

Elders and Energies

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When Elders of the indigenous communities in Northern Ghana are discussing important issues, it always seems as if they are talking at cross-purposes. Are they really discussing the same issue? Is the discourse homogeneous? Will they ever come to a consensus? Their creative way of communicating is often lost when it is interpreted or translated. This article describes a discourse between the author and two elders about a catastrophe in Northern Ghana.

During the 1991 rainy season in Northern Ghana the normal weather pattern was disturbed by a series of strange incidents. First, there was a high incidence of armyworm attack. This was attributed to the rains that were both late and very scanty. When the normal rains finally arrived, they came in heavy down pours that persisted for long hours and resulted in floods.

Such unusual occurrences provide a good opportunity to enter into a dialogue with farmers who have a cosmivision perspective. CECIK has experienced that a useful research methodology, as far as cosmivision is concerned, is to identify 'strange happenings' because these prove good entry points.

Elder Atampugri and Elder Azure of the Gowrie community are both about 70 years old. During the dialogue described below, I wanted to assess their ideas about the problem of armyworm infestation in the crops. I wanted to find out what we could do about the problem.

Author: "What is happening with our farming? The worms are destroying all the crops in the field. We will die of hunger this year."

Elder Atampugri: "Death leads to life. All life is preceded by death. The seed has to die and in death it acquires new energy to enable it to germinate and multiply. Rot means transformation from one energy level to another. The seed rots in the ground and in so doing acquires new vigour to enable it to multiply."

Elder Azure: "Animals do not die and yet they multiply. We do not die but we multiply. But we have Life, from which we derive energy for our every day activities. We are able to fight diseases because their energy is lower than ours. When we

fight them, they die and then come back again."

Elder Atampugri: "You say animals do not have to die first, but diseases are animals. When they die they multiply in your body. If your spirit is not strong, they re-appear even stronger than before. That is why when you get a sickness twice, the second time is always stronger than the first - because they have multiplied. As for the human being, the death of man came first, before his life. The spirit is older and has higher energy than the body. And so the body lives for a short time and disappears, and the spirit returns to the ancestors where it came from in the first place."

Author: "My questions is what is happening this year with our farming? I have mentioned the issue of the armyworms. I would like to learn more about this."

Elder Azure: "Yes! Yes! The worms have come. They have invaded our crops destroying them. All these worms will soon die. In their place there will be a lot of rain and a lot of harvest. I know this because we have witnessed these worm attacks several times in our lives. The rains cannot die. Something has to die for it.

Death is interchangeable. That is why some people exchange their deaths with others. If your energy is higher than another's, you can exchange death; the evil ones use the evil spirits to increase their energies to conquer you. You have to strengthen your energy with that of your *Yaamine*, your ancestors. You need them."

Elder Atampugri: "As for you Azure and your evil spirits. We are talking about the worms. Let me tell you this. When the worms die, they rot, and you get *Poursgu*, good food, for the soil. The worms are good food for the crops but they must first get transformed during rotting. When this happens, you have to re-plant quickly with crops that do not take a long time to mature. Then you get a lot."

Author: "What about this idea of heavy rains? I cannot understand that bit."

Elder Atampugri: "Oh, the rains? The rains will be heavier and longer. The incidence of the worms is an early warning for the rains. They have to come to warn us; those are our signs. Our ancestors have various ways of communicating to us and one of them is by these disasters. Forget about what Azure says about worms dying for the rains. Worms cannot die for rains.



Seated on the trunk of a sacred Baobab tree, David Millar is listening to an elder in Bongo: "We will continue our way and hope that you will introduce us to your ways too, so we can act together in a positive way"

Photo: Bertus Haverkort

The energy of the rain is higher than that of the worms."

Author: "Have you had deaths of livestock as a result of the worm infestation?"

Elder Azure: "Apart from a few normal deaths that could be attributed to any cause, we cannot say animals here in Gowrie have died as a result of eating the worms. I think they get energy from the worms when they eat them. I wish we could eat these worms too; after all we eat flying termites. The animals have spirits too, you know? They have good spirits and bad spirits. I agree with Elder Atampugri that spiritual energy is good for all living and non-living things that the All Father has created. Atampugri, don't you agree with me?"

Elder Atampugri: "Of course I do! But what do you think we have been talking about all the time? That is what we have been talking about - Spiritual Energy. You outsiders refer to it as Life. If you call it Life, you leave out the special rocks, stones, sound, music, vibrations, and other creations of the All Father. But if you call it Spiritual Energy, then all Creation is catered for, even the lesser forms of creation."

Author: "You might have encountered this situation before in the past. What do we do to combat it or prevent the worms from coming again?"

Here the dialogue produced a list of possible actions that could be taken. These were based on previous encounters with similar situations. "Before the worms attack we should regularly sacrifice to the ancestors to pacify them and we should carry out all other agriculture-related sacrifices". Furthermore, the elders suggested the use of organic fertilisers and dry matter to increase the water holding capacity of the soils. Crop mixtures, bio-

pesticides and ridging were also suggested. Ridging can slow down the movement of the worms. There were other ideas too. "When the worms have attacked, we must soothsay to find out the why. We can also handpick the worms from the plants or let chicken peck them up. We can plant early maturing varieties if previous plantings have been destroyed. And, after the harvest, we make offerings to the gods and ancestors".

Author: "Who is to act?"

Elders: "We have already started to act before you came. We will continue the way we know and hope you will introduce us to your ways too, so that we can act together in a positive way."
(end of dialogue)

Sources of ill-health

The elders in traditional communities in Northern Ghana do not think 'Life' is possible without the help of their Gods, ancestors and other spirits. Even though they believe that their ancestors are dead and living in another world, the elders still cooperate with these supernatural forces in several ways. Some of the invisible spirits of the ancestors are evil; the spirits of wicked deceased people can be wicked.

Your living enemies can also cause ill health. Moreover, the abuse of a production resource can result in illness, because it may lose its 'spiritual energy'. Examples of such abuse are having sex on the farm, scourging the earth with fire, shedding innocent blood on the land, or failing to perform a ritual associated with that resource. The 'spiritual energy' can only be restored if an offering is made to the Gods and affected spirits.

Offerings

Any animal or bird that is to be sacrificed must be in perfect condition, because the

Gods and ancestors do not accept physically imperfect animals. For instance, a bird or animal with a broken wing or leg will definitely not be accepted. Even animals with scratches on their bodies are regarded as 'incomplete in their spirituality'. The missing parts are an expression of its 'lower energy level', or reduced vitality.

There are certain family sacrifices that can include outsiders. This is often the case when the sacrifice is intended to revitalise the family land for agricultural purposes. In this type of sacrifice a particular sort of animal is sacrificed. After the sacrifice the animal is not consumed; it is left on the land to rot. In decomposition, the lost energies are transformed into fresh energies for the crops on the land.

In case of widespread outbreaks of 'evil energies', such as epidemics, the heads of the families have to be present when such offerings are made. Usually representatives are chosen from the lineage elders and they, together with the *Tindana* or earth priest, will perform the sacrifice.

Women are excluded from participating in these rituals. Sometimes women do contribute to a sacrifice on behalf of their dead husbands. But more often a widow's contribution is channelled through the dead husband's brother or, failing this, through one of her sons.

Cosmovisions are central

It is intriguing to note from the dialogue with the elders, how the worldview of the rural people of Northern Ghana expresses itself in their everyday life. The way the elders perceive the inter-relation between man-soils-crops-animals-worms-rain-and inanimate objects, is a reflection of the complexities with which they live. The link between spirituality and the solutions to their problems reinforces the relevance of cosmovision in the farmers' practices. This explains why we need to make cosmovisions a central part of our development interventions.

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Photo: Bertus Havenkort

The living - women, men, elders and children - together with the living dead, the ancestors, and the not-yet born, are all involved in decision making about farming and natural resource management