

## **The mtu (human being) and African spirituality**

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Within the African worldview we see a conception of the mtu (human) as existing in body, mind, and spirit. At the foundation of this scheme and within the framework of traditional society was a comprehensive orientation towards developing the self and each of its facets holistically.

Hence, the warrior arts are but one small part of the cultivation of the body. Whether we are referring to boxing, wrestling, or weapons training, these not only sharpened the body, but also the mind. It is this orientation which continues to inform the work of many enlightened practitioners.

The mind is a major concern within African cultures, as the cultivation of intelligence, wisdom, discernment, propriety, and ethics are major ends of the process of socialization. This is why intelligence and wisdom are common themes in sayings, proverbs, and stories from throughout the continent and the diaspora. Many of the most scathing critiques relate, not only to behavior which is regarded as unethical or improper, but also to behavior which demonstrates a lack of intelligence. Further, the former is linked to the latter, as people who seem to be incapable of proper action are often regarded as being intellectually deficient—hence expressions such as someone being “messed up in the head”, “touched”, needing to “get their mind right”, or “special” are meant to convey such deviance.

Lastly, “spirit” is a major concern within African cultures. “Spirit” is variously conceived as the non-physical aspect of the being—the source of one’s vitality, often a higher or more elevated self, a self that has transcended time and space (as in an ancestral self), as well as one’s destiny. Much of the nurturing of the mtu in the traditional context was related to the notion that each human being arrives with a purpose, a veritable message from the ancestors to bring forth into the world. Apart from literal interpretations, this can also be seen as indicating that each mtu represents a purposeful existence, a set of dynamic and finite capacities that gain expression through the permutations of their journey through life, and the degree to which these facilitate a higher level of realization as to their inclinations, capacities, potential,

and their ultimate decision (either conscious or unconscious) of a path in life—and that these are, inescapably—linked to their ancestral inheritance.

It should be noted that these concerns are the core of much of what is articulated or presented as African “spirituality”, and that this obviously entails a range of social structures whose work is focused on the development of the mtu and the independence of the taifa (nation). Ultimately there was no separation in terms of the path towards “spiritual enlightenment” and the means which enabled the society to minister to its needs on a day-to-day basis. Thus, those concerned both about the practice and institutionalization of African spirituality should be mindful of this.

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