

A Dynamic Continuity between Traditions

Doudou Diène

Like most Africans¹, particularly those from Western Africa, I come from an oral tradition where the Word has a central place. Whether it is spiritual or educational, transmission takes place primarily through spoken exchange. Our traditions are passed on to children in the evening, after dinner and around bedtime, by their parents, grandparents, uncles and elders. Then the talk touches on basic matters, which are put across in a teaching style that uses images: this is the time for stories through which children discover their ancestors, their family history and the traditional religions. During these evening hours a number of ceremonies and artistic and religious activities also occur. Circumcised boys join together with the whole community for musical festivities that have a religious dimension, for in the traditional world circumcision is the important rite of passage through which a boy learns to master pain: it should never be visible. This is not a purely medical or surgical act. It is ritualized to the highest degree. It is the first marker of a concept that the West does not have, that of generation. A whole age group is circumcised together. The ritual takes place at a certain time of day. It used to happen in the forest, in very difficult conditions, but the ritual aspect is still very present even when the procedure is done in hospital. The circumcised boys wear a special costume. They live apart from the community under the direction of a master, who guides and accompanies them, who teaches them and also punishes them. And the high point of this ritual occurs at night in a ceremony with tom-tom music that brings together boys and community each evening. That is when the boys learn certain ritual movements, and the elders come to talk about life and recount their experiences. It is not only stories and legends belonging to the group that are passed on then, but also the great mysteries of the world. There, sitting amid the black star-studded African night, all this wisdom is passed down in a festive atmosphere: for us religion cannot be separated from festivity. Celebration is part of religious expression. It is always a powerful, very full moment that has an effect on children from the age of five or six.

In my family we are always carrying out rituals specific to the oral tradition. Sometimes without being aware of it, at other times because there is a problem. We have great priestesses who are part of our tribal group and who ceaselessly work to protect us, and we also have our poets. They preserve and sing the memories of each family. They are our troubadours. Immediately when I arrive in Senegal, my family's poets come to my home and start to sing of my ancestors without even giving me the chance to put my luggage down. It is always very beautiful and very stirring. They recite my ancestors' names, recall their great deeds and refer as well to the spirits. These troubadours, like Western writers, represent the word as memory, the word as history, the word as archive. They belong to the family because they know every one of its members, whether living or

dead. They have belonged to it through generations. Each extended family has its poet and his knowledge is passed down from father to son or from uncle to nephew. Nowadays the chain is sometimes broken because of schooling, but the great families of poets still exist and are often prosperous: they receive a lot of money. These are families set apart from the rest of society, who sadly belong to castes that are unjustly seen as inferior and that do not mix through marriage. Nevertheless they have an important part to play, which demonstrates the central place of ancestors in African tradition. They are forever venerated and are present in the oral tradition carried on by the poets, but also in the names people are given. Family members are always given an ancestor's name. In Senegal many names begin with *Pap*, which means the first name is the paternal grandfather's. The first name begins with *Mam* if it is the grandmother's. So you can tell immediately where the child's name comes from and therefore one's identity incorporates continuity with one's ancestors. This continuity is also visible when there are problems in the family: the rituals used to resolve them always contain an appeal to the ancestors. The leader of the ceremony speaks to them, asks them to reply or explain. It is all quite natural. In many families the founding ancestors live through particular animals or objects. Because of this, certain types of animal are not killed. In Senegal there is a region where the snake is the reincarnation of the ancestor. It is never killed. In order to avoid being bitten, each family wears a special item of clothing. When they wear it, snakes do not bite. In other regions it is other animals. All this seems very mysterious to Europeans, but for Africans it runs extremely deep. The ancestors are ever-present.

For us the power of the word is such that in some groups people believe words can kill: when they are spoken in a certain way at a particular time, they can paralyse someone. But they are also believed to be able to heal. The West has recently discovered music therapy – that is, treating psychiatric patients using music – but in my culture we have practised it since time immemorial. We treat mental illness using sound. Indeed we believe that each person consists of a basic sound. In my extended family some old people know the basic sound for each of us. They know our *rapp*. This *rapp* identifies our spirit and also the secret language that goes with it. If I have a problem of any kind, these people will straightaway call up my *rapp*, even if I am in Paris. When a community has a mentally ill person in their midst, they get together and call on professional musicians – playing the *thrum*, the tom-tom, the drum or other instruments – as a means of therapy. These musicians carry on playing for hours or days, in order to discover the sound and through it the vital energy of the afflicted person. Once they have identified it, they play around this sound, which is able to bring the person back to full health. This ceremony is a celebration that everyone takes part in. It centres around music and dance. When the person starts to move and jig about, that means something has been activated. To begin with, the person moves in a disjointed way and the whole community moves with him/her, showing they are not the only one moving. Then, very gradually, the movement becomes more coordinated, more graceful, more harmonious, owing to the accompanying singing and music. The therapeutic process is precisely this transformation of uncoordinated into harmonious movement. Coordination of movement indicates that calm has returned to the person's mind; then we know they are being healed. But they go through this experience with their community. When the disjointed movement turns into a dance, that is the consequence of the therapy.

In the Lebou community this ceremony is conducted by wise women, who are often old and well-respected. They are known for being a kind of shaman, in contact with the spirits. They can communicate with them, then translate and tell the community what they have said.

Sounds are important, but so are words. There are words that are known only to the old women. It is a secret language that has words to heal, words to pass on knowledge, words to paralyse. I have been given words that I am not allowed to repeat. Our spirituality has a system of codes and secrets. There are many phrases and practices that you are not supposed to reveal. They are part of the systems that link people, families, the cultural and aesthetic systems, and so on, that are related to certain kinds of festival. Music expresses all that quite naturally. That is why it is difficult for a foreigner to understand the language of music and dance. These are not simply aesthetic movements or pleasant sounds, but a ritual language. There is an example of this in the diaspora: it is well known that the slaves of Haiti and Santo Domingo rose up on the night of 22 to 23 August 1791. This was the most significant, the best organized slave revolt, resulting in the most profound impact on the slave system. The slaves had organized their revolt for several months under the noses of their European masters without them realizing it. Voodoo was the source and framework for the revolt's strategy and organization. Their masters thought they could let these savages move about at night, play the tom-tom and dance after working in the fields. They hoped it would make them more willing to work the next day. But the slaves were using the coded, ritualized, secret language of voodoo. That was how they organized the revolt, allocated tasks, passed information under the noses of their masters, who watched them without understanding a thing. When the revolt broke out, it was a complete surprise.²

This status as language that sound, speech and movement have is one of the profound realities of West Africa. It communicates meaning. In Senegal certain sounds can mean that someone has been bitten by a snake. Then the tom-tom players make a noise that is recognized by those who can treat snake-bites, so they come straightaway. Other sounds may indicate that someone has died or something else. The use of sound as energy, or expression of a certain meaning, is deeply rooted in our culture.

Other rituals occur at various points in the lives of Senegalese families. They are related to birth, death, baptism, the significant family events. Around the age of eight or ten children discover the ritual that has to do with relating to others. Then they learn the accepted code or language for addressing those around them. You do not speak to everyone in the same way. It is not just a question of respect. The words are linked to a certain attitude. When you address your uncle, who is a central figure in my culture, you do not do it in the same way as you address your mother or grandmother.

Families who live in the country also have a ritual for work in the fields. It does not relate so much to the idea of productivity as to one's relationship with nature. In this way you learn that the spirits are behind all of creation and give it meaning. That is why African children live among an extraordinarily rich world of the imagination; they discover that behind each natural element or event there is a secret, a meaning, a spirit, that the spirits are all around, evil ones and good ones. So there are some times of day when you must not be in certain places because of certain spirits. In particular people say that the end of the day, around seven in the evening, when the sun is going down, is a

dangerous time when evil spirits come out. Then you must stay inside until it is night. Later the deep black of night becomes a shared universe again, one of visible and invisible, of human beings and spirits. This is because night is the special moment for dialogue, knowledge, transmission.

And so traditional African life at its deepest core is essentially one of ritual and mysticism. According to our beliefs the divine is everywhere: in objects, trees, stones, which sometimes indicate the presence of possible ancestors, but also in the whole universe. Everything around us is divine. Our mystics and shamans give a meaning to everything. Their methods are different of course: the shaman is an intermediary between humans and the spirits of nature, in order to respond to specific needs (sickness, love, fortune . . .), whereas the mystic seeks pure union with the divine.

The absorption of Islam into the soil of Africa

Our holistic conception of the divine partly explains why Sufi Islam went through a profound process of adaptation, which occurred amazingly fast, in both East and West Africa. In fact Sufi Islam is a mystical form, which is also based on perceiving the divine in all physical things. In Sufism the essential sacred act is the search for contact with the divine, a contact which it is thought can be established through anything. The aim is to know the divine, to realize that there is a purpose other than life as we know it, to discover that we ourselves are a tiny part of that divine totality, that we are not separate from it, that the god we seek is not outside us but within us, that every living act, every thought, every movement has its spiritual meaning: it is the whole of all that which gives our lives their structure and their meaning. Sufism teaches us to see a divine meaning in everything around us. So we can discern the divine, however material its manifestation. This is precisely the same approach as in African spiritual traditions. For the sufi attaining the divine may occur through physical movements, words repeated aloud or in one's head, the *dhikr*. African spiritual traditions express this same unitary meaning of the sacred and make use of the same practices to achieve knowledge and transcendence. The centrality of the word in Sufism is another point where it meets traditional African culture. One of Sufism's strongest mystical supports is the manner of reciting the *dhikr*. Although some Sufi traditions recite it silently, others repeat it out loud, thus creating a trance-like effect or altered consciousness, which is the channel for the link with the divine. In the rituals all these elements have become intermingled, whether from Sufism or African traditions. And so Islam made rapid headway in West Africa because it adapted to this spiritual landscape. Of course it arrived in West Africa with the Koran, which was transmitted here as it was elsewhere: first, believers spoke, recited or declaimed it, then they wrote it down in Arabic. However, the written version supplemented the spoken, but did not replace it. I can demonstrate that by using myself as an example. I come from a deeply Muslim family: one of my uncles was the imam of Dakar. But I was taught the Koran through recitation. I can recite the Koran without knowing any Arabic, since I have never learnt it. So when I was learning the Koran, the emphasis was on the spoken word. Most West African Muslims recite the Koran in the sacred language of the prophet, although they do not speak Arabic. That does not stop them knowing and understanding the meaning of what they have learnt.

Furthermore I in no way see a separation between African spiritual traditions and Islam. My work has meant that I have travelled and discovered other religious traditions that I also integrate into my own practices. I can express my spirituality through a picture of the Buddha as well as with a verse from the Koran that I learnt to recite when I was young, or again by thinking of my grandmother, a central figure in my family line, or by reciting traditional mystical phrases from the Senegalese tradition. West Africans' experience is truly holistic, it is a totality. The idea that everything is divine goes deep in our culture, our upbringing, our way of life. We do not make any separation. It is just that the interpretation given to an object, an animal, a tree, the sun or the moon varies from family to family. But there is no dividing line. In my office there are objects from all the traditions I have come across: here a *bodhisattva*, the reclining buddha, there some books about Islam, or Senegalese objects from home, or again some stones a Russian shaman gave me, or some other stones I brought from certain sacred places in Senegal. It is not about aesthetic enjoyment but a feeling of a deep bond between these many actualizations – unity in diversity. For me all that goes hand-in-hand.

Once you have realized this, the question arises of the mystery of sacred texts. All spiritual traditions teach that the divine Word has a dual meaning: its surface sense and its hidden mystical sense. This is why reciting the sacred word is full of mysterious significance. In certain situations the act of reciting the sounds of the sacred Word creates an altered state of consciousness. Indeed this is what Hindu and Sufi mystics practise. They think of the word itself as fundamentally imbued with vibrant energy that allows them to reach the supreme energy, cosmic energy. Here we come back to the basic strength of the oral tradition, the spoken word, that is, sound, utterance, meaning. Our sacred traditions have found in their own practices that these words are full of energy. They have taken them over because they already believed in the importance of the Word, its power and energy. The world is old and the relationship to the divine is extremely ancient. So when the written religions arrived with their language, the old law of energy was confirmed: nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything changes. African peoples incorporated these religions that came from elsewhere into a vision of the sacred that was already there. The traditional mystics absorbed the new words from Islam into the ancient African sounds. The words and the sounds are different, but the vibrations and the deepest meaning are the same.

Christianity's problems of intolerance and cultural incompatibility in Africa

Where Islam quickly found its place within West African culture, the same cannot be said of Christianity, which was for a long time linked with colonization. For many years a futile argument poisoned its opportunities to develop. Those priests who were in the field realized very rapidly how important it was to adapt the liturgy to the local cultures. But their orders were to follow the rite. They were to wear robes and use Latin. Priests living in the Congo knew that Congolese Christians wanted to play the tom-tom in church, or some other African instrument. They also wanted to express God through dance. But Christian orthodoxy forbade it, claiming that it was barbaric, animist and so evil. It was a long time before it was realized that Christianity had to adapt, that the essence was not to be found in the means of expression but in the core of the Christian message. Movements

that were founded in Zaïre and other countries in southern and central Africa tried to Africanize Christianity and often did so in opposition to the local authorities and the dominant policy of the colonizers. Nowadays, when the Pope comes to Africa, he finds a vibrant Christian faith in the beat of the tom-tom during the mass. But in the past Rome used to insist on the piano or the organ being played in the Congolese jungle! The blinkered cultural ethnocentrism of some European representatives of the Church did not always assist the spread of the Christian message. In fact it did it a disservice.

The African mission regions where Christianity did spread were those countries where it was most quickly and completely Africanized. Rome or Europe's resistance to the expression of the message in the local culture confused the message of Christianity with its cultural expression. European cultural expression had to be copied everywhere else. The impact of this theological dispute on African Christianity was very profound. However, priests who had long experience of Africa very quickly understood the deep spiritual meaning of the synthesis Africans were trying to bring about. For many years the archbishop of Zambia held meetings in huge stadiums where he performed miracles. He was recalled to Rome, where he was forced to stay for a few years, and then he was sent back to Africa. He used African wisdom without there being necessarily any contradiction with the Christian ethic. In central Africa there are now large groups similar to the Baptists. The great Churches have created their local prophets and incorporated traditional rites into Christianity. Missionaries have realized that this is the only way to plant the Christian message. In those countries where Christianity has been most thoroughly Africanized, Islam has gained less of a foothold.

A 'dynamic continuity'

African cultural and spiritual reality is characterized by continual inventive change. Christianity adapted naturally to traditional African spirituality in the end, as Islam had done. The African variety of Islam practised in Senegal, like the Christianity practised in Zaïre or elsewhere, demonstrate in varying degrees the gradual processes of integration into African culture. There is an African 'core culture' that basically decides the forms of expression of these religions, as well as the dynamics of their progress or decline, on the continent of Africa. It is in the context of this spiritual complexity that it is said, for example, that in Senegal 90 per cent of the people are Muslims, 10 per cent are Christians, but 100 per cent are 'animists'. I am a Muslim, but I still have my traditional gods to appeal to. Thus Islam has preserved circumcision, but has removed some elements of the traditional African ritual. It contributes another type of teaching that is complementary to African tradition rather than competing with it. I grew up surrounded by animist beliefs at the same time as I was being taught the Koran. This consisted of reciting verses from the Koran written on wooden tablets. We were not taught Arabic, but had to memorize the verses. We spent hours reciting them under the direction of extremely strict masters, who sometimes meted out minor physical punishments. This instruction took place in the daytime at specific times and always in a group. But we were taught African traditions and beliefs in the evening among our families. Whereas Islamic education was carried out in the public sphere, by *serignes* (religious teachers), traditional education was integrated into social life.

Here and there you can find imams who are in favour of dividing lines between religious identities, but many ignore them. Because of its mystic core, African spiritual tradition is deeply pluralist and open. The cardinal of Senegal's brother is the imam in a village near Dakar. So in the same family there is an imam and a cardinal. That does not prevent them from meeting and talking about God. Africa has this ability to synthesize, to cross borders and to work to reach the essence. This is largely due to the mystical nature of its spirituality. There is no division between things. Everything is one. There is a close bond between everything in the universe. The divine is everywhere. So Africans, and especially West Africans, do not really mind whether the divine is called Christ, has a voodoo name or the name of a local spirit. For us there is no contradiction whatsoever. For this reason it is easy to understand how religious and spiritual structures such as *candomblé* in Brazil or *santería* in Cuba grew up with the diaspora of slaves who were taken to the Americas and the West Indies. In a *santería* ceremony you can find the Virgin Mary cheek by jowl with Yoruba gods without there being any conflict. This is because the slaves came from a culture where god can take any form. But also because over the centuries of slavery slaves, who were forced to accept what their masters told them to, evolved a culture of resistance and subtle subversion that incorporated everything that was imposed on them, without abandoning their basic beliefs, but altering and adapting them. They incorporated their masters' gods. If they were Christian, they made a place in their own spirituality for Christ and the Virgin Mary and gave them a new African name. This is what 'maroon' culture was.

Western anthropologists have got used to calling this 'religious syncretism', but I am not very fond of that phrase. It implies that various beliefs intermingle automatically by means of a sort of alchemy. I prefer the concept of 'dynamic continuity'. There are values, forms of expression, ways of being and cultures that evolve without a break, taking account of what they meet or come in contact with. We may say there is syncretism to the extent that mixing does indeed take place, but not everything is ever equal in this mixing process. There is always one of the cultural aspects that absorbs the other and at the same time changes itself. It was African cultures, because of their natural age-old adaptability, that absorbed both Christianity and Islam. They preserved the outward forms and the values of these religions, but they planted them deep in the traditional practices and values, seamlessly and without there being any conflict. I think African cultures have been strongest precisely because the spoken word is stronger than the written word. Writing is a way of fixing, fencing in. Speaking taps into the imagination, it is more fluid, it is like water. This can be seen in our art objects. For us their value is spiritual rather than aesthetic. Their source goes back thousands of years. Those who created them are still creating them in a ritual sense. The spiritual and religious value that surrounds them preserves them more surely and effectively than Western museums could: by shutting them in, they would have frozen them, stripped them of their traditional function and thus of life. Our objects do not need to be placed in glass cages and dusted now and then. They should be used continually in our rituals and so carry on our traditions. It is this continuity that safeguards them. African art is above all a spiritual art. For this reason it is very fluid both in its simple and its complex forms of expression. In Africa aesthetics arises out of ethics or spirituality. This is its strength: it is a sacred art because of its content and not its form. This confers on objects a power that goes far beyond aesthetics.

Form and content

One of the great problems for the dialogue between spiritual traditions is that some people reduce the spiritual to the form of cultural expression that believers have given it. And so they impoverish it, limiting it to what it was at a particular moment in history. This is a blind alley. Each time that emphasis is placed on the outward form of the spiritual, the essence is forgotten. The outward form is Buddhism, Christianity, Islam or even a sect. The essence is beyond. It is hidden and we have to look for it. In relation to this, Africans say that 'in the forest, when the branches fight, their roots embrace'. So we have to look for the invisible roots, which bring unity when they embrace. The branches are the many, the visible, the changing; they go every which way. But they are only the expression of the roots, the outward sign of the essence.

In Senegal we do not have a word equivalent to 'religion' precisely because we come from a mystical tradition. It is on an intellectual level that religious traditions are defined as separate: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, etc. But on the mystical level Buddhism and Christianity and the other religions are bubbles rising to the surface of a vast ocean. At a particular moment they emerge, then fall back down, and a new bubble appears. It matters very little to the mystic whether people call him Buddha or something else. What is important is behind.

Religion is only the expression, at a given point in history, in time and space, of a spiritual tradition. The places where ceremonies are held, the rituals, the robes allow us to identify it. The spiritual goes beyond the religious. It sees humans as fundamentally spiritual beings and considers spirit to be the principal force in the universe. Mysticism is the purest translation of this vision. In this tradition spirit imbues everything and since this is so, mystics do not feel obliged to seek God in a church, a mosque or a synagogue. They can find him anywhere, in the passing cloud, in the bird flying by, or on the tree, since everything all around is divine. In all these mysticisms we find the idea that God is the One. He has assumed an infinite number of forms in order to be loved in different ways. By becoming manifest through everything, he is many. Mystics transcend this many to find the One. So they are always tolerant. Fundamentalism or sectarianism is never found in mystics, since they consider the other to be divine, so they cannot exclude or persecute it.

When the suit is too small . . . we should like to see the split as a mere sectarian breakaway, but that would be too simple

At present we are watching a live event, the progress of the spiritual out of darkness into light. Each era has made its own suit (Christianity, Islam . . .), but today the suit has become too tight; it is on the point of splitting. That is part of the mystical journey. Since the suit no longer fits, people are being forced to look for unity behind the borrowed forms. Every time an attempt has been made to enclose human beings within one simple form and reduce the spiritual to that form, they have broken out in the end, even though it may have been fifty, a hundred, two hundred, or a thousand years later. The mistake made by all the hierarchies and all the religious authorities has been to reduce the spiritual, the essence, to its material manifestation in order to get its power. And mystics do not seek after power. But every time religion has allied itself with power it has created ring

fences that people have tried to break out of. It has very often been then that their actions have been called sectarian and the new groups they have joined have been called sects. The word has too often been used to repress anything that did not come from the great spiritual traditions. And today history seems to want to repeat itself.

The word sect is used negatively to describe a kind of irrationality that certain sorts of practice display. However, the great rock concerts that young people sometimes go to in their tens of thousands could be seen as spiritual rituals very comparable to what is found in Africa. First they are quests. These young people all perform the same movements. They need to express something other than what they are in their isolated individuality. There is a kind of communion. The part played by music and words reappears: the young people repeat the words with the band, which is also similar to a ritual like the *dhikr*. These young people repeat words that take them to a certain level of altered consciousness. They do not know what they are looking for, but it happens quite naturally. The music, and more especially the sound of the music and the words, has a role that it assumes in many rituals. At these concerts it may happen that young people smoke grass. It is well known that in some Sufi groups, or in certain shamanic rituals, grass is used to reach a particular level. Today's great gatherings of young people are a kind of mysterious return, but which is not intended as such, to rituals of group communion. These young people stick photos of musicians up on their walls, just as in the past people used to put up a picture of the holy virgin or other religious images.

Of course there is a fear that this will lead to deviance, as the events are uncontrolled and take place outside the cultural system. But in many spiritual traditions (particularly tantrism or Sufi traditions) the route to the divine is not through a long process, but through a violent emotion, a sudden shock, unsought and unintended, that takes hold of the individual. Then this violent emotional shock is seen as revealing a spiritual dimension. This is why some religious scholars, thinkers or practitioners consider trances to be a mystical expression. Both routes have always existed in all traditions: the route of ritual, slow apprenticeship and gradual unfolding, and the route through violent shock. Often the gradual route is a way of avoiding the pain of the violent route. When these young people come together and sing in communion, they may perhaps not be directed by a master, but there is something going on that must bring them another experience.

Today sects are the expression of the fact that the religious suit is splitting. People are trying to break out in a way that may be clumsy. We must understand their quest, encourage them, offer them values. Bubbles burst when they have been enclosed in the bottle for too long. They pop out messily, but nothing will stop human beings searching for something that expresses their spirituality better than what they are being offered.

Doudou Diène
UNESCO, Paris

(translated from the French by Jean Burrell)

Notes

1. This article is the result of interviews that took place in the spring of 1999 between Doudou Diène, director of the Department of intercultural dialogue and pluralism at UNESCO, and Nathalie Luca.
2. On the history of slavery, see *Diogenes* issue 179 (1997 July–September) *Slave Routes and Traces* (Paris, Gallimard), published in collaboration with the UNESCO project 'The Slave Route'.