution in these words:

[O]ne must consider the context in which a herbal treatment is used in order to know if it is a simple therapeutic remedy, or part of some ritualistic practice which may or may not conflict with Bahá'í Teachings.⁴³

Herbalism is directed solely towards solving physical or mundane problems. It, therefore, comes under the fifth class mysticism.

Soothsaying

Soothsaying, another common practice in traditional African communities, is not condemned in the Bahá'í teachings. For the Bahá'í view on consulting soothsayers, the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice says that it is “*not aware of texts which specifically prohibit these practices*”⁴⁴ and “*does not equate consulting soothsayers and diviners*” with “*occult experiences.*”⁴⁵

Ancestral Reverence

Africans do not worship their departed relatives. It is true that departed relatives are believed to continue to live and to show interest in their surviving families. These families may show their belief by building shrines for the departed and placing bits of food or drink there or on the graves, and sometimes mentioning them in their prayers.⁴⁶

The Bahá'í Faith upholds the importance of remembering one's forebears, especially one's parents, and in making certain types of offerings in their names.⁴⁷

Some of these offerings are “*charity and beneficence*” and the imploration of “*pardon and remission of sins.*”⁴⁸

Even though “*With regard to the question of ancestor rituals, the Research Department has not, to date, been able to locate any statement in the Bahá'í Writings . . .*”⁴⁹ the reader has been given general guidelines with respect to determining the acceptability of cultural practices, including ancestor ritual:

Bahá'ís should be encouraged to preserve their inherited cultural identities, as long as the activities involved do not contravene the principles of the Faith.⁵⁰

Looking at the texts above, one can say that as far as maintaining a healthy link with one's ancestors, especially one's parents, is concerned, the two religions are in accord. They may only differ insofar as placing bits of food and sprinkling drops of drink on ancestral graves and shrines is concerned, for these, in the Bahá'í view, are offerings far inferior to feeding the poor or performing other acts of charity in the name of the ancestors. Praying for their soul's progress and for the remission of their sins are acts common to both religions.

Since ancestral reverence is solely aimed at maintaining harmony with the ancestors, it rightly falls under class five mysticism.

Talismans and Charms (Religious Articles and Objects)

“*Religious articles and objects are many, and we find them in all African societies.*”⁵¹ These objects, also called talismans and/or charms which

are empowered magically through the repetition of set words . . . may be used for a variety of purposes: attracting a lover, gaining employment, protecting from witchcraft, productivity of gardens, accumulation of wealth, protection from sickness and . . . to protect warriors from . . . bullets in modern warfare.⁵²

Though discussion of talismans is rare in the Bahá'í writings, their use was upheld by the earlier teachings of the Báb:

Dieu a fixé pour les gens du Báyán, deux grands bienfaits. . . C'est le <héikel> pour les hommes. . . Pour les spectacles du Bá (les femmes), il a permis des cercles. . .⁵³

This author translates this passage as: “God has ordained for the people of Bayán, two great blessings. . . It is the pentacle for men . . . For (women), He has permitted circles.”

The influence to be exerted by these objects is also mentioned. For the pentacles of men:

Tout ce qu'on écrira dans ces <héikèl>, l'influence s'en manifesterá sur la personnalité de celui qui l'aura écrit, mot pour mot, point par point.⁵⁴

This translates as:

The influence of all that is written in these pentacles will be manifested word for word, point by point, on the personality of the writer.

For women, the influence of the circles is to protect them morally:

“ces cercles les protègent moralement.”⁵⁵

In the Bahá'í Faith, there is also

a charm-like prayer, in pentacle form, for protection. It is called Du'áy-i-Haykal (Prayer of Haykal). Bahá'u'lláh . . . has given . . . instructions on how this prayer should be copied, in what color and with what kind of ink, and how it should be carried.⁵⁶

The two religions are in agreement on this theme. But, in the Bahá'í Faith there is room for ascending to class one mysticism if the writer of the talisman beseeches God for spiritual qualities and for martyrdom and through prayer.

Protection against Knife Cuts and Bullets

Some African native doctors specialize, among others, in giving treatments that protect the user from knife cuts and bullets.

From the Bahá'í view, the Research Department, referring to a letter from the Universal House of Justice answered that:

The Salient point . . . seems to be the distinction between something that is prescribed as a simple therapeutic remedy and something that is taken as part of a religious ritual as a form of sacrament.' We note, also, that the House of Justice points out that there is “an important borderline between unorthodox medical practice and sheer quackery or superstition, and this we should be careful not to cross.”⁵⁷

Protection against knife cuts and bullets is to attain a mundane goal. It has nothing to do with seeking communion with God.

Libation

This is the act of pouring some liquid to the spirits and the act is accompanied by a prayer.⁵⁸

The concept of libation is not mentioned in the Bahá'í teachings. The place of prayer in the Bahá'í teachings has already been discussed. Libation is, therefore, a purely ATR concept. Its significance “*lies in the belief that since the liquid softens the ground, it symbolically opens the way to the presence of the divine Power or powers.*”⁵⁹ Libation, in essence, is, therefore, a symbol.

Animal Sacrifice

“*Sacrifice is the act of offering the life of an animal or person, or some object to the divine Power or powers.*”⁶⁰ This offering is also made to deities, divinities, ancestors and kings.

The object of offering sacrifice is to maintain

contact or communion between the divine and man. It serves as the best way through which man maintains an established relationship between himself and his object of worship.⁶¹

On the matter of sacrifice, the Research Department wrote that:

The sacrifice of animals is an ancient custom and a familiar theme in the history of religion.⁶²

The Bahá'í Faith further explains this symbol in this way:

Just as the sheep sacrificed its life, likewise this natural state of man, which is the animalistic state, must be sacrificed. How should it be sacrificed? The vices of the animalistic state of man must be entirely annihilated, and he must be characterized with divine virtues.⁶³

With the . . . greater spiritual maturity of the people, the symbolic act of self-sacrifice largely replaced the sacrificial animals, and it is this symbolic act that is most acceptable in this Day.⁶⁴

This means that the sacrifice of animals is a reminder that human beings must completely overcome their evil qualities and replace them with virtues. Clearly, therefore, human sacrifice is at variance with the Bahá'í teachings and animal sacrifice is abrogated. Its major objective is conciliation and propitiation with the divine which could have made it class one mysticism. But the fact that it is just a symbol makes it fitted for class five mysticism.

Other Offerings

The offerings considered here are bits of food, and alcohol. This has been treated under Ancestral Reverence.

The Bahá'í Faith upholds the importance of remembering one's forebears, especially one's parents, and in making certain types of offerings in their names.⁶⁵

These are:

the intercession and the sincere prayers of other human souls, or through the charities and important good works which are performed in its name.⁶⁶

Offerings are, therefore, made in both religions, but the nature differs from one to the other.

Dreams and Visions

Like many other peoples, Africans consider dreams a method by which the ancestral spirits can communicate with the living. . . . Dreams are usually taken seriously.⁶⁷

This definition is limited because, in reality, dreams are also considered to be a method by which God communicates with the living. The same definition applies to visions. Therefore, both terms are used synonymously. Dreams and visions in ATR can be evoked after certain traditional practices. It could be the wearing of a special talisman before going to bed. The powers of this talisman then enable the wearer to receive whatever message is communicated or revealed to him.

Dreams and visions are very important in the Bahá'í Faith. It is considered to be "*the most mysterious of the signs of God amongst men.*"⁶⁸

The Bahá'í Faith teaches that:

There are three kinds of visions or dreams. First, those that arise from over-excited nerves, or disordered stomach, and of no use whatever. Second, when God sends a revelation to a soul that is not entirely pure from the world: to such an one He sends visions in symbols and signs, and these experiences need an interpreter. The third kind is when a soul who is severed from the world receives a revelation from God. In this station everything is clear and pure and needs no explanation.⁶⁹

In the Bahá'í Faith, therefore, not all dreams should be taken seriously. Those that are due to over-excited nerves, if they can be identified, must be discarded. Those that are symbolic must be handled with caution because they need an infallible interpreter. The third type is clear and needs no explanation.

The Bahá'í Faith teaches further that

there can be, under certain rare circumstances . . . communion with some soul gone before into the invisible world, but that most of this type of experience which people often claim to have with departed souls is nothing but the product of their own imaginations—however real it may seem to them to be.⁷⁰

It is possible, the Bahá'í Faith teaches, to receive communication with the soul of the departed even though this experience is rare. There are instances in Africa where people have been instructed in dreams by some ancestor and taught the cure for certain ailments.

In the Bahá'í Faith, dreams and visions are not to be sought by any means unless they occur by themselves. This is what it says:

When a person endeavors to develop faculties so that they might enjoy visions, dreams, etc., actually what they are doing is weakening certain of their spiritual capacities; and thus under such circumstances, dreams and visions have no reality, and ultimately lead to the destruction of the character of the person.⁷¹

To summarize, both religions, in principle, share in the belief in dreams and visions. But the Bahá'í Faith, unlike the ATR, identifies three types of dreams, teaches that the type due to over-excited nerves or disordered stomach are useless. The second type, symbolic dreams, if properly interpreted may lead one into the third, second and first class mysticism, inasmuch as they lead one to truth and to seeking closer union with God. The third type of dreams is clear and needs no interpretation. It "*comes to an individual through the grace of God.*"⁷² It often leads to truth.

When either of the two true dream-types comes to an individual involuntarily, it is desirable; if evoked by some rituals, it is harmful to the soul of the individual.

Because dreams and visions also have the attribute of the second and the third class mysticism, it makes it difficult to restrict it to class five mysticism. On the other hand, because it can be evoked—and, this seems to be the more common practice in society—often for mundane or orthodox occult reasons having little or nothing to do with the sanctification of the soul, this concept is classed under class five mysticism.

Miracles or Supernatural Acts

Miracles is a concept that runs through many other concepts in African Traditional Religion.

The Bahá’í Faith teaches about miracles attributed to the Manifestations of God as proof of Their role, and about those attributed to conjurors. For the first case, it teaches that:

Our purpose is not to deny such miracles; our only meaning is that they do not constitute decisive proofs, and that they have an inner significance.⁷³

For the second case, the Bahá’í Faith states that:

Extraordinary feats have also been related to some conjurors.⁷⁴

It goes on to state that:

The outward miracles have no importance for the people of reality. If a blind man receives sight, for example, he will finally again become sightless, for he will die and be deprived of all his senses and powers. Therefore, causing the blind man to see is comparatively of little importance, for this faculty of sight will at last disappear.⁷⁵

This statement should not be taken too far out of the context. True, if a man has protection against knife cuts or bullets, he would eventually die of some other cause. But in the situation of civil disorder and traditional warfare, one can countenance this feat.

One effect of miracles, though, is that they fill some people with awe and bafflement at the omnipotence of God. Even the virgin birth of Jesus Christ is no proof of His Manifestation. But it fills one with awe and reminds one of the supremacy of God—“*God does what He will.*”⁷⁶

Miracles are not performed with the objective of attaining union with God, but for the purpose of solving mundane problems. For these reasons they fall under class five mysticism.

Class Six Mysticism or Orthodox Occultism

Magic, Witchcraft (or Wizardry) and Sorcery

In African Traditional Religion, “*Magic can be defined as an attempt by man to tap and control . . . supernatural powers or resources of the universe for his own benefit.*” White magic is “*primarily used for protection against the evil forces that are found everywhere.*”⁷⁷ Black magic “*is intended primarily to harm people and property.*”⁷⁸ “*Sorcery is defined as the use of black magic and medicines against others.*”⁷⁹ Witchcraft “*is a manifestation of . . . mystical forces which may be inborn in a person, inherited or acquired in various ways.*”⁸⁰ It is distinct from sorcery. “*Its distinctive feature is that there is no palpable apparatus connected with it, no rites, ceremonies, incantations or invocations that the witch has to perform.*”⁸¹

More informative than these rather vague definitions is the popular observation that these phenomena are often practised with evil intent.

These concepts are not specifically defined in the Bahá’í teachings, and no clear synonymy exists between witchcraft and psychic forces (see note 5), but the elements involved, except for white magic, are worth noting. Some guidance is given below:

[T]he term “voodoo” generally refers to a variety of practices often including sorcery, the supposed summoning of spirits, elaborate rituals, and animal sacrifices. While nothing has been found in the Bahá’í Writings specifically on the set of beliefs and practices which make up voodoo, Bahá’ís can readily use the authoritative texts of the Faith as a standard with which to assess the various elements of voodoo.⁸²

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Since voodoo involves summoning spirits, practising elaborate rituals and doing evil, it would seem quite justified to proscribe these concepts and practices. The Universal House of Justice, referring to *ju-ju* and magic, a reference that very well applies to witchcraft, sorcery and psychic forces, wrote: “. . . educate the friends to avoid such practices . . .”⁸³

The purport of the above concepts is to do evil, seeking, therefore, to accentuate the ego of the practitioner. It therefore fits this definition of orthodox mysticism.

Necromancy

Necromancy is synonymous to psychicism in the Bahá'í teachings. It is the practice of summoning spirits. As stated in reference numbers 16 and 93 (below), the believers are strongly warned against summoning the spirits of the departed.

The mere fact that necromancy is proscribed qualifies it for class six mysticism.

Mediumship

“*Mediums are people who get in touch with the spirit world.*”⁸⁴ If this connection is made involuntarily, the Bahá'í teachings are not against it. But if this connection is cultivated, the Bahá'í Faith is against it. It says that:

What ‘Abdu’l-Bahá always pointed out in this matter is that these psychic powers were not to be used in this world, and that, indeed, it was dangerous to cultivate them here. They should be left dormant, and not exploited, even when we do so with the sincere belief we are helping others. . . .

If children are inclined to be psychic they should not be blamed for it too harshly; they should not be encouraged to strengthen their powers in this direction.⁸⁵

It is commonly observed that this faculty is often cultivated. For this reason, mediumship is against the Bahá'í teachings and placed under class six mysticism. A hint to this understanding is found in the refusal of the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith to accept a medium into his fold. He telegraphed:

CONCERNING MEDIUM DO NOT ADVISE ACCEPTANCE MEMBERSHIP.⁸⁶

Spirit Possession

This is a rather vexed theme. There are, generally speaking, two types of spirit-possession. One type is described below:

Amid dancing, drumming, and the carrying of carved objects . . . the deity will descend upon a devotee. . . ,she or he will gasp ecstatically and go limp, then suddenly leap into tremendous activity and take on the characteristics of the spirit. . . . People may ask questions of the possessed and receive answers in the name of the divine.⁸⁷

The Bahá'í Faith teaches that:

Regarding the materialization of spirits through mediums: A person finding himself in a state of trance, or unconsciousness, is like one who sleeps; whatever he feels and sees he imagines to be matter and of material things, but in reality they are wholly immaterial.⁸⁸

Outside the bounty of the Holy Spirit, whatsoever thou hearest as to the effect of trances, or the mediums' trumpets, conveying the singing voices of the dead, is imagination pure and simple.⁸⁹

This statement, perhaps, needs some commentary. Since the Bahá'í teachings mention that the situation outside the bounty of the Holy Spirit is pure imagination, this supposes that within the bounty of the Holy Spirit mediums can have true revelations. But, whatever they perceive is not material: it is spiritual. Like a type two dream, it needs to be interpreted. And this is where a wide zone is created for groping in the dark.

This type of mediumship is accepted if it develops involuntarily and if its impressions can be correctly interpreted. However, even if its perceptions can be correctly interpreted, it is not permitted to cultivate mediumship intentionally. It is also difficult to classify this type as good or evil, as what counts is the kind of communication received and the intention for evoking such influence. It has nothing to do with developing human virtues.

The second type of spirit-possession is one in which it is believed that supernatural, evil power can possess one or manipulate one's behaviour. The Bahá'í Faith teaches that

the condition of those people who are described in the Gospel as being possessed of devils . . . should be interpreted figuratively . . .⁹⁰

Here, again, the absence of correct, authoritative interpretation poses difficulties.

Contrary to the meaning of the above statement, the Bahá'í teachings affirm that sometimes people are influenced by evil, supernatural forces. Two relevant citations are found below:

Evil forces do take control of our life, but it is within our power to free ourselves from falling under their subjection.⁹¹

The second one states that:

The House of Justice fully appreciates that . . . there are many instances of individuals being affected adversely by the psychic arts of the other people.⁹²

Even though this second type of spirit-possession is true, because it is evil and has nothing to do with acquiring human virtues, it is condemned and, therefore, placed under class six mysticism.

Dreams and Visions

The category of dreams and visions that fall under this class of mysticism is that sought with the aid of some special rites or practices. Dreams and visions of this type are those that prove harmful to the seeker's soul. This has been discussed earlier and is disapproved of.

Talismans and Charms

Talismans and charms appear under this group in the cases where they are used as paraphernalia in orthodox occult practices aimed at causing evil. The objective for employing them in this case is not to seek communion with God or to acquire human virtues, but to seek mystic experiences.

Conclusions

Mysticism in the Bahá'í teachings can be placed under six classes, which can be placed descending order of importance. Class one or True mysticism has no parallel in African Traditional Religion. Class two mysticism is common to both religions insofar as worship and prayer are concerned in basic principles. Class three mysticism is also shared by both religions, but the absence of a proof of a divine, authentic source in ATR, the sayings and acts in ATR are limited to the emanations of sages, mystics, and religious leaders. Class four mysticism is shared by both only insofar as in ATR, adolescence or the coming of age of the individual is concerned. But, in general, African Traditional Religion does not consider adolescence as mysticism.

It can be seen, therefore, that almost all the concepts in ATR fit into classes five and six. This underlines the fact that, the older a religion, the further away from the essence of its teachings do the adherents move, thus calling for its renewal.

In addition, this paper has broadened the understanding of mysticism in African Traditional Religion by shedding some new light on adolescence, and it has shown the irrelevance of the popular concepts of mysticism in ATR to the spiritual development of the individual and to modern society.

References

- 1) Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 217.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 287.
- 3) *Compilation of Compilations*, volume two, p. 238
- 4) All definitions taken from *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*.
- 5) Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny*, pp. 406-7.
- 6) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Star of the West* 5: VIII: 6: 65.
- 7) Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 8 December 1935, cited on p. 4 of a memorandum from the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice dated 21 Jan. 1996.

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- 8) Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 163-164.
- 9) See nos. 4, 9, 11, and 18 of the Bibliography.
- 10) Memorandum dated 21 Jan. 1996, p. 4.
- 11) *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 12) *Ibid.*
- 13) *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 14) Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, ch. CLIII, pp. 323-4.
- 15) Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny*, pp. 406-7.
- 16) Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 60.
- 17) Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 337.
- 18) Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 209.
- 19) Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys*, p. 41.
- 20) Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 163f.
- 21) The Universal House of Justice, *Messages from the Universal house of Justice*, p. 665.
- 22) Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 144.
- 23) *Ibid.*, p. 147.
- 24) *Ibid.*, p. 148.
- 25) *Lights of Guidance*, p. 157, no. 427.
- 26) *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 126, Question 70.
- 27) The Universal house of Justice, *Messages from the Universal House of Justice*, p. 665.
- 28) *Lights of Guidance*, p. 132, no. 371.
- 29) Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 164.
- 30) Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 96.
- 31) Tanyi, *African Traditional Religion and the Bahá'í Faith* (unpublished ms.), p. 46.
- 32) Awolalu and Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion*, p. 240.
- 33) Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 154.
- 34) *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- 35) *Ibid.*
- 36) *Ibid.*
- 37) *Issues Related to the Practices of African Traditional Healers (IRPATH)*, p. 4.
- 38) Memorandum dated 13 June 1999., p. 1.
- 39) Memorandum dated 31 March 1988., p. 5.
- 40) Memorandum dated 13 June 1999., p. 1.
- 41) *IRPATH*, p.1.
- 42) Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, pp. 77-8.
- 43) Memorandum dated 21 Jan., 1996, p. 6.
- 44) Memorandum dated 27 Dec., 1994, p. 7.
- 45) Memorandum dated 6 March 1997, p. 1.
- 46) Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p 18.
- 47) Memorandum dated 17 October 1991, p. 1.
- 48) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 231, 232.
- 49) Memorandum dated 17 October 1991, p. 2.
- 50) *Ibid.*
- 51) Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 24.
- 52) Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, p. 71.
- 53) The Báb, *Le Béyan Persan*, translated from Persian into French by A.L.M. Nicholas, p. 26.

- 54) *Ibid.*
- 55) *Ibid.*
- 56) Reported in an article by Iraj Ayman in *The Lamp*, Vol.5, number 2, June 2000, p. 4, online at www.wilmetteinstitute.org/lamps
- 57) Memorandum dated 27 Dec., 1994, p.6.
- 58) Awolalu and Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion*, p.128.
- 59) *Ibid.*
- 60) *Ibid.*, p. 132.
- 61) *Ibid.*
- 62) Memorandum dated 31 March 1988., p. 1.
- 63) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Star of the West* 3: IV: 12: 205.
- 64) Memorandum dated 31 March 1988., p. 1.
- 65) Memorandum dated 17 October 1991, p.1.
- 66) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 240.
- 67) Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, p. 142.
- 68) Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 187.
- 69) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Star of the West* 8: 14: 7: 211.
- 70) Lights of Guidance, p. 389, no. 1054.
- 71) Lights of Guidance, p. 390, no. 1057.
- 72) *Ibid.*
- 73) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 38.
- 74) *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- 75) *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- 76) Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, súra 14: 32.
- 77) Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, p. 69.
- 78) *Ibid.*
- 79) *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- 80) Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 166.
- 81) Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, p. 72.
- 82) *Aspects of Traditional African Culture*, p. 45, no. 38.
- 83) *Ibid.*, p. 40, no. 32.
- 84) Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, p. 158.
- 85) Lights of Guidance, p. 387, no. 1048.
- 86) Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny*, p. 175.
- 87) King, *African Cosmos*, p. 60.
- 88) Lights of Guidance, p. 394, no. 1074.
- 89) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 160, no. 139.
- 90) Lights of Guidance, p. 385, no. 1043.
- 91) *IRPATH*, p. 4.
- 92) *Aspects of Traditional African Culture*, p. 41, no. 35.

Notes

I. A text that supports and expresses reference no. 11 is:

Sacrifice of life is of two kinds. To be killed for the Cause is not so difficult as to live for it in absolute obedience to the commands of God.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Star of the West* 5: VIII:6:65

The teaching about the symbolism in animal sacrifice dates as far as the Old Testament days. But as usual, humanity quickly turns away

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from the essence of the teachings of God, and holds on to superstition. The Book of Psalms, in chapter 50 verses 8-13 and chapter 51 verse 16, tells us that God does not need animal sacrifice. The sacrifice that is acceptable to Him is indicated in verses 14 and 15 of the same chapter in these words:

Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High . . .

Psalm 51 verse 17, gives us more guidance on the acceptable sacrifice:

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise . . .

'Abdu'l-Bahá clarifies the meaning of thanksgiving in these words:

In this day, to thank God for His bounties consisteth in possessing a radiant heart, and a soul open to the promptings of the spirit. This is the essence of thanksgiving.

Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 179, no. 153.

This understanding ties in with the second meaning of sacrifice giving by 'Abdu'l-Bahá above, for sacrifice in the path of God and obedience to His commands mean the same thing, and it is this obedience or sacrifice that brings about a pure, contrite and radiant heart.

Thus, even before the Bahá'í Dispensation, God had revealed the symbolism in animal sacrifice, and taught that true sacrifice is the spiritual conditions of possessing a pure and radiant heart which come about by keeping one's vows to God, in other words, obeying God's commands, and by repenting from one's sins.

II. The whole of reference number 17, which is a letter dated 8 December 1935 written on behalf of the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, is cited below:

It is this condition, so sadly morbid, into which society has fallen, that religion seeks to improve and transform. For the core of religious faith is that mystic feeling that unites man with God. This state of spiritual communion can be brought about and maintained by means of meditation and prayer. And this is the reason why Bahá'u'lláh has so much stressed the importance of worship. It is not sufficient for a believer to merely accept and observe the teachings. He should, in addition, cultivate the sense of spirituality, which he can acquire chiefly by the means of prayer. The Bahá'í Faith, like all other Divine religions, is thus fundamentally mystic in character. Its chief goal is the development of the individual and society, through the acquisition of spiritual virtues and powers. It is the soul of man that has first to be fed. And this spiritual nourishment prayer can best provide. Laws and institutions, as viewed by Bahá'u'lláh, can become really effective only when our inner spiritual life has been perfected and transformed. Otherwise religion will degenerate into a mere organization, and become a dead thing.

III. A question that one might naturally ask is how to identify this mystic feeling. The answer to this question is given below:

With regard to Mr. . . . 's question about how one can identify "that mystic feeling that unites man with God," it is the view of the Research Department that the answer is to be derived from personal meditation and may well be different for each person.

A memorandum from the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice dated 9 April 1996.

IV. The third class of mysticism is given the adjective "coronary" because this class deals with understanding scripture, and several references in scripture show that the heart is the seat of understanding. Some of these are: Isaiah 6: 10, Matt.13:14, John 12:40; Súras 7:179 and 63:3; The Hidden Words (Persian), numbers 16,33, and 36, *Bahá'í Prayers* (Wilmette, Ill.: B.P.T., 1991), p.165, and Gleanings, pp.293, 303.

Another reason is that, understanding of scripture is the purpose for which scripture is revealed. Bahá'u'lláh wrote that:

. . . in every age, the reading of the scriptures and holy books is for no other purpose except to enable the reader to apprehend their meaning and unravel their innermost mysteries. Otherwise, reading without understanding, is of no abiding profit unto man.

Kitáb-i-[^]qán, London, England: B.P.T., 1961 edition., pp. 110-111.

Thus, Bahá'u'lláh makes a direct link between the understanding of scripture and mysticism in stating that the sole purpose for reading scripture has always been, is, and will always be, to understand their meaning and to unravel their mysteries.

V Talking of psychic powers and witchcraft, one might want to know the relationship between these two. The answer is given below:

The Research Department has found nothing in the Writings clarifying the relationship between the use of "psychic powers" and what some call "witchcraft."

A memorandum from the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice to an individual dated 5 April 1999

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