

**Author: Edith Chamwama**

**Affiliation: Maryknoll Institute of African Studies, Nairobi, Kenya**

**Title: Spirituality of Hope: African Christian Women's Spirituality**

## **Spirituality of Hope: African Christian Women's Spirituality**

“Hope is not a matter of waiting for things outside of us to get better. It is about getting better inside about what is going on outside. It is about becoming open to the God of Newness. It is about allowing ourselves to let go of the present, to believe in the future we cannot see but trust to God. Surrendering to the demands of the moment, holding on when holding on seems pointless, brings us to that point of personal transformation which is the juncture of maturity and sagacity. Then, whatever the circumstances, however hard the task, the struggles of life may indeed shunt us from mountain top to mountain top but they will not destroy us.” Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB- The spirituality of hope

### **Introduction**

This paper attempts to define spirituality of hope as an aspect of African Christian spirituality. This is done through examining the meaning and expressions of hope by African Christian women especially in times of crisis. The paper utilizes information gathered through interviews in one of the internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Mai Mahiu, Naivasha Kenya.

The argument being posited in the paper is that African Christian women cope better and find the strength to move on after a crisis because of the spirituality of hope. For the African Christian woman, Christianity is a religion of hope. In it they find resources and messages of hope that are a driving force to their strength to move on after life altering experiences.

The paper sets off with a brief overview of Kenya, the genesis of election (ethnic violence), post-election violence, its effects on women, spirituality of hope, sources of spirituality of hope, its expressions and finally draws a conclusion.

### **Definition of terms**

- **Spirituality:** Lived experience that finds expression in a person's faith through their beliefs and values, symbols, rituals and actions.
- **African Spirituality:** innate spirituality shaped to some extent by the African indigenous inclusive view of a spiritual world
- **Christian Spirituality:** The quest for a fulfilled and authentic life that involves taking the beliefs and values of Christianity and weaving them into the fabric of our lives so that they animate, provide the breath and spirit and fire for our lives
- **Post-Election Violence (PEV):** Violence and chaos that broke out after the 2007 disputed Kenya presidential elections.
- **IDP-** Internally Displaced Persons

## **Methodology**

This paper was written using both primary and secondary data. Primary data was derived from first hand information through field research conducted from June 2009 to May 2011. In the field research data gathering methods used included personal interviews, group interviews and observation through visits to the Mai Mahiu IDP camps and homes of some of the women. Secondary data obtained from literature review of published books, Television interviews, articles, and local dailies, was used to supplement the primary data. The data collected was analyzed and synthesized for the final product- this paper.

## **A brief Overview of Kenya**

Kenya, a country located in East Africa has a total population of about 38,610,097<sup>1</sup> (as per the nationwide census conducted in August 2009). Of the total population, 19,417,639 are women, thus surpassing the male population by 225,154. Thus deducing from this, it can be concluded that women form a majority of the country's population.

Majority of the people in Kenya are of African descent. The country has about 70 distinct ethnic groups. Often it is 42 of these groups that are commonly known with most of the smaller ethnic groups grouped together with the major ones. The Kikuyu ethnic group is said to be the largest ethnic group with 17% of the total population, followed by the Luhya at 14% and the Kalenjin at 13% while the el-molo have the lowest population at below 1%. The country's ethnic groups are in three major clusters namely the Bantu, nilotes and cushites.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenya National Bureau of statistics. (2010). *2009 Kenya Population and housing census, volume 1A*. Nairobi: Government Printers.

The republic of Kenya follows a democratic system of governance. The leaders are elected every five years with the top most leader being the president. In 2010, the people voted for and adopted a new constitution replacing the old constitution that has been in place since the country's independence in 1963.

In terms of religion, a majority of the Kenya population are Christians, with an estimated 45% being protestants and 33% being Catholic. Islam also commands a large following especially at the Kenyan coast and other urban areas, with an estimated 10% of the population. It is further estimated that 10% of the people ascribe to indigenous religion. Other religions such as the Baha'i faith, Hindu, Buddhism are also present and practiced in the country.

### **Election violence- Causes**

Ethnic tension has been a characteristic of Kenyan politics since the independence of the country in 1963. This has been fueled by various factors and has invariably devolved into ethnic clashes and violence in the country especially in the election period.

The practice of election violence in Kenya has been prevalent in the election years especially since the inception of multiparty system in 1992. This has mainly taken the form of ethnic violence. It is thus important to trace the root of the ethnic tension that sparks the election violence every election year since 1991/92.

Some scholars have posited the idea of ethnic tension as having its roots in the colonial period. During this period the British colonialists employed the policy of divide and rule, through ethnically defined administrative jurisdictions.<sup>2</sup> This then pitted the various ethnic groups against one another. This was further fueled by the colonial policy of annexing off fertile pieces of land in Central Kenya and Rift Valley and setting them aside for the white settlers. They forced a large population of Kikuyu, Kalenjin and Maasai off their land.

After independence, these lands were not reverted to the previous owners, instead they were taken by rich and influential people in the government. Some of the displaced people were resettled in areas of Rift valley by the then political government. This further displaced some of the pastoralist population of the Kalenjin and Maasai. Through this there was heightening tension and suspicion especially between the Kalenjin and Kikuyu as most of those resettled in the Rift valley were the Kikuyu.

There has been a general conception that the Kikuyu were given large pieces of land free of charge by the then government under the first president Jomo Kenyatta. This shift in land ownership in Rift valley, considered as the most fertile land, has been a key element of the ethnic tension between the Kikuyu on one hand and the Kalenjin and Maasai on the other.

Another factor that is to blame for the ethnic violence/election violence is the political power and rights. This is mainly in connection with the ethnic affiliation of the three presidents that Kenya has had since independence in 1963. The first president was Jomo Kenyatta, a kikuyu, the second

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<sup>2</sup> Frank Holmquist and Michael Ford, Kenya: State and Civil Society the first year after the Election", *Africa Today* (Vol. 41, No.4) p.11.

Daniel Arap Moi, a Kalenjin and the third and present president, Mwai Kibaki, a kikuyu. It has been speculated that these presidents have, during their tenure in office, showed favoritism to their respective ethnic groups at the expense of the other groups. The tension between the Kikuyu and Kalenjin has however been more pronounced because of the perception that the group in power (depending on the sitting president) has sidelined the other group in terms of development, allocation of government resources and top government offices/jobs.

The political leadership of the country also has a share of blame in the ethnic tension that sparks off ethnic violence. Often the leaders hype up tribal/ethnic feelings that then seclude one ethnic group from the other. They use this to their advantage to maintain leadership and this whips up ethnic animosity between the populace. Furthermore, most of the political leaders form political parties that are patronized by people from their ethnic groups, thus perpetuating the colonial policy of divide and rule. Often the people are led to believe that it is only by having a person from their ethnic group in leadership that will benefit from government assisted development, allocation of resources and government job opportunities.

Thus, as a result of the above reasons, every time there has been elections, there have been ethnic clashes especially in the Rift valley. At these times, people have been displaced, violence meted on the people, their property looted and destroyed, but after a while the tension cools down and they go back to living as normal, only for this harmony to be disrupted in the next election year.

Nonetheless, the violence that erupted after the 2007 general elections was of an unprecedented magnitude. Unlike the other years, the violence erupted after the election conducted in December

2007 and was spread all over the country, hence the term post-election violence (henceforth PEV).

### **2008 Post-Election Violence (PEV)**

The post election violence (PEV) began in the Rift Valley but quickly spread to other parts of the country. As in the other years, it first pitted the Kalenjin and the Kikuyu. But this quickly got out of hand. Prior to the announcement of the presidential results, it was widely believed that the present Prime Minister was going to win the elections. It came as a shock to many people when the incumbent was declared the winner and hurriedly sworn in at the statehouse as the president while people were still awaiting for the final presidential results announcement. Immediately riots broke out in many areas of the country, the worst hit being Rift Valley.

The Kikuyu population in Rift Valley became the target and the Kalenjin and other communities poured their pent up anger on them. The violence was characterized with a lot of looting, burning of houses, killings, rape and other forms of violence. The violence quickly spread to other towns and cities in the country and other areas too. In the end it is estimated that more than 1200 people died in the ensuing violence and tens of thousands were internally displaced, giving rise to Internally displaced persons (henceforth IDPs).

There are those who also believe that the violence was sparked was a long standing anger against Kikuyu's especially in Rift valley whom some people believed were arbitrarily allocated lands. It is believed that many of the Kikuyu in Rift valley were given land by the first president of the nation- freely and thus were not deserving. They are believed to have been unfairly awarded the

pieces of land. ( this though may not necessarily be true in accordance with the history, but nevertheless that is what was planted into the psyche of the local communities by the leaders).

Thus it should be noted that the post election violence that erupted after the 2007 elections was triggered not only by one factor by several factors. It was also a history that had been repeating itself over the years, but this was notably different because of the magnitude of the violence and the severity of the acts of violence. This too was brought out the limelight as, unlike the other election years where it was mainly concentrated in Rift valley this time it flared throughout the country. The violence threatened to escalate and plunge the whole country into chaos as people now were fighting against whoever was perceived to be an outsider, depending on the political affiliation, ethnic group or ideology.

### **Effects of PEV on Women**

As in other countries in turmoil, the effects of conflicts on women and children is notably different as compared to the men. In the case of the PEV, the effects on women were various including loss of economic support, abuse of rights and most notably violence.

Chilengi (2008) notes that violence against women in conflict and post-conflict situations is extensive and deeply rooted in the continent [Africa]. Women in both conflict and post conflict situations, are systematically experiencing various forms of violence that affect their lives, hindering their personal development as well as that of the continent in general (p.1). Indeed, he



further observes that women account for most casualties of war and make up most of the world's refugees, IDPs and poor populations (p.2).

In the Kenyan PEV situation, the women in these IDP camps underwent physical Violence (through beatings, rape and other acts of sexual abuse), Psychological Violence (not knowing where their children are, their spouses, siblings, what to do next, where to run), Socio-economic violence (lootings and plunder of their businesses and sources of economic livelihood), and abuse of rights.

One of the worst atrocities that happened against the women in the post election violence was the burning to death of about 30 people at the Kiambaa church in Eldoret. Most of the dead were women and children who had gone to seek refuge in the church. The attack took place in broad daylight, around noon. There are accounts of an elderly woman who dies as she could not get jump out of the burning building as she was confined on a wheel chair by physical disability. Several women sustained burns as they tried to rescue children and other relatives from the burning church. A mother watched helplessly as her child burnt to death. For over half a year, some of these women lay in hospitals nursing their children who had sustained serious burns.

Many of the women were displaced from their homes and farms. In the ensuing violence, many lost their children and spouses, rendering them widows and ultimately single parents. In some households, older women were left with very young grandchildren to cater for as their parents had perished in the chaos. It is estimated that 650, 000 Kenyans were displaced, and 1300 lost their lives in the PEV.

## **Spirituality of Hope**

The spirituality of hope that this paper is postulating is captured by the statement “the greatest heritage of Africa is hope. We are a continent of patience and determination, a people who embrace a spirituality of not giving up. This spirituality is best illustrated in the way we read the Bible in Africa: we appropriate the words of the scriptures and assume that we are the intended audience.” In this sense then, “the reality of African Christian communities is strongly founded on the interaction between scripture and life experiences, which are cultural.” (Kanyoro, 1999).

But then what is the basis of this spirituality of hope for the Africans and especially so, in terms of this paper, for the African woman who has embraced Christianity? The foundation of this spirituality is in traditional African spirituality, a spirituality that embraces each and every aspect of life that it is virtually impossible to draw a line between the sacred and the secular, to the point that Mbiti (1969) remarked “Africans are notoriously religious” (P. 1). Furthermore, it is a pointer that Africans are vitally and deeply spiritual. Thus our life experiences as Africans are inherently spiritual as God is involved in our struggles and celebrations, in all aspects of our cultures. This spirituality is one of hope as it provides the strength to go on with the assurance that God is in the struggle.

Often spirituality of hope emerges amidst significant experiences of setback, discouragement, and challenges. In this case it emerged as a result of the violence and chaos that ensued after the

2007 general elections in Kenya. Kanyoro has observed that when this happens, the traumas and challenges are given a religious interpretation. The affected people have so many unanswered questions of why, how, when, what next. The responses to these questions are of a theological nature and they point to their quest for knowledge about God and the supernatural. This though is not the end of their lives, somehow they pick up and find the strength to go on. Often it is not because they have found a solution but it is because they have hope that this will not re-occur or if it does, then they hope they will be better equipped to handle it or by then they would have found a solution. As Kanyoro rightly observes, after the violence, the trauma, the challenges, songs are sung, dances are held and hope continues for the continent of Africa.

Cilliers (2009) maintains that African spirituality has not waned even in times of strife, calamities, catastrophes epidemics, etc (p.16). This is true of African Christian women, in this paper, the women in reference are those in Vumilia IDP camp in Mai Mahiu, Naivasha. Despite the challenges they have faced including violent actions of rape, psychological violence of watching houses torched, friends and relatives hacked to death; economic violence as they watched their sources of livelihood reduced to ashes, these women held on to their Christian faith. They held on to hope and have found ways of expressing this spirituality, both as individuals and as a community.

In interviews conducted at the camp, the women said they looked up to God to save them, to assist them in rebuilding their lives, to muster the courage to forgive and be able to tell the stories of their ordeal and still proclaim forgiveness for those who caused them harm. Indeed, many are not willing to return to their previous settlements but have expressed forgiveness, as

one put it “it is the only way we can move forward. We now live here, this is our livelihood, but more so, we are trusting God that we shall never experience what we did in 2007 and early 2008”. The women (together with their children)sought refuge in churches, attended masses in these churches, and joined together in Christian fellowship and prayer groups. They held on to hope, and it is this that gave them the strength and will to soldier on despite the odds.

### **Source of the spirituality of hope for the African Christian women**

The spirituality of the African Christian woman is rooted in her African roots...her African spirituality. A spirituality that encompasses her connectedness to God, to her human roots, her relationships with other members of the community, to her fellow women and to the rest of nature. A spirituality in which is expressed the belief that everything has a sacral influence and permeates each and every aspect of the human life, a belief which the African woman carries with her into Christianity. It is a spirituality that is expressed in words, actions, symbols, images and rituals. One that provides answers to the African woman’s questions, gives meaning to her experiences and offers hope for the future. Indeed, even though African spirituality [religion] has been termed as backward gazing, it looks into the future. It draws from the experiences in the past for lessons for the future. This is the basis for the African Christian woman’s spirituality, and furthermore the spirituality of hope.

It should also be noted that in the present day and age, many African women are reading the bible for themselves and interpreting it too. Kanyoro (1999) writes that African Christians are ardent Bible believers. They [women] read the bible as if they are the intended audience. They

have a literal interpretation of the message of the bible and in this case, it is the message of hope as found in the biblical story. The women find and read stories of hope in the bible. Stories of women who never gave up but kept hoping, women such as Sarah, Ruth, Jochebed (Moses' mother), and Rachel, Leah, Esther, the woman with the issue of blood among other women in the bible. These are women whose hope and faith bore fruit as in the end they were in God's favor. They find hope in the story of the Israelites and the story of Job.

The African Christian woman continues to latch on to the abiding good of hope, as this corresponds with the Christian faith and the biblical doctrine of hope based on the person and nature of God. It is the kind of hope that keeps them from despairing and motivates them to live with that end-goal in view. They have hope for the future which keeps them going in the present. Their image of God is that of a hope-fulfilling God; an image that implies that if they are faithful, keep trusting and depending on Him, then they should expect a positive outcome.

For the African Christian woman, the spirituality of hope is embedded in the Christian faith. At the same time, Christianity to them is a central means to define themselves, and to find community. It provides social involvement, a reason to come together in prayer and fellowship groups thus organizing them and promoting a common bonding issue. They are united by their Christian faith which is a source of encouragement and promotes the gender group consciousness. Their unity and emergence based upon their Christian faith in a situation such as the PEV is a symbol of hope and faith that the ultimate outcome will be favorable and positive.

Schillebeeckx locates hope in local communities of believers and ultimately in the spirit of God. This is true of African Christian women. These women see the stories of hope come into being amongst them in the community. In the Vumila IDP camp, this was in the form of In the midst of these women they see examples of the outcome of hope. Amongst these women have emerged leaders in the church. These women hold various leadership positions in church including being treasurers, secretaries of various churches or groups within the church and chairpersons of the women's groups in church. One of the women, who has been volunteering as a kindergarten teacher, has been ordained as a pastor with the world wide mission church. The pastor in charge and other members of the church noticed her gift of sharing the gospel, encouragement to others and her emphasis on giving messages of hope to the people. Her talent was nurtured and she was trained as a pastor. She completed her training and was ordained on 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 2011. She now serves as the assistant pastor of worldwide concern Mai Mahiu, which covers an area of 582650 sq km with several thousand church members.

### **African Christian Women's expressions of spirituality of hope**

For the women in the IDP camps, the spirituality of hope is not just an ideal, but it is expressed through life experiences. It is made concrete in the manner in which they live, their interactions with each other and others within the community.

The spirituality of hope is expressed through various means, one of them being stories. Since time immemorial, storytelling has been a way of passing on knowledge, messages, a tool for learning and a form of self expression in African cultures. This is a tool that has been and still is

used by African women in the socialization process as well as a source of encouragement. In their sharing of stories, the women express solidarity with one another and draw lessons from their experiences. In this case, the women in the IDP camps tell and share stories of what took place, where they have come from, where they are at now and where they are hopeful to get. They also are stories that reflect how far they have come and the fulfillment of their hopes. They are stories of how far they can get if they are faithful to God as they hope for a reward in the end. It is stories of how far their faith has brought them and further still it will take them.

Another expression of the spirituality of hope is through the Christian concept of *koinonia* (community) to which the African woman easily responds to as they identify closely with it. In many African cultures, the concept of community and communality is encouraged. It is the common way of living, participating in human life. It is borne of the realization that the growth and development of a community is not an individual affair but needs other members to bring it to fruition. This is spurred on by the fact that in unity they are able to accomplish more and go further than if one went on it as an individual. For the African Christian women this is expressed through their unity in confronting the issues that impact upon their lives and their families. This is unity in terms of prayer and fellowship groups, women self-help groups and small Christian communities.

An important aspect of the spirituality of hope is the congregation of believers in a church group. This was very visible among the women in the Vumilia IDP camp in Mai Mahiu. On several visits to the camp on a Sunday we found very few women within the camp. Most of them formed a majority of the congregations that we found gathered either under a tree, or sitting in the

scorching sun singing, dancing listening to the preacher on a Sunday – part of their rituals as Christians. After the Sunday services, many of the women remained behind to meet in fellowship groups through which they continue to encourage one another. Through these congregations, they have pooled together resources and began income generating projects such as chicken rearing. They sell eggs from these chicken and use the money for their upkeep and that of their families even as they await for the government to resettle them.

The spirituality of hope is reflected through so much goodwill and hospitality among these women in their interactions with other people. We visited this camp, and five of us entered a tent to interview one of the women on her experiences. Despite having very little, she offered us a cup of tea, even though she did not even have enough cups to serve us in, leave alone the resources to prepare tea enough for us and the two women accompanying us.

An important aspect of the spirituality of hope is the strength to hold on despite the challenges and setbacks. The women in the Vumilia IDP camp have remained strong irrespective of their challenging situations. They attribute this to their holding on to hope that things will get better. It is this hope that spurs them to initiate projects that sustain them and their families. It is the hope of bettering their children's future that has inspired them to begin tent schools- kindergartens using the little resources they can master, offering their services for free. One of the women said 'if only this children get an education, then they will lead better lives as they will have a chance of getting good jobs, better pay and therefore will lead better quality lives' Another said "this is the only inheritance I can guarantee my children as I no longer have a piece of land to leave for



them in terms of inheritance. This is the best foundation I can lay for their lives. It is what I can offer with hopes that they will be self-reliant adults.”

Prayer is another expression of the spirituality of hope. The Women at the Vumilia IDP camp began prayers groups while they were still at the Eldoret show ground where they had first gone to seek refuge. They met daily, irrespective of their denominations to pray for their families and for each other. It is this that gave them hope for a better tomorrow. As some of the women put it” it is this prayers that have brought us this far.” One of them said, “I believe if it wasn’t for my faith as a Christian and my belief in the power of prayer, I may not have come out of the chaos alive. My whole family too was saved and all this I attribute to prayer.” They also formed fellowship groups to read the bible and share encouraging messages based on the Christian teachings. The fellowship groups are based on the various churches they attend. These include, the catholic church, African Inland Church, Pentecostal Church of East Africa, Seventh Day Adventists, Anglican church of Kenya, First Born church and Worldwide Mission among other church groups. Through these groups they meet to pray and encourage each other in their Christian faith. When there are issues that need to be attended to the women meet and before they embark on their meeting or the task that has brought them together, they first pray. At the camp, the women, irrespective of their denomination, meet every Friday for prayers and sharing of the gospel.

## **Conclusion**

In Christian tradition, hope has been recognized for its special powers. It is especially important in dealing with stress and adversity. In this case, it has been important for the African Christian

women in Kenya, specifically the Vumilia, Mai Mahiu IDP camp dealing with the challenging experience they went through after the disputed presidential elections of 2007. The source of this hope is the African Christian faith. It is this faith that has sustained the hope of the women resulting in a spiritualized hope which has kept them grounded in the worst of times.

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