# CHAPTER 4

# THE AFRICAN SPIRIT WORLD

INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, the subject of the African spirit world is something that has been either neglected or overlooked by traditional Christian theology. Anderson (1991:25) feels that this is a subject to which Christian theology must relate for a more effective witness in Africa. Bediako (1995:97) apportions blame on African theology which he thinks has done a marvellous function in stressing the centrality and uniqueness of God in African tradition but unfortunately has left the wider spirit world of African primal religions - divinities, ancestors, natural forces - unaccounted for. This vacuum that has been left by traditional (western) Christian theology, or African theology according to Bediako, has resulted in tremendous theological and spiritual implications for Christians in Africa. Generally, the dilemma for African Christians is whether to follow the God of the Bible who, in a unique way, revealed himself in Jesus Christ or to continue to simultaneously be attached to traditional medicine - or spirit-specialists.

The African spirit world, which is an important and indispensable dimension of the African religious reality, and which is akin in various ways to that of the New Testament times (see Malina *et al* 1996:14; Mugambi 1989;56f; Pomerville 1985:77; Ukpong 1995:13), offers a serious challenge to Christian theology if the church hopes to present the whole counsel of God in Africa in a meaningful and impactful way. Such an investigation will go a long way towards giving the church in Africa a much-needed, long-awaited and hard-fought for, African identity. Already some African scholars (and others associated with church ministry in Africa) have identified this lacuna and have documented valuable contributions towards addressing this need and in this study we will make use of their findings (e.g. see Ukpong 1995:13; 1999a:283; 2000:3f).

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2      TERMINOLOGY: "AFRICAN?"

As we intend dealing with the African spirit world, it is significant for us to point out right from the onset problems surrounding the term "African". To speak of 'African culture' or 'religion' or a characteristically African society is to make a huge generalisation, because Africa includes so many diverse peoples from so many various backgrounds. Any generalisation is bound to be an oversimplification (see Kaphagawani and Malherbe 1998:210). If we make any claims about 'African' beliefs or religions or customs or knowledge, then those claims should, strictly speaking, be equally applicable to a community of the Bedouin tribe in the Sahara, to the Masaai people in East Africa, to the business people in Accra, to the Khoisan people of the Kalahari, to the Ethiopian shepherds, to the African people living in the exclusive northern suburbs of Johannesburg. Pobee (1979:18) is quick to point out that *homo Africanus* is a multiheaded hydra, in much the same as *homo sapiens* is a multiheaded hydra.

It is a fact that cannot be denied that Africa has a plethora of cultures. Even within one country there may be remarkable differences based on tribal background. Geographically, Africa is a very heterogeneous continent (see Mugambi 1995:153; Kudadjie 2002:62). It strides across the Equator and the two tropics, with both the northern and southern tips touching the temperate zones. Politically and historically, during the scramble for Africa by western nations, Africa was colonised by different nations with the resultant diverse western languages imposed on various parts of the continent. Even the acquiring of liberation was achieved at different periods with South Africa getting its freedom last of them all.

It is also to be acknowledged that all the major missionary religions have made an impact on the continent with varying degrees and intensity (see Kanyandago 2002:18; Kudadjie 2002:62). Christianity and Islam have had the most influence on the continent, although the other oriental religious beliefs are increasingly making inroads on the continent as well. In all of this, the African cultural and religious heritage is the foundation upon which all invading religious traditions are superimposed. Although, according to Barret (1982), the African Traditional Religion is statistically the smallest group (than Christianity and Islam), its influence is very

strong, and quite evident in the daily lives of the people, whether they be traditionalists, Christians, Muslims or people of other faiths.

Realising such diversity and the problematic use of the term "African", some scholars have tended to go for the context or culture-specific route which is intended not to try to come up with views which are supposed to apply to all groups on the continent, but rather to describe and discuss the views of specific cultural groups (see Teffo and Roux 1998:136); because the problem is further compounded by migrations caused by urbanisation, famine and wars and by the very fact that, like any society, the African society is a living, dynamic society (cf. Kudadjie 2002:63). Oduyoye (1986:52) feels that for theology in Africa to be authentic and relevant, it must reflect a particular context. She further maintains that a monolithic construction of African theology would be unrealistic, given the variety in the continent of historical experience, political systems (traditional and colonial), economic systems and the impact of primal religions.

Having raised these reservations about the generalisation of the term "African", we nevertheless utilise it here, bearing in mind that it may be misleading and dangerous. If it is used, we need to become aware that a great deal of descriptive work needs to be done. In our case, when we talk about the African spirit world, we believe that we are outlining and discussing views which are alive in a fairly large part of Africa and which can serve as representative of religious beliefs in Africa. Moreover, in all this debate about 'African', one would maintain that there is a sense in which an African is distinguishable from the Asian or European or the American. There is a certain Africanness about the culture and religious beliefs and practices that can be recognisable and discernible in large parts of Africa. In spite of the diversity of cultures, there is ample evidence of sufficient recurrent themes and patterns common to indigenous African societies. Such common features warrant the usage of the talk 'African', though bearing in mind variations that may exist on any particular theme or pattern. Though the diversity in Africa makes our task difficult, it does not mean that such an enterprise cannot be undertaken, albeit with limitations, of course.

4.3     <u>KEY ELEMENTS IN THE AFRICAN SPIRIT WORLD</u>

4.3.1     <u>VITAL FORCE</u>

In history and anthropology, there have been various attempts to depict African cosmology with one term (cf. Theron 1996:2). It is usually described in terms of power or force. The general anthropological term used for this impersonal force, is *mana*, which is a Melanesian word, and was a concept introduced and described by R.H. Codrington in his book, *The Melanesians* (1891). Robert Marett introduced this term into anthropology, and developed theories about it (cf. Van Rheenen 1991:19; Smith 1936:30).

In religio-cultural terms, the person who propounded the idea of vital force was Tempels (1959) who said that there is a radical conceptual difference between Africans and non-Africans on the essential nature of beings and entities in general, and human beings in particular. Africans, according to Tempels, conceive of entities or beings as nothing more than essential energies or vital forces. For Tempels (1959:51), Westerners hold a static conception of 'being' while Africans believe in a dynamic one. This is echoed by Mbiti (1969:203) when he states, "[for Africans] the universe is not static or 'dead'; it is a dynamic, 'living' and powerful universe" (see also Taylor 2001:44-51). Gehman (1989:67) confirms this by saying that this belief "in mystical power filling the universe is common throughout Africa". Ukpong (1995:9) explains a basic feature of the African worldview in the belief in the divine origin of the universe and the interconnectedness between God, humanity and the cosmos. In this belief, according to Ukpong, the entire universe is seen as participating in the one life of God and there is supposed to exist a network of relationships between God, humanity and the cosmos with the human being at the centre such that actions of human beings affect not only their relationship with one another but also with God and nature (cf. Anyanwu 1981:90-92). This life or force manifests itself in people, animals and things (cf. Theron 1996:2). Consequently, reality in Africa is viewed in unitive terms and not dualistically whereby it is composed of matter and spirit, profane and sacred, secular or religious, etc. (see Ukpong 1995:8). Rather, reality is seen as a unity with two aspects that are visible and invisible dimensions in which

human persons, dead or alive, inhabit the same world (see Ikenga-Metuh 1981:52; Liehart 1961:28; Steyne 1996:60-61).

The vital force or dynamism or energy can be explained as the practice and/or belief in hidden, mysterious, supersensible, pervading energy; powers, potencies and forces (cf. Imasogie 1983:54; Van Rheenen 1991:208). This power is accessible to those whose consciousness has been expanded through training or occultic powers. Such people are not only able to become aware of this dimension of the universe, but they can also use it for their needs to help or harm others. Therefore, many practices and rituals exist to control and to increase this power. Access to this power is hierarchical in the sense that God has the most and absolute control over it, the spirits and the living-dead have portions of it; and "some human beings know how to tap, manipulate and use some of it" (Mbiti 1969:203).

Because this cosmic power is understood to be limited, there is competition between living beings to get more of this power (see Theron 1996:2). If one person in the community rises above the other, it is traditionally understood that this happens at the expense of somebody else. The belief is that that person is using some ritual, medicine or magic in order to get more power, and this entails that power is taken from somebody else. This is illustrated in the case of someone killing somebody and then mutilating them for the reason of having more power. In *isiZulu,* it is called *ukuthwala* (simply strengthening oneself) in order to be more powerful than other people. Based on the knowledge among Africans that the vital force can be tapped, used and manipulated, it is therefore natural that people would believe and practise magic which can either be good or evil (Mbiti 1969:199; see also Holland 2001:132). Evil magic involves the belief and practice of tapping and using this power to do harm to human beings or their property. In such situations witchcraft and sorcery become operational. This, naturally, includes other related practices. However, we also need to point out that belief in evil magic is based on, or derives from fear, suspicion, jealousies, ignorance or false accusations. People fear to leave around their hair, nails, clothes and other articles with which they normally are in direct contact with, in case their 'enemies' will use them and work evil magic against them (see Mbiti 1969:200).

On the other hand, the use of good magic is accepted and esteemed by society (cf. Mbiti 1969:198). It is mainly the specialists, and particularly the traditional diviner-healers and rainmakers who use their knowledge and manipulation of the mystical power for the welfare of their community. It is used in the treatment of diseases, in counteracting misfortunes and in warding off or diluting or destroying the evil power of witchcraft. The traditional healers, diviners and herbalists provide amounts of mystical power to people in the form of charms, amulets, powder, rags, feathers, figures, special incantations, cuttings and incisions on the body. All these are used to protect homesteads, families, fields, cattle and other property (see Mbiti 1969:198). Babies, for instance, are made to wear amuletic coils round the neck, wrist or waist in order to protect them from evil magic (see Knappert 1995:25). From time to time, these amuletic objects meant to protect families and property are renewed because of the belief that after some time they lose their effectiveness. Apart from traditional specialists, in some areas in Africa, we also find some African Independent (Initiated) Churches who specialise in dealing with this power. Some members of these churches are told by their prophets and prophetesses (see Van Rheenen 1991:152; Mbiti 1969:199) to wear ropes around their waist both for healing and as an apotropaic measure. In this, we see in some way that even church-going people in Africa are not untouched by the belief in the vital force or power.

Nature, human beings and the supernatural form a cosmic unity, a total community in which all are involved reciprocally (Theron 1996:3). As already indicated, these aspects of the cosmos are organised in a hierarchy of powers, which influence each other. In most of the African cultures, the Supreme Being as maker and creator is placed at the top of this hierarchy. Beneath are the lesser divinities, spirits and ancestors. Human beings and nature are next in this order. This structure is also seen in the strong emphasis on age and seniority. In this cosmic unity comprising the visible and invisible dimensions, the balance and harmony between all these aspects and powers must be maintained. If this harmony, balance or rhythm of life is disturbed in various ways through magic, witchcraft, disrespect, or transgression of the taboos and rules of society, diviners are consulted to investigate the cause of the breakdown. To restore the balance of relationships, diviners would recommend the appropriate remedy, whether it be the offering of sacrifice to the offended spirits, the imposition of punishment to guilty individuals,

or otherwise (see Khathide 1999a:72-73; Mulago 1991:120-121; Theron 1996:4-6). The idea of reconciliation, that is, to restore harmony or to bring balance or equilibrium back to a person's experience of his or her world, is of paramount importance in the African's religio-cultural reality (see Steyne 1996:135; Awolawu 1979:137; Tippett 1972:138-139).

.2    THE SUPREME BEING

Parrinder (1976:39) correctly points out that

> From the earlier view that African religion was crudely fe-
> tishistic, with an idea of God where it existed being an
> importation, informed opinion has now swung round to
> the conviction that most, if not all, African people have
> had a Supreme Being as an integral part of their worldview
> and practised religion.

There appears to be a convergence of thought in as far as this position is concerned. Idowu (1973:135) states that the Supreme Being is "one ultimate" of African religion. Tempels (1959:20) maintains that the African people have been having the most pure form of the concept of God, the Supreme Being and Creator. In his contribution to the subject, Mbiti (1970) shows how in Africa, behind simple expression of belief, there often lives a profound faith in God as Father, Creator and Maker (cf. Mutwa 1998:560-565).

As if he were going against a stream, Nyirongo (1997:11), among very few others, criticises theologians who claim that the Africans worshipped the true God before they came into contact with the gospel. Nyirongo's argument is based on the premise that the Africans' knowledge about God is not founded on what God has decreed as being the right way to seek and know him. In opposing this standpoint, Burnett (1988:37) says that it is worth noting that the peoples of Africa believed in a Supreme Creator-God long before the arrival of Christian missionaries. Mbiti (1970:80) goes further to say that the concept of God or Supreme Being in Africa shows similar characteristics as those of the Christian God (see also Khathide 1999a:73).

African theologians have been keen to show the relationship between the concept of God in pre-Christian African religions and the Christian God. Bediako (1995:97) believes that this must be reckoned an important achievement by African theology as it is also validated by the fact that in virtually every Christian community in Africa, the Christian name for God is usually a divine name hallowed in the pre-Christian religious tradition for the Supreme God. Missionaries and Bible translators in Africa used the traditional African concepts and the names of God as means of transmitting the gospel of Christ to Africa (cf. Turaki 1999:162; Tutu 1978:366; Setiloane 1978:402; Sawyerr 1968; Dickson 1979).

In traditional Africa, the Supreme Being or God is known by many names. To illustrate this continuity of God between the pre-Christian era and the period of Christian missionaries, almost all the names of God are used by both Christians and traditional religionists (see Oleka 1998:75-76). Most of the names of God are descriptive of his nature and attributes. For instance, the general name for God among the Yoruba is *Olorun* meaning "owner of the sky." He is believed as the creator of all things, the almighty, and all-knowing, the giver of life and breath and the final judge of humankind (Parrinder 1962:34). One of the Yoruba names for God is *Orise* which means "the source-being which gives origin to all being" or "the source of all beings" (Idowu in Oleka 1998:75). Among the Igbo, he is called *Chukwu,* which is a combination of two Igbo words: "Chi", meaning God, and "ukwu", meaning "great, lofty and immense." The Ngombe of the Congo know him as *Akongo*, the creator of the universe, the moulder of human beings like a potter. He is called beginner and unending, almighty and inexplicable, who is closely related to each individual as a guardian spirit, giving good fortune or bad, easily approachable, though he has no temples or idols (see Parrinder 1962:34-36). Among the Akan of Ghana, *Odomankoma* is a name for God that means "creator" (Oleka 1998:76; cf. Onyinah 2002:41; Burnett 1988:36). The Baganda (of Uganda) call him *Katonda*, which refers to creator, protector and helper of the helpless. To the Kikuyu of Kenya, God is *Mulungu*, who lives on four sacred mountains, and is all pervading and invisible. He is known as "the possessor of whiteness" and One who demonstrates his power in the sun, moon, stars, storm and rain, and rainbow.

In Southern Africa, God, as Supreme Being, is often understood monistically, like in other parts of Africa, as "the source and mover of all the powers, from whom life-force flows through the spirits to the people, animals and plants" (Crafford 1996:13). God's existence makes the whole of existing reality a field of force, a sacred environment which may not be drastically altered (see Mugambi 1989:56f; Khathide 1999a:72). Some of the names for God among Southern African peoples are *Xikwembu* (Tsonga), *Mwari* (Shona see also Moyo 1987:13), *Modimo* (Sotho-Tswana - see Setiloane 1976; Oosthuizen 1977:267), *Mudzimu* (Venda). In isiXhosa, the traditional name *uQamatha,* gives way to the Khoi-Khoi name *uThixo*, which has found complete acceptance among those who speak isiXhosa in the eastern Cape. The Zulu names for God include *uMvelinqangi* (the first one), *uNkulunkulu* (the Great great one), *uMdali* (the creator), *Simakade* (the long-lived one), *uMenzi* (maker; see Ndwandwe 2000:186; Krige 1950;280; Callaway 1970:1f; Hofmeyr and Pillay 1994:xx).

All these names for God that were used before the pre-Christian era have found usage in Christian communities as well. This shows continuity in the African religious thought. It also proves that Africans had the concept of God long before missionaries came to the continent.

Turaki (1999:145f) is of the view that, because of the abundant presence of the awareness that the Supreme Being exists in traditional religious thought in Africa, it is not necessary to overstate this fact again, or to prove God's existence to Africans. The existence of God is common knowledge to most Africans, if not all. Turaki's concern, though, is that we only need to ask what the content of this concept or the awareness of the existence of God is. In response to this challenge, Bosch (1973:68) agrees that Yahwe or Elohim is the same as *uNkulunkulu* or *Modimo* and, at the same time, he is not the same. For Bosch, *uNkulunkulu* is the "meeting place" between Yahwe and the Zulu people (amaZulu). *UNkulunkulu* is the "picture of Yahwe" and he is the place where Yahwe becomes relevant to them in their traditional existence. Bosch maintains that in *uNkulunkulu,* God, through Christ, enters into the world of the Zulu. In support of Bosch, it is to be accepted that the Yahwe of Israel or the God of the Bible has a connecting link with the concepts of God in Africa (cf. Ps 19:1 - 4; Rm 1:19-20) and that in and through Jesus Christ, he is calling us to a unique relationship

with him. Though the concepts and names of God in Africa might be deemed inadequate to fully reveal the God of the Bible, it is to be acknowledged that not only the missionaries and Bible translators found their usage helpful in transmitting the message of Christ, but also, in a positive sense, it shows that biblical and Christian theological ideas can be adequately presented through the vehicle of traditional languages. Furthermore, biblical and Christian theological concepts and ideas can be transmitted in the vehicle of a religious framework which is common to both Christianity and the traditional religions. This makes dialogue between Christianity and African traditional religions possible. Isizoh (2001), Sanneh (1989), Walls (1996), Bediako (1995), among others, have all stressed the significance of this commonality and continuity.

Though there is a general consensus about the awareness of the existence of God in Africa, the issue of how he relates to humankind and creation still vexes and stretches theological minds. There is a school of thought that believes that God, though good, is not meddlesome, nor does he interfere; he does not concern himself with other people's business (see Sawyerr 1970:9; Onyinah 2002:42; Idowu 1973:153; cf. Bosch 1973;74). The overriding concept of the transcendence of God usually means that most of the time the Supreme Being is remote from the everyday affairs of the people (cf. Zinzindohoue 2001:137; Anderson 1991:14). It is for this reason that some writers speak of the Supreme Being as *deus otiosus* - a withdrawn, uninvolved divinity which is not directly concerned with everyday life. Yet others will also refer to God or Supreme Being as *deus absconditus* - the concealed, remote God who is approached mainly through mediators or prayer (cf. Crafford 1996:13; Burnett 1988:37).

Another school of thought believes that God is immanent in the traditional African religious thought. Mbiti (1970:12) writes that many foreign authors harp on the note that for African peoples, God is "too remote" and virtually excluded from human affairs. Mbiti rejects this as false. He illustrates this by saying that for the Akan people, God is seen "as being in and beyond the past" (Mbiti 1970:12; cf. *contra*. Onyinah 2002:42). Mbiti (1970:14-15) believes that from all the appellations and sayings about God, it emerges clearly that God as spirit has no limit and transcends all boundaries. For Mbiti, God is omnipresent and there is no vacuum of existence which he does not fill up; he is or has the most abundant

reality of being, lacking no completeness and possessing all fullness of being (ibid).

And yet another school of thought maintains that the traditional African views of God reveal a certain ambivalence: the Supreme Being is at the same time very far away (transcendent) and very near (immanent; see Anderson 1991:13; Taylor 2001:84; McVeigh 1974:128). Seoka (1997:4), in support of this position, says that God in Africa is believed to be a "living power, 'Wholly Other' and infinitely greater than him/herself (or any other creation), a Power mysterious, *mysterium tremendum et fascimans* because though unseen, yet it is present and an urgent reality." Furthermore, Seoka states that to an African, this Power mysterious was and is and shall always be present. This Power mysterious invokes that which is divine in human beings and seeks to reconcile the fallen nature and brings it back into a living self and everything around it. According to Seoka (1997:10), in spite of the conception of God as transcendent, Africans believe in the possibility of a real relationship with God who has revealed himself through natural objects and phenomena, and also storytelling and objects. Although Seoka's position is closer to what most Africans believe about God's relation to human beings, in my opinion at least, he still suffers from what many African theologians have been criticised for, that is, using western philosophical and theo-logical categories to define and interpret traditional concepts of God. This is what Ela (1986:122; cf. 125) refers to when he says the "traits by which African identity is defined belong to a western conceptual heritage" (see also Turaki 1999:161).

In summary, undoubtedly there is evidence of the belief in the Supreme Being in Africa. Although there are divergent views as to how he relates to his creation and human beings, a position that appears to capture the Africans' understanding of God, albeit broadly, is that God is "indeed a transcendent Being who is at the same time immanent" (Moyo 1987:14). In Africa, the Supreme Being is under-stood to be the source of all life and being. There may be some other spiritual beings associated with the deity but the same cannot be confused with him. He is acknowledged, among other functions, as creator, sustainer, guardian and judge. It is also accepted that God is spirit, sovereign and above all. Perhaps the view of God's understanding by Africans is well summarised by Pataki's statement:

> To Africans, God is the Supreme Power, and the whole of
> African belief is deeply entrenched in Him. The concept of
> God, therefore, is widely known and enjoys full support
> from Africans. God is referred to as the Creator and Fa-
> ther-of-all-creation, including both man and the heavenly
> bodies, the oceans and the sky. He is strongly perceived
> as more than just a parent or guardian. He represents life,
> hope, love, courage and eternity (in Madiba 1996:271).

## 4.3.3    SPIRITS

### 4.3.3.1   THE ORIGIN OF SPIRITS

Africans do not believe only in the Supreme Being but also in divinities and spir-
its. For example, Awolalu (1979:20) writes that the Yoruba "hold the belief that
as the Supreme Being created heaven and earth and all the inhabitants, so did He
bring into being the divinities and spirits ... to serve his theocratic world" (see
also Alupona 1991:27).

Insofar as the origin of spirits is concerned, there is no agreement among schol-
ars. Idowu (1973:169) argues that divinities are derivatives from Deity, spirits
who have no beginning and probably no ending. According to Idowu, Orisa-nla
(arch-divinity among the Yoruba), is definitely a derivation partaking of the very
nature and metaphysical attributes of Olodumare (see also Idowu 1962). Far-
row (1969:34) points to diverse origins of spirits: "Some of them, according to
mythology of the country, were always spirits, of divine origin, existing prior to all
creation; others are deified men; others again are the spirits of animals, trees,
rocks, etc." On the contrary, Fadipe (1970:262) denies the concept of divine
derivation among the Yoruba, saying that, "All the Orisa of Yorubaland are gen-
erally acknowledged to be in every case traceable to a human being".  As for
Mbiti (1969:79), there is no clear information what African peoples say or think
about the origin of spirits because, according to him, some spirits are considered
to have been created as a 'race' by themselves. These, like other living crea-
tures, have continued to reproduce themselves and add to their numbers. This
makes Mbiti conclude that most peoples in Africa seem to believe that the spirits

are what remains of the human beings when they die physically. Mugambi (1989:64) cautions, though, that we need to differentiate between spirits that were once human (ancestral spirits) and those that were never human. Yet Mugambi does not tell anything about the origin of the spirits that were never human.

Yet another view on the origin of spirits is represented by Parrinder (1949:26) who says, "Any of the divinities worshipped in West Africa seem to have come from the personification of natural forces, since all the universe is thought to be peopled with spirits. Others are deified ancestors. Some have a double quality, both human and divine combined." All these divergent opinions about the origin of spirits are indicative, to a large extent confirming what Mbiti (1969:79) says that generally there is no clear information what African peoples say or think about the origin of spirits. There is a general consensus though about the ancestral spirits as those of people who have once lived.

## 4.3.3.2   DIFFERENT TYPES OF SPIRITS

Beliefs about the numbers, names and orders of spirits vary among different African peoples (Olowola 1993:33). According to Mbiti (1969:78), "myriads of spirits are reported from every African people, but they defy description almost as much as they defy the scientist's test tubes in the laboratory". If we pursue the hierarchical consideration that includes divinities, Mbiti is of the opinion that the spirits are the 'common spiritual' beings beneath the status of divinities, and above the status of human beings. They are the 'common populace' of spiritual beings.

Except for the ancestral spirits that form the bulk of the populace of spiritual beings (cf. Anderson 1991:76), there is another significant category of spirits that is generally referred to as 'nature spirits'. There are various theories as to the actual identity of the 'nature spirits'. Willoughby (1932:1) sees 'nature spirits' as being ancestors who were buried in or near that particular natural phenomenon, and who, with the passing time, had 'degenerated' to being identified with that phenomenon. Idowu (1973:174-175) also supports the theory that the 'nature spirits' were once human (see Mugambi 1989:79). But another school of thought holds that 'nature spirits' were never human (see Mugambi 1989:64). Though

'nature spirits' do not feature prominently in Southern African peoples (see Krige 1950; Schapera 1953; Mönnig 1967; Hunter 1979), in other parts of Africa, however, their existence and role are abundant (see Willoughby 1932:1-118; Anderson 1991:75; Wiredu 1998:190; Parrinder 1976:50).

In the category of 'nature spirits', there is often an overlooked dimension and that is the role of female divinities or spirits. Jell-Bahlsen (2000:38) attributes this neglect to the suppression of the colonial administrators and the religious fanatics from various churches. This has led to the concentration on the conservative male aspects of custom, at the expense of the dynamic, innovative and creative female side of custom (see also Jell-Bahlsen 1998a). To fill in the lacuna, Jell-Bahlsen (2000:38f) then presents a case study of the water goddess, Uhammiri/Ogbuide, the spirit woman of the Ugwatu/Oguta Lake and the role she plays in the lives of the rural Oru Igbo. Uhammiri's husband is the river god, Urashi. The divine pair harbours cosmic balance, creation and procreation. Some of the functions of Uhammiri are that she presides over the crossroads of life, death and rebirth. She also compensates for losses and disappointment. Her priests and priestesses often are renowned leaders of various illnesses (see Jell-Bahlsen 2000:39).

In the Zulu tradition, God was understood in relation to the actions of uNomkhubulwana, the daughter (*inkosazana*) of *uNkulunkulu* (God). UNomkhubulwana was believed to have come out on the same day that a human being came out of the earth (see Ndwandwe 2000:189; Krige 1950:282-283). She was regarded as the mouth of God or a type of earth mother associated with agriculture, spring rain and fertility (Thorpe 1991:37). In times of drought or floods or when worms had eaten mealies, uNomkhubulwana was asked for rain (see Berglund 1976:64). According to Mbiti's (1969:78) report, uNomkhubulwana was said to be the 'Queen (Princess) of heaven' of great beauty. The rainbow, mist and rain were emanations of her glory, and she was surrounded by light. She was believed to be a virgin, and taught women how to make beer, among other useful arts. UNomkhubulwana presided over the growth of the corn and some of the Zulu people in spring time would hold dances on the hills in honour of her (see Krige 1950:283).

Insofar as the female side of the universe in Igbo cosmology is concerned, Achebe (1986) says that among the many deities of the Igbo pantheon of gods and god-desses, the supreme mother goddess known as Uhammiri/Ogbuide in Ugwuta and the mother earth goddess Ani/Ala are the most prominent, ever-present spirits in Ugwuta and its environs. Achebe (1986:20-25) further explains that as divine mother, the water goddess is imperial in challenging or confirming a person's destiny. She is not only present but also pivotal for one's entry into and exit from this world. The divine woman is believed to be an eternal, intrinsic and dominant force of human nature, existence, life course and destiny (cf. Jell-Bahlsen 2000:45).

As touching the unique case of the Rain Queen of the Lobedu people of South Africa, Knappert (1995:205) is of the opinion, and correctly so, that we must distinguish between these Lobedu rain queens who are a succession of female rulers named Modjadji and the great goddess whose incarnations on earth these queens are. It is this connection between the human and the mythological that makes the incredible reputation of the Rain Queen a religious phenomenon. The Lobedu people believe that they were protected by their Goddess of Rain against the invasions of the Zulu hordes of the early nineteenth century, since just the mention of her name struck terror in the hearts of her people's enemies who, when they approached her kingdom, would be struck by magic and die of un-known causes. She could send drought and even swarms of locusts to her en-emies. Among the people of Lesotho, Mantsopa was believed to possess some of these extraordinary powers (see Hodgson 2003:210).

The belief in the female deities does not appear to be a modern phenomenon, though. De Villiers (2002) makes an interesting inquiry into the *Queen of Heaven* in Jeremiah 7:17-18 and 44:15-24. De Villiers (2002:620) observes that the *Queen of Heaven,* as mentioned in Jeremiah, is not an insignificant goddess, because the whole catastrophe of the exile is attributed to the worship of her. Before the exile, Yahweh, who claims to be the true God of Judah, is concerned about this worship. In Jeremiah 7, Yahweh forbids his prophet, Jeremiah, to carry out the duties of his office: he may no longer pray for, nor intercede on behalf of the people. Yahweh is angry because the *Queen of heaven* is worshipped and not he. In reading Jeremiah 44, we discover that Yahweh has carried out his punishment on Judah. By this time, some people had gone into exile and some

had fled to Egypt, and Jerusalem was in ruins. In spite of the judgement of God's wrath, evidence shows that the refugees from Judea, who fled to Egypt, continued to worship the *Queen of heaven* (Jr 44:17). A papyrus dating from the 5th century B.C., found at Hermopolis in Egypt, mentions the *Queen of Heaven* among the gods honoured by the Jewish community living there (see also Vriezen 1998:31-58). The story of the *Queen of Heaven* serves to illustrate that the female side of custom or religion is an old and enduring one despite various attempts to suppress it (see Jell-Bahlsen 2000:38; de Villiers 2002:626; Olupona 2000:xviii).

Another type of spirits that require mentioning are the anthropomorphous spirits, often visible to some people, which are ogre-like little creatures, often with sexual connotations (Anderson 1991:77; Knappert 1995:241-242). The best known in Southern Africa is *uTikoloshe* or *Hili*. *UTikoloshe* can look like a human child for it possesses magic powers and is very vicious. *Tikoloshes* are believed to be agents of witchcraft and are said to be as sexy as satyrs and reportedly mating with females. Obviously *uTikoloshe* is understood in male terms (cf. Rheeders 1998:37-38) whose victims are mainly women and children. The origin of these spirits is not speculated on, they are simply believed to exist (Anderson 1991:77). A discussion on the understanding of spirits in Africa will be incomplete if something is not said about evil spirits, to which we now turn.

## 4.3.3.3  EVIL SPIRITS

Anderson (1991:77) correctly observes that one of the functions of a diviner is to determine the identity of, and exorcise 'evil spirits'. It is to be noted that in traditional Africa, ancestors are never referred to, nor considered, as evil spirits.

In nearly all African societies, it is thought that the spirits are either the "origin of evil or agents of evil" (Mbiti 1969:204). In various churches in Africa, prayers for deliverance from 'harmful' spirits are sought and offered (see Laurent 2001:333). In those churches, the idea of demons or devil is tied up with the concept of bad spirits (Kiogora 1993:54). Evil spirits are believed to cause various maladies and madness (Mbiti 1969:204). If a person, who is sick or suffering, has exhausted the remedies and diagnostics available at the hospital, and

after the family has concluded that the evil in question does not come from a medically related cause, the solution suggested is for the afflicted person, often together with his/her family, to consult a diviner as to what the matter is and why the sickness or affliction persists (see Knappert 1995:228; Mary 2001:318). The belief is that if something or sickness is beyond medical expertise, it has spiritual causes that are ascribed to evil spirits or *izinto zabantu* (human-induced spiritual activities; cf. Pobee 1979:100; Umeagudosu 1992:22).

The working of (evil) spirits is also seen when it comes to magic and/or witch-craft. For example, telekinesis is, for the African spirit-expert, the removal of an object by a spirit-master without touching it. A spirit-master simply commands his/her servile spirit, invisible for other spectators, to move it for him/her. In South Africa, especially among African communities, some families complain that objects are moved in front of their eyes without any visible hand moving them. People attribute such activities to the work of evil spirits, who often are con-trolled by sorcerers and witches. .

There is also a belief that some people fly, being carried by the spirits they com-mand (see Knappert 1995:228; Parrinder 1963:145). Those who do not fly (at times like fire balls) are believed to ride on animals, especially on owls, antelopes and leopards, all nocturnal creatures. In Southern Africa, the baboon is also said to fall into this category. It is obvious, therefore, that in African cultural and religious belief, there is this close connection between spirits and some animals. Spirits can hear, see, speak and appear in dreams to people, in human form or disguised as animals (Knappert 1995:228; cf. Kiogora 1993;54; Holland 2001;9; Rheeders 1998:37). Among the Nguni people especially in the eastern Cape, the *impundulu* is probably the most feared familiar. He is a lightning bird, associated with thun-der and lightning, causing death to people and beasts, and failing crops. He is blamed when lightning strikes, and is thought to suck blood from his victims, causing illness in the chest area. Still among the Nguni people, there is *isithunzela* which is supposedly a corpse dug from its grave and controlled by witches to do evil deeds. These 'zombies' are also used to cultivate the land of the witches, saving them from performing this heavy task (see Rheeders 1998:38).

Daneel (1971:134) also writes about *ngozi* (avenging) spirits among the Southern Shona of Zimbabwe (cf. Anderson 1991:78). Daneel says that the "avenging spirit is never a member of the afflicted person's patrilineage". However, *ngozi* spirits may be understood as evil because they are "the most formidable, dangerous, and therefore the most feared ... but this does not imply moral wickedness" (ibid). Daneel (1971:133) explains the avenging spirit as "of an aggrieved person that comes back after his death to demand justice and retribution for the unrepaired wrongs that were done to him during life". In the case of an aggrieved member of a family becoming an avenging spirit after death, the senior members of that family know what ceremony to conduct in order to appease the dissatisfied spirit (see Mbiti 1969:84). Among the Zulu people (amaZulu), a wandering spirit is called home through a special ceremony called *ukubuyisa* (see Ndwandwe 2000:207; Lamla 1981:16-17).

## 4.3.4    ANCESTORS

### 4.3.4.1    ANCESTORS: THE REALITY

A belief in ancestral spirits seems to be the most prominent feature in the African traditional religion because it always resurfaces in one way or another (see Krüger, Lubbe & Steyn 2002:34; Zulu 1998:182; Clark 2001:182). This indicates the significance that ancestral belief plays in the African worldview. But Steadman and Palmer (1994:177) contend that even in societies where the dead are not consciously and explicitly worshipped, there is reference and dealing with ghosts, shades, souls, totemic plants, or cults of the dead. Hammond-Tooke (1981:23) explains the difference between cults of the dead and ancestral religion/worship in this manner: "Cults of the dead, then, do not typically involve the idea that the dead support and assist the living: rather it is the living that are concerned with the well-being of their dead. It is a one-way traffic - whereas the relationship of living and dead in ancestor worship is two-way". Hammond-Tooke illustrates this in the African context by referring to the Dahomeans of West Africa who clearly distinguish between the dead, *chio*, and the ancestors, *tovodu*. The Dahomeans have complex ceremonies to transform some of the dead into ancestors. Hammond-Tooke further advances his argument by mentioning the ancient Greeks who had elaborate cults concerning belief in ghosts and shades,

and he also mentions the Jews who commemorate the dead by name at their New Year and Day of Atonement (cf. Le Roux 1999:249). These rites, Hammond-Tooke (1981:23) contends, do in no way constitute an ancestor cult. Though this subject is attractive and worthy of a proper inquiry, it is beyond the parameters of the topic at hand.

In Africa, as ancestral belief is a living tradition among many tribes, it is not surprising that most Africans have been exposed to the issue of ancestors whether directly within their own families or indirectly from their neighbourhood (see Zulu 1998:182). To a large extent, it is something whereof almost every African is conscious, even if they may not be directly involved therein (see Turaki 1999:34; Zahan 2000:10). In his poem entitled, *Breath*, Birago Diop attempts to capture this dimension of the African religious reality by these words:

> Those who are dead have never gone away,
> They are at the breast of the wife;
> They are in the child's cry of dismay
> And the firebrand bursting into life.
> The dead are not under the ground.
> They are in the fire that burns low;
> They are in the grass with tears to shed,
> In the rock where whining winds blow.
> They are in the forest, they are in the homestead.
> The dead are never dead.
> (in Sonyika 1975:44-46).

Because of this awareness in the African's mind, ancestors are called "the living dead" (Mbiti 1969:83; see also Mitchel 1977; Gehman 999; Triebel 2002:188). The interaction between the living and the dead is made possible "because the world of the ancestors is ontologically both analogous and contiguous to that of mortals, that is, there is no difference in kind between worlds" (Teffo and Roux 1998:141). Again, according to the African spirituality, every person is a nexus of interacting forces so that he or she is capable of communicating and interacting vertically - with God, and deities, ancestors, and other spiritual forces including

mystical powers and horizontally - with fellow human beings (see Danfulani 1992:48).

As Africans are generally community-oriented people, it is understandable that the relationship between the living and the dead is appreciated and, if at all possible, maintained. It is therefore not surprising that the ancestors influence the thinking, the life and the behaviour of the living. On the other hand, the ancestors also depend on the living in a sense that only if they are remembered, only if attention is paid to them through veneration and the offering of sacrifices will they exist as ancestors (see Triebel 2002:189). This mutual interdependence serves to indicate, among other things, that in Africa the individual cannot live in isolation and apart from fellow human beings because life is understood in communal terms (see Maimela 1985:66). It is against this backdrop in African spirituality that ancestors are incorporated into a very sensitive network of relationships because they are not 'dead' but 'living' and this is based on the perception that says that life cannot be terminated even by death itself (see Mbiti 1969:108; Triebel 2002:188).

## 4.3.4.2  ANCESTORS: DESCRIPTION AND IDENTIFICATION

In Africa, human ageing is a biophysical phenomenon but it confers also on the individual a new status (see Beller 2001:21). When a person grows in age, he or she as an elder, comes closer to the ancestors and after death will pass either to linear or cyclic time. In the linear model, the ancestor is supposed to have an existence for a period, but he or she does not return to have further human existence. The cyclic model assumes the possibility of a reincarnation of the ancestor in the form of a newborn child (see Burnett 1988:62-64). Although Beller (2001:21) emphasises that people in death pass from the linear to the cyclic time, which is the case in the ancestral beliefs of some African tribes like the Ga people of Ghana and the Nilotic peoples of Eastern Africa, such as the Maasai or Karimojong (see Burnett 1988:63), in Southern Africa, the tendency is that ancestors pass to linear time. The reincarnation of the ancestors in newborn babies is foreign to most of the peoples of Southern Africa (see Lamla 1981f; Hammond-Tooke 1981:22f; Callaway 1970:127;228; Krige 1950;159f).

In terms of the Southern African context, Zulu (1998:183) describes ancestors as those who have died but continue to exist in the land of the dead (cf. Beller 2001:21). But death alone is not a sufficient condition for the dead person to be given the title of being an ancestor (Hammond-Tooke 1981:24; Zulu 1998:183). Zahan (2000:11) says "the notion of ancestor implies the idea of selection".

People who die a premature death cannot be categorised as ancestors (Imasogie 1983:57). Instead, they are people who must have 'died well', that is, dying a 'natural' death, full of years, after having delivered one's message to one's own, and to have had a funeral and burial (Kabasélé 1991:118). An ancestor is some-one who "has reached a great age and who, during his lifetime, has acquired a vast experience of life, human beings and things" (Zahan 2000:11). In Africa, a person who 'died well' is a person who was not killed by lightning, did not drown or commit suicide, was not killed by accident or some 'ill-reputed' dis-ease such as leprosy, smallpox, etc. (Kalu 2000:57; Zahan 2000:11). Should death come before the allotted time, according to Imasogie (1983:57), the person's soul lingers around as a ghost for some time until the life-span originally given him or her is completed (cf. Nyirongo 1997:80; Burnett 1988:58).

The ancestor is expected to must have lived a morally worthy life (see Lumbala 1998:111). They must have 'lived well' (Kabasele 1991:118), that is, have led a virtuous life (cf. Kalu 2000:57). They must have observed the laws - have in-curred the guilt neither of theft nor a dissolute life (cf. Triebel 2002:188). Again, the ancestors must not have been wrathful persons or quarrelsome ones, or have dabbled in sorcery or witchcraft (see Kabasélé 1991:118; cf. Nyirongo 1997:79).

As ancestral belief is based on the notion of family as best characterised by the famous sentence of Mbiti (1969:108): "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am", the ancestors, for them to be regarded as such, must have left descendants on earth because if one has had no progeny, there will be no role to play like that of mediation (between God and human beings). Zahan (2000:11) explains that "only he who is an organic member of the family, of the lineage, or of the tribe to which he belongs can be an ancestor". This automatically excludes slaves or outsiders, who, even if integrated into a social unit, can never attain the status of ancestor (cf. Triebel 2002:188; Kabasélé 1991:118).

It is to be noted that in ancestral belief there is no gender differentiation; both males and females could be ancestors (Kalu 2000:57). According to Zulu (1998:184), the matrilineal families tend to have more female ancestors, while patrilineal families tend to have more male ancestors.

As we have in some way established the identity of who ancestors are, we can now deal with how they communicate with the living, their role and also important aspects of veneration and worship.

### 4.3.4.3 COMMUNICATION AND MANIFESTATION

In Africa, the relationship between the living and the living-dead is a dynamic one. It is accepted that the ancestors are still in some way part of the community of the living and thus they are correctly called the living-dead (Mbiti 1969:25; Gehman 1999). In describing this relationship between the living and the living-dead, Triebel (2002:188) says, "They are dead, they died and were buried, they are physically dead, but nevertheless they are still related to the living and they still influence the lives of the living".

The inter-dependence and mutual relationship of the living people and the ancestors show itself in various ways. For example, the living communicate with the dead by regular ritual sacrifice and invocation, the priest or officiant at which is the family head, or the senior group representative where ancestors of alrger groups are being addressed (see Kiernan 1995:22; Callaway 1970:171f). In return, the ancestors reveal themselves through dreams by stating their names or through calamity, sickness, barrenness or bad luck, to mention a few (Zulu 1998:184; see also Berglund 1976:197; Callaway 1970:228). Though not all dreams are believed to have been sent by ancestors (see Anderson 1991:80), "dreams sent by the ancestral spirits can always be recognised, for they mostly come with a message from the dead" (Krige 1950:287). If the living fail to understand the message of the ancestors, they employ the services of a diviner or *isangoma* who, as a link between the ancestors and the living (or between the spirit world and the physical world) is able to interpret the message of the ancestors for the living (see Ndwandwe 2000:215).

Ancestors may manifest themselves as animals; the appearance of a harmless snake is commonly interpreted as a propitious symbol of good fortune (see Nyirongo 1997:83; Kiernan 1995:23). Among the amaZulu, when an *idlozi* or *ithongo* wishes to revisit the world of the living, he/she does so in the form of a snake. There are certain distinct and well-known kinds of snakes that are definitely regarded as spirits or spirit-snakes (see Kige 1950:285f).

Owing to the inter-dependence and mutual relationship between ancestors and the living, it is therefore of significance that harmony and cooperation exist between them. If the relationship between the ancestors and the living falters, it needs to be restored or healed through an appeasement ceremony that usually involves a ritual sacrifice.

## 4.3.4.4 THE ROLE OF THE ANCESTORS

In Africa, the family and the community are not limited to those presently alive: they include members of the past and also future members (see Kalilombe 1994:126). The death of the individual is seen, in a sense, as "a social elevation" (Mbiti 1969:81) because death in the African's mind does not represent the end of human existence, but rather a change in status (Zahan 2000:10). In fact, the death of the individual is perceived as the necessary condition for becoming an ancestor (see Beller 2001:22).

Having passed through death, the ancestors, having become prominent members of the invisible world, are believed to share in mystical powers not ordinarily available to those presently alive. The general belief is that the ancestors are nearer to God. Those that are departed of up to five generations, who are still within a Sasa period (see Mbiti 1969:83), are believed to be still around and are part of the families and the community. They understand fully what is going on and they share in the preoccupations and projects of the living members, and are intimately interested in what is going on (Kalilombe 1994:126).

The *amadlozi* or *badimo* play the function of ensuring good ordering of social relationships among the biologically living and the fertility and well-being of human beings, their crops and stocks (Setiloane 1976:65; cf. Awolalu 1979:61).

Based on the notion that the ancestors are in a special position, that is, near to God and that they have mystical power, they are taken as natural guardians of their relatives on earth and can act as mediators with God (see Mbiti 1969:83; Setiloane 1976:43; Kalilombe 1994:126; Skhakhane 1995:109). The living expect help of the departed in their fight against the evil forces that pervade the world and threaten them at every turn (Ndwandwe 2000:209; cf. McVeigh 1974:29; Hexham 1987:22-23).

As guardians of law and order, the ancestors act as representatives of ethical values, traditions and activities (see Triebel 2002:189). This flows from the understanding that ancestors have established the norms for the good life and serve as the protectors of tribal morality (McVeigh 1974:7). Offence in the ethical and moral values by the living is ultimately offence against the ancestors who, in that capacity, "act as the invisible police of the families and communities" (Mbiti 1969:83; cf. Zahan 2000:11; Ray 1976:146; Zvarevashe 1987:245).

Setiloane (1976:65) correctly summarises the role of the ancestors as basically parental - protective, corrective and aimed at the welfare of the family and the whole group (cf. Zulu 1998:184-188).

## 4.3.4.5   ANCESTORS AS MEDIATORS

The special role of the ancestors is generally considered as that of being intermediaries between God (the Supreme Being) and the human being or between the spirit world and the world of the living. Mbiti (1969:83) describes the ancestors as "the closest links that men have with the spirit world". For Mbiti, the living dead are bilingual: they speak the language of human beings with whom they lived until 'recently'; and they speak the language of the spirits and of God, to whom they are drawing nearer, ontologically. Having passed through death, the ancestors are considered nearer to God, the invisible *par excellence*, with whom they are able to communicate and to whom they can more effectively present the needs of those alive (see Kalilombe 1994:126; Mbiti 1969:83; Ndwandwe 2000:210). Because of their closeness to God, the Source, the ancestors are believed to know the living relatives more intimately (Kabasélé 1991:124). Though the ideal of mediation is crucial to the understanding of the role of ancestors, it is

something that is still imperfectly developed in African religious thought (see Vilakazi 1965:89).

### 4.3.4.6   VENERATION AND WORSHIP

The relation of the living people to their living dead has been described by scholars in various ways. Nyirongo (1997:87) explains the relationship between the living and their dead as "demonic illusions" because, according to him, it is impossible for the living to commune with the dead. He goes so far as to say that it is the demons which masquerade as ancestors. On the other hand, Mulago (1991:130) argues that, "From the viewpoint of Christian faith, we can see absolutely nothing at odds in principle with the practice of making ancestors and other dead person's beings the object of veneration, or even of a religious cult, provided that this does not exclude the worship due to the Supreme Being". For Tlhagale (2001:45), believers need to understand that, "Faith in God as the all-powerful father, as the all-merciful mother, as creator and foundation of all being, has dethroned the ancestors from the human-made pedestal". This, in short, serves as an illustration of the divergent representative opinions of how scholars, African and otherwise, view the relations between the living and the dead.

But still, the fundamental question remains as to whether the relationship between the living and the dead is that of veneration or worship. Some scholars think that it is more of veneration than worship (see Anderson 1991:81; Krüger et al 2002:34; Zulu 1998:185). In his inquiry into the religious system in the Oruuano Movement among the Herero people of Namibia, Pollitzer (1984:127) has found that the issue at stake in the movement is not worship but veneration because "the ancestors are not gods and they never become gods". His argument is that there is no evidence of an apotheosis of the ancestors because their state is merely a prolongation of their life on earth, with certain powers and prerogatives added. Among the amaZulu, the ancestors are considered as mediators (between the Supreme Being - uNkulunkulu or uMvelinqangi) and nothing more. The ancestors are not called 'onkulunkulu bethu' ('our gods' - see Ndwandwe 2000:264). Fasholé-Luke (1974:211) prefers the term 'veneration' than 'worship' because African people, according to him, make a distinction tbetween the worship they offer the Supreme Being [God] and the 'worship' they offer the ancestors.

Bediako (1995:224) thinks that the distinction made by Fasholé-Luke is an important one, although it does not get us out of the fundamental problem. Pöllitzer (1984:126-127) believes that the issue of veneration and/or worship has to do with terminology. He thinks that the issue of ancestor veneration has been irrevocably and wrongly prejudged and put into the category of religion by western missionaries, theologians and ethnologists. He maintains that it makes far more sense to interpret ancestor veneration in social, than religious, categories.

In this viewpoint, Pöllitzer is not alone. Sharing in this school of thought are other notable theologians in the African continent. The Nigerian theologian, Idowu (1973:186), states: "Certainly, the cults of the ancestors do not constitute African traditional religion; and it is a gross error to equate them with religion ... Thus the cults are a means of communion and communication between those who are living on earth and those who have gone to live in the spirit world of the ancestors". Ela (1987:33) indicates that the offerings for the ancestors are "signs of respect", "symbols of the continuity of family", and "simply a command of the love of children" towards parents. In Ela's opinion, these offerings are "only an 'anthropological' reality" and not related to religion at all (cf. Ma 2002:203; Triebel 2002:192).

Though this viewpoint of seeing the ancestor veneration (worship) as a social rather than a religious phenomenon is a valid attempt in resolving this matter, it still leaves us with some puzzles. Triebel (2002:192) says that, although we are encouraged not to talk about ancestor worship, this view does not take into account the fear of the ancestors that is part of the ancestor cult. Triebel (2002:193) argues that, "if one interprets African religion as theistic, centred on the belief in the one God, one cannot accept that the ancestors have their own independent religious function" (cf. Sauma 2002:325). Moreover, this view appears to be influenced by a western anthropological perspective in which reality is divided into different categories (e.g. social and religious). In Africa, such a dichotomous or even trichotomous approach to reality is foreign because all of life is believed to be a unit (see Oduyoye 1979:11; Khathide 1999a:2). Again, other African theologians (e.g. Mbiti 1969:83; Bediako 1995:223f) do not seem to share the position that the ancestor practices is more of a social phenomenon than a religious one.

Although most Africans prefer the usage of "veneration", to "worship", when it comes to ancestral belief, there are still practices that may tilt the argument to worship, itself; for example, the building of altars (see Zahan 2000:13) upon which sacrifices are offered to the ancestors. At such a ritual ceremony, there can be no doubt that the ancestors are invoked; they are the addressees of these prayers and the invocation of God is missing (see Triebel 2002:193). In the opinion of Balz (1995:8), it is the attitude of the venerating (or worshipping?) persons that count the most. They feel that they know that they themselves depend on the ancestors, who are the guarantors of life. Another intriguing aspect in those involved in the ritual sacrifice is their tendency to say that they are praying to God and their ancestors (*Modimo le badimo* - cf. Setiloane 1967:65, 71; Pöllitzer 1984:126). In that sense, ancestors appear to attain a new status, that of being equated to the Supreme Being. It is for this reason that many missionaries in the past and in the present have regarded ancestor veneration as the centre of African traditional religion and as something opposed to the worship of the true God. They condemned it as an offence against the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me."

Some African scholars and churches have responded in various ways in trying to resolve the ancestor debacle. For instance, at the Church of the Province in Kenya in *A Kenya Service of Holy Communion*, the ancestors are mentioned in the liturgy:

> Gracious Father we heartily thank you for our faithful an-
> cestors and all who have passed through death to the new
> life of joy in our heavenly home. We pray that surrounded
> by so great a cloud of witnesses, we may walk in their
> footsteps and be fully united with them in your everlasting
> kingdom.

It is clear that the tendency in some churches is to incorporate the ancestral belief in the doctrine of the Communion of Saints (see Fasholé-Luke 1974:214; Bediako 1995:223-230; *Indulgentiarum Doctrina II*.4). Others, like Kato (1975:36f), do not consider positively the role played by the ancestors in the pre-Christian background of Africans (see also Nyirongo 1997:87). Triebel (2002:195-196)

proposes that the celebration of Holy Communion may include traditional rites of ancestor veneration. He says such a decision and specifics must be worked out by African theologians and churches, themselves. According to Mbiti (1991:130), there is a difference between veneration and worship. He says that naming the dead in prayers and performing rituals show respect for the living-dead but "this does not and cannot mean that they are worshipped" (ibid 130).

## 4.3.4.7  CONCLUSIONS

Within the African traditional religious framework, the ancestors were never considered as evil spirits. Though dead, they were believed to be living in the spirit world performing such roles as mediators between the Supreme Being and the living because they were believed to be closer to him by virtue of their state (of death). As death was taken as passage into another form of life, actually a prolongation of life on earth rather than termination thereof, the ancestors played basically a parental role of protection, provision and correcting aimed at the welfare of the whole group. African theologians and churches are still struggling how to respond appropriately and biblically to the issue of ancestral practices, especially among Christians. It is clear, however, from the views we have surveyed, that ancestors by virtue of their status of not being 'gods', have never been and cannot be, worshipped or given the same status as God or the Supreme Being.

## 4.3.5.  SORCERY AND WITCHCRAFT

## 4.3.5.1  BROAD DEFINITIONS

While the role of the ancestors is understood to be at most punitive, their intervention is admonitory rather than vindictive (Kiernan 1995:23). It is taken for granted that they always act in a socially supportive role. But, in the words of Kiernan, "the same cannot be said of another kind of human mystical agency, witches and sorcerers, who also are given prominence in the explanation of misfortune" (ibid; cf. Shorter 1998:67). Magesa (1997:179) maintains that, "In African Religion, an understanding of witchcraft is central to understanding wrongdoing as evil". Bosch (1987:41) adds: "The witch ... in traditional African society is the author of evil *par excellence*".

In answering what witchcraft exactly is, many scholars distinguish between witch-craft and sorcery (e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1958:9-11; Parrinder 1970:133-137; Shorter 1985:99-100). According to Lagerwerf (1985:5), the main difference between a sorcerer and a witch is that the former achieves his evil end by magic, whereas the latter, often a woman, achieves hers by mystical power inherent in her personality - a power that does not require the help of magic (see also Bosch 1986:45). Sorcerers are individuals who deliberately employ magic against other people by means of *umuthi, ditlhare* ("medicines"), incantations or spells. It is a technique which people can acquire and then practise. Witchcraft, on the other hand, is considered as an inherited capacity for causing evil to others, a mystical and innate power and a kind of supernatural quality, of which the witch may not even be aware (cf. Magesa 1997:179-181; Hammond-Tooke 1998:7). A witch (Swahili *muroji*; seSotho-Tswana *moloi*; isiZulu *umthakathi*) can be an old woman who, by her mere presence, makes a child ill. She does not do anything, though she may be accused of casting the evil eye on the child, supposedly be-cause she is jealous, not having any surviving children of her own (see Knappert 1995:257; Bosch 1987:4). It is for this reason that some young children are found with amuletic gadgets around their wrists or necks. This is an illustration of positive or good magic.

Though anthropologists and sociologists may seek to distinguish between sor-cery and witchcraft, African societies do not often draw such an academic dis-tinction between witchcraft, sorcery, evil magic, evil eye and other ways of em-ploying mystical power to do harm to someone or their belongings. They are all categorised as "enemies of life" (see Magesa 1997:161f). The belief in some scholars is that witches and sorcerers are influenced by evil spirits in their wicked deeds (see Parrinder 1970:138; Bourdillon 2000:176; Boakye-Sarpong & Osei-Kwedie 1989:8-9; Nyirongo 1997:186-188). In that sense, they fall under one category.

As witchcraft is a universal phenomenon, it is of importance that we establish its meaning, especially in reference to early modern Europe, because that is where it possibly made its impact felt. Bosch (1987:41) is of the opinion that under-standing European witchcraft is vital because it has had some influence on the way scholars, both western and African, have interpreted African witchcraft (cf.

Parrinder 1970). When early modern Europeans used the word "witchcraft", they would refer, for example, to the practice of harmful, black, or maleficent magic or the performance of harmful deeds by means of some sort of extraordinary, mysterious, occult, preternatural or supernatural power (cf. Levack 1995:4). This type of magic would include the killing of a person by piercing a doll made in that person's image, inflicting sickness on a child by reciting a spell, bringing down hail on crops by burning enchanted substances, starting a fire by leaving a hexed sword in a room, and causing impotence in a bridegroom by tying knots in a piece of leather and leaving it in his proximity. These acts were usually referred to in Latin as *maleficia*. The agents of *maleficia* who were called *malefici* or *maleficae* were believed to have owed their powers to having made a pact with the devil (see Parrinder 1970:60f; Bosch 1987:41). These witches were supposedly holding secret meetings known as covens, sabbaths or synagogues, at which they adored the devil and practised infanticide and cannibalism. Several papal bulls from the late Middle Ages reveal that the Catholic Church had completely accepted the existence of witchcraft as believed by the masses. This led to the persecution of witches throughout Europe. Similarly in South Africa, especially in Limpopo (Northern Province), people suspected of witchcraft have been executed by members of the community, in most cases even without a formal trial (see Ralushai *et al* 1986; Teffo & Roux 1998:43; cf. Bourdillon 2000:176).

Although beliefs comparable with those of European witchcraft have been known in many parts of the world, it is in Africa that the study of witchcraft has gained particular interest because of its religio-cultural impact on societies. In Africa, witchcraft, as a term, used more popularly and broadly, would describe all sorts of evil employment by individuals who have access to mystical power and whose activities are performed in a secret function to harm other people and their belongings (see Mbiti 1969:202; cf. Parrinder 1970:138; Knappert 1995:275; Maghbouleh 1981:22). According to Mbiti (1969:202), "in a non-scientific environment belief of this type cannot be 'clean' from fear, falsehood, exaggeration, suspicion, fiction and irrationality". This belief is found in every African village and it affects everyone. It is part of the religious corpus of beliefs.

## 4.3.5.2   THE REALITY OF WITCHCRAFT

Idowu (1973:175) states that, "In Africa it is idle to begin with the question whether witches exist or not ... To Africans ... witchcraft is an urgent reality". Berglund (1976:269) cautions that, "A denial of the presence of sorcery and witchcraft is a denial of the existence of activities of evil".

Despite all the efforts of missionary activity in Africa, sorcery and witchcraft are a reality in the lives of many people including Christians. Lagerwerf (1987:1) laments the fact that the churches did not always seem to take their members' fears of witchcraft, seriously. Even discussing matters relating to witchcraft, was impossible as it was not encouraged. In many cases, experiences with witchcraft and also interaction with other spirit beings were swept under the carpet and continued to exist away from the eyes of the missionaries. Bosch (1987:42) attributes the theological inadequacy of missionaries to the fact that they were children of the Enlightenment and tended to deny the existence of the supernatural forces located in human beings as well as the reality of spirits in general and the "living-dead" in particular (cf. Silvoso 1994:103; Lagerwerf 1987:14). Owing to this inability of the gospel of the missionaries to engage the spirit world, many devoted Christians in sub-Saharan Africa were left with little or no choice but to cling to traditional religious ways to ward off evil spirits and attacks of witchcraft. Imasogie (1983:23) says that, because of the inadequate western presentation of the gospel in the African context, "In times of existential crisis many respectable African Christians revert to traditional religious practices as the means for meeting their spiritual needs".

Another reason why witchcraft was not taken seriously by missionaries or by Westerners, in general, is because witchcraft, magic, sorcery and other such phenomena are normally not considered as objects of scientific study because they are not based on empirical observation (see Teffo & Roux 1998:143). Indeed, by scientific criteria, these powers are rejected as unreal and belief in them is generally classified as irrational, if not outright unintelligible. It could also be that the denial of the existence of witchcraft is the barbaric way in which witches have been hunted down and executed mercilessly (Bosch 1987:41; Teffo & Roux 1998:143; Parrinder 1970:17f). The early modern churches in Europe and some

communities in Africa have been rigorously involved in trying to eliminate witches in their midst (see Parrinder 1970:35; Teffo & Roux 1998:143; Levack 1995).

To Westerners, in general, and missionaries, in particular, it seemed self-evident that the belief in witchcraft or sorcery was something 'traditional' that would automatically disappear with modernisation. But this way of thinking is not compatible with the actual development in Africa today. Throughout the continent, discourses on sorcery or witchcraft are intertwined, often in quite surprising ways, with modern changes (Geshiere 1997:2; cf. Lagerwerf 1987:1). Because of the strong belief in the existence and reality of witchcraft, Africans employ mystical power for curative, protective, productive and preventative purposes. They wear, carry or keep charms, amulets and a variety of objects on their bodies, in their possessions, homesteads and fields (see Mbiti 1969:203). In some homes, both in the rural and urban black South Africa, one may even find a symbol of the cross made out of medicinal concoction at the top of each door which is meant to ward off spirits of evil and other attacks of witchcraft.

The argument that says that witchcraft is illusionary does not hold water in the African context. In the African continent, witchcraft is believed to be real and to overlook this fact is to fail to "scratch where it itches" (Kraft 1979:150) in the lives of people. This is exactly what the oversight of the missionaries was, who were influenced by the Enlightenment-rooted presuppositions and whose worldview had its axiom as, "If you can't prove its existence scientifically, it does not exist". In the western worldview, most people act as if the spirit world and thus witchcraft, does not exist, although they may pay lip service thereto (see Kraft 1989:88; Khathide 1999a:64; Jacobs 1992:147).

The fact that witchcraft, magic and similar phenomena cannot be considered as objects of scientific study, owing to the fact that they are not based on empirical observation (see Teffo & Roux 1998:143), cannot simply lead to the denial of the existence. To such a negative attitude, Dominique (2000:31) retorts by saying, "A merely scientific explanation of the phenomenon does not get to the heart of the matter", and he goes on to say that, "Witchcraft beliefs cannot be explained fully by one science alone since they fulfil various functions in the life of the traditional society" (ibid:32). In order to prove the reality of witchcraft, some

researchers like Willis *et al* (1999) have made it their responsibility to show how witchcraft has impacted the Zambian communities and villages. Within the African epistemological framework, the existence of witchcraft is never called into question. It is therefore clear that witchcraft as a phenomenon is still a factor to be reckoned with in Africa (Ralushai *et al* 1996:59). It is part of the religious corpus of belief (Mbiti 1969:202).

### 4.3.5.3  WITCHCRAFT - A UNIVERSAL PHENOMENON

Teffo and Roux (1998:143) contend that the paranormal activities of witchcraft are not just an African peculiarity because the history of every human society shows evidence of such beliefs and practices although in Africa they have been more pronounced than in other communities elsewhere in the world. Several authors have shown clearly that witchcraft is not just a unique African experience but that it occurred and still occurs in highly industrialised regions like Europe and America (see e.g. Levack 1995; Parrinder 1970; Taussig 1980; Barstow 1994). To illustrate the universality of the phenomenon of witchcraft, Maghbouleh (1981:122-133) makes a survey of the belief in witchcraft among the Hindu, the Buddhists, the Chinese, the Jews and even among the Christians (see also Burnett 1988:133). Although witchcraft is a universal phenomenon, it should be acknowledged that the fear and hate of witches have been more common in Africa than other regions of the world.

### 4.3.5.4  THE SOCIAL ROLE OF WITCHCRAFT

According to Bourdillon (2000:187), one of the social functions of belief in witchcraft is social control and the preservation of order. As part of the process of socialisation, adults tell children not to behave in certain ways for fear of being attacked by a witch, or for fear of appearing to be a witch. In Bosch's (1987:43) view, witchcraft fulfils an important social role in that it provides a channel through which people can deal with hatred, hostility, frustration, jealousy and guilt. Singleton (1980:14-15) believes that the witch epitomises the exact opposite of what a given culture considers normal and normative. Another aspect that Singleton (1980:31) mentions about witchcraft is that even though beliefs in witchcraft prevent progress, it is only a certain progress they prevent, namely, the progress

of the few privileged ones at the expense of the majority. Thomas and Luneau (1975:87-90) mention, among other social functions of witchcraft, the promotion of homogeneity in society in the sense that everyone who deviates from traditional patterns of life and behaviour will more easily become suspect of witchcraft. They also state that witchcraft serves to justify the socially unacceptable, yet necessary social developments such as formation of new sub-clans. Division and separation are of themselves unacceptable, so accusations of witchcraft provide the necessary opportunity for them to happen and to be sanctioned (Dominique 2000:32). Similarly, accusations of witchcraft justify people in breaking off social relations that have become intolerably strained (see Bourdillon 2000:188).

Bosch (1987:44) sees witchcraft as functioning as an arm of law and politics (cf. Bourdillon 2000:188), and as a stimulus to economic distribution (cf. Singleton 1980:31). It also serves as an outlet for anxiety and as a means for making the dark unknown manageable (see Adeney 1974:385). Perhaps the most single socio-spiritual function of witchcraft is that it plays an integrative function in that it prevents the formation of severe neuroses in both individuals and communities (see Bosch 1987:44). It helps people in Africa deal with the mystery of evil (cf. Dominique 2000:32). Magesa (1997:179) describes "Witchcraft as the human embodiment of evil". The witch, as it were, according to Shorter (1998:67), takes the place of the devil. In Africa, witchcraft is considered as anti-social and as something that systematically contradicts all the values of society. Witchcraft, therefore, is something that cannot be placated; it is something to be eradicated at all cost.

In the African context, whatever the 'rational' explanations that the sophisticated may find for witchcraft, we cannot remove the fact that such beliefs express a very real human experience of the dreadful mystery of evil present and active in their midst in a very real way (cf. Dominique 2000:34; Beattie 1963:53). However, it is also undeniable that witchcraft accusations tend to proliferate in situations of social instability and change. In technologically advanced societies, instances of witchcraft may be secretly acknowledged because it becomes too scandalous to discuss such matters in public and such talks are discouraged as barbaric and primitive.

4.3.5.5    THE NATURE AND ACTIVITIES OF WITCHCRAFT

Witchcraft can manifest itself in various ways and at different levels of human existence. For example, its destructive effect can show itself at personal, physical, familial, social and cosmic level (see Dominique 2000:33-34).

Among the AmaZulu, while ordinary illnesses and those of old age are accepted, other disruptive forces are viewed as evil and have to be explained before a remedy can be sought (see Thorpe 1991:45). It is believed that the two major causes of (abnormal) illnesses can be either the ancestors' punishment for some breach of duty by an offending individual or, what is greatly feared, illness or affliction that is human-induced through evil magic or witchcraft *(ubuthakathi)*. In the case of the ancestors, *isangoma* or *isanusi* (a diviner) would recommend a certain ritual to restore the damaged relationship between the living and the dead. When it comes to the seeds of malicious anger or ill-feelings resulting in witchcraft, the diviner is quick to pinpoint such causes (see Krige 1950:299; Thorpe 1991:46; Taylor 2001:130).

The modus operandi of the witch can be briefly explained as follows: The witch, who is generally a female, goes out at night and meets in an assembly with other witches (see Parrinder 1970:138; Thorpe 1991:46). In travelling to meet with other witches, she can do that by leaving her earthly body. In carrying out their nightly hunt for victims, the witches often ride on animals, especially the baboon. Sometimes they do not ride on animals but they metamorphose themselves into them, for example, the wild cat, owl, etc. The witches also employ mystical evil creatures as *utikoloshe*, the *impundulu* or the lightning bird and zombis *(imikhovu)* that witches are believed to raise up from dead bodies to do their wicked bidding (Thorpe 1991:46; cf. Dominique 2000:34; Knappert 1995:257; Parrinder 1970:43).

Another mode of travelling for witches is flying, which is "one of the oldest strands of witchcraft belief, and strangely enough one of the most enduring" (Parrinder 1970:42). Levack (1995:44) states that the belief in the flying of witches provides an explanation for the ability of witches to attend secret nocturnal gatherings in remote areas without their absence from home being detected. This belief

in flying witches is very ancient and widespread. Parrinder (1970:44) writes that in Hindu superstitions, witches used spells to enable themselves to fly through the night to places of meeting or to cemeteries where they fed on corpses. In the case of medieval Jewish belief, women were believed to fly with unbound hair to nocturnal assemblies. In Africa, it is still believed that witches fly to their meetings as nightjars, bats, owls and fireflies (cf. Parrinder 1970:42-46; Levack 1995:45).

Magesa (1997:185) relates that when secretly active at night, witches prefer to be naked, performing their dances while holding or actually spurting fire. They handle excrement, urine and vomit for purposes of harming people through the life force that these materials represent. Witches also enjoy soiling their neighbours' yards and other property with these materials. One of the heinous things done by witches is their participation in cannibalistic banquets (see Dominique 2000:34; Thorpe 1991:46).  Because of the witches' craving for human flesh, they are often found assembled in graveyards. According to Magesa (1997:185), among the Ga, Azande, Ibo, Nupe and Lobedu, this "eating" of human flesh is not physical but "spiritual", in that it is the soul or the psyche - the actual vital force - of the victim that is "eaten" (cf. Setiloane 1976:52). But the eating of human flesh can be an actual "physical" exercise among some tribes in Africa (see Magesa 1997:185-186; Parrinder 1970:50-53).

The activity of witches is characterised by sorcery, invisibility and  loathsome behaviour (cf. Thorpe 1991:46; Magesa 1997:185). Some of their activities in-clude the harming of victims with the 'evil eye', digging evil medicine in the ground where the victim will pass or send 'death' from a distance (see Mbiti 1969:201). Setiloane (1976:53) also tells that by applying evil medicine on a person's hair, body-dirt, footprint, shadow, and other things similarly related to a person's body, or by making a clay image of him or her (cf. Parrinder 1970:56), witches find it possible to affect a person's *seriti* (or vital force) so that all things, including living things and persons (including children) react negatively to him or her. Setiloane also mentions a popular belief that a very skilled *moloi* or *umthakathi* (witch) can direct lightning (as often happens in the Limpopo Province in South Africa) to strike a particular person (see also Teffo & Roux 1998:143; Parrinder 1970:57).

Witches break all the accepted norms of society (see Magesa 1997:185). They reject kinship ties and loyalties and will as readily harm a kinsperson as anyone else. In actual fact, a general condition of 'graduating' into a witchcraft sorority or fraternity is to kill and eat the flesh of a close relative (ibid).

Sex plays an extraordinary part in witchcraft (Maghbouleh 1981:130; cf. Melanchton 2002:519; Nm 25:1-13). Witches adhere to no sexual taboo (Magesa 1997:185; cf. Parrinder 1970:37). They commit incest and cause other people to do so, or at least, to have incestuous dreams. Likewise, witches are known to engage in sexual intercourse with spirits and animals. Magesa (1997:185) explains that this is possible because witches possess the power to change themselves into spirit-like beings at night and go to the witches' assemblies while their physical bodies remain at home (cf. Thorpe 1991:46). In southern Africa, utikoloshe is understood in heavy sexual connotations (cf. Knappert 1995:241-242; Thorpe 1991:46).

Among other activities of sorcerers and witches, Setiloane (1976:51-53) also mentions boloi ba molomo (sorcery of the mouth; cf. Sanders 1995:209) boloi ba pelo (sorcery of the heart) and sejeso (isidliso) which is generally known as 'African poison'.

This brief description of the nature and activities of witchcraft serves to indicate the central place it holds in the understanding of the African belief system. Magesa (1987:186) believes that all these anti-social activities can be summarised in one sentence: "Witchcraft is the enemy of life."

## 4.3.5.6  GENDER AND WITCHCRAFT

In Africa, there is a general belief of associating witchcraft with women (cf. Parrinder 1970:138). Kinoti (1996:241) says that there seems to be some sense to making a partial connection between gender power struggle and a woman's regenerative and mystical powers. In almost all African cultures, menstruation is associated with women's secret power often expressed also in witchcraft as antithetical to men's secret power (see Olupona 1991:6). The blood (in this case

menstrual blood) which is a symbol of life (cf. Lv 17:11) as some believe, has some potency to also destroy.

The stories of witchcraft by women abound in Africa. For example, the Nande of the Democratic Republic of Congo believe that among them live the *avali*, singular *omuli*, literally 'one who eats.' An *omuli* is a woman or a girl who 'eats' the soul *(kirimu)* of another person who will subsequently die of 'consumption' (see Knappert 1995:225). In Kenya among the Luo, *sihoho* is the power of the evil eye. *Jasihoho* is a woman who is believed to be possessed by a spirit and who may be referred to as a witch (see Kinoti 1996:238-239). Such a woman is possessed by a spirit which is keen to harm or revenge itself for bad treatment during its life in the community. *Jasihoho* is believed to have an evil eye and therefore to be able to bewitch someone merely by looking at them (see also Bourdillon 2000:186-187).

Associating women with witchcraft could possibly stem from the fact that they depict a deep sensitivity towards the invisible and spiritual realities (see Mbiti 1991:69). It could also be that people who are oppressed, such as women and the poorer classes in class-stratified societies, feel empowered by being involved in witchcraft activities (see Omoyajowo 1983:317). In polygamous relationships, for instance, where jealousy and possessiveness reign supreme, witchcraft accusations tend to be rife. But it also needs to be noted that a wife, particularly a newcomer to a marriage clan, can easily become a scapegoat (see Kinoti 1996:241). In the extended family, the suspected witch, who is usually a close or distant relative, can be said to be harbouring ill-feelings or be envious of prosperous family members (see Bosch 1987:46).

As accusations of witchcraft are so widespread in Africa, many women have fallen victim to the anger of their communities, which sometimes result in executions of witches who happen to be women. The trials are often not formal. In such executions, mob justice becomes the order of the day (see Teffo & Roux 1998:143; Kinoti 1996:239).

### 3.5.7 WITCHCRAFT AND DEVIL-WORSHIP

In the early modern European definition of witchcraft, it was not only the performance of *maleficium* that was mentioned. The other concerned the relationship that existed between the witch and the devil, who was believed to be the supernatural foe of the Christian God and the personification of evil (see Levack 1995:8-9; Parrinder 1970:73f; Seligmann 1997:178). A witch was a person who not only performed harmful magic but who also made a pact with the devil and paid some homage to him. At the centre of most learned witch beliefs was the devil, the source of the witch's magic, the partner with whom she concluded the pact (see Levack 1995:29). Understood this way, witchcraft was therefore diabolism, the worship of the devil. This belief, coupled with other things like the demonisation of heresy, infanticide and cannibalism, led to alerting people to the danger of witchcraft by the church and state in 13th and 14th centuries (e.g. Gregory IX *Vox in Rama*; Innocent VIII *Summis Desiderantes Affectibus*). As if the encyclicals by the popes were not sufficient, two Dominicans by the names of Jacob Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer added the most notorious of such manuals called the *Malleus Maleficarum* ("Hammer of Witches"; cf. Shorter 1998:69).

In terms of witchcraft in the African continent, there is no historical evidence that it was ever associated with the worship of the devil. In any way, the devil-concept in Africa was brought about by western missionaries. In the traditional African belief system, witchcraft was not linked to any one supernatural figure. It is now that people involved in the spiritual warfare paradigm and deliverance ministries are finding a direct connection between the devil and witchcraft. Though there might have been some tentative suggestions before of associating diabolism (Satanism - *ubusathane*) and witchcraft (*ubuthakathi*; see Berglund 1976:269; Bosch 1987:43), it could be more of Christian influence than a traditional African belief.

Maghbouleh (1981:125) makes an interesting observation that witchcraft is nowhere associated with the devil or Satan in the canonised Jewish texts (see also Cohn 1975:60). But, having stated this, it should also be mentioned that a survey

of the New Testament reveals references to uncanny powers and magical arts that are condemnatory (e.g. Acts 8:18-24; 13:8-13; 16:16-18; 19:18-19).

## 5.8  ERADICATION OF WITCHCRAFT

In Africa, since death and misfortune are ascribed to witchcraft activities, it is not surprising that from time to time various societies try to eliminate all witches and witchcraft (see Bourdillon 2000:188). Bosch (1987:48) says, "Because of belief in witchcraft, then all reality is divided into wholly good and the irredeemably bad. Everybody is either on the side of the angels or on the side of the devil. There are no shades of grey." In response to particular misfortunes, occasionally a community may become obsessed with witchcraft and as a result witchcraft-cleansing or witch-eradication movements emerge as happened in Europe (cf. Levack 1995; Parrinder 1970:17; Seligmann 1997:178). After witches have been sniffed out through divination, they are punished by their communities "through stoning, beating, paying of fines and death" (Mbiti 1969:201). A relatively benign form of witchcraft eradication may be found in independent churches in which the accused witches may be treated sympathetically as unfortunate persons possessed by evil spirits and therefore 'not responsible for their actions'. Prophets claim to see witches, and then to exorcise the evil spirits from them, providing the kind of therapy frequently associated with possession trances (Bourdillon 2000:189).

Bourdillon correctly points out that, "although any society may contain individuals who readily break its most fundamental norms, in a witch-hunt innocent people may suffer and have their lives ruined in the mass hysteria of a community that believes it has found a means of ridding itself of all its fundamental tensions and frustrations" (Ibid:190) . The problem with this mentality is that after the witch-hunt exercise, the community may be lulled in some way to think that their frustrations are over. This false hope and misplaced sense of security may lead the affected community to be trapped in an endless cycle of frustrations as problems continue to emerge. Another problem is that if the diviner is ill-disposed towards the suspected witch, his or her personal feelings may take preference over "expected objectivity". In family situations, witch-hunts often put considerable strain between the new *umakoti* (bride) and her mother-in-law or all the in-law mem-

bers because she (i.e. *umakoti*) ends being the accused person. This serves to illustrate that even though witchcraft and subsequent witch-hunts may have a social function in the community, they are not without problems. Bosch (1987:56) also rightly points out that to attribute every misfortune and every inexplicable failure or accident to a witch or sorcerer, subverts the possibility of true repentance, conversion and faith. Instead of constantly blaming evil on witchcraft, Africans need to learn to accept responsibility for their actions and limitations.

## 4.3.5.9   PROTECTION AND FORTIFICATION

In Africa, belief and claims about witches and witchcraft are neither metaphorical nor mere symbolic representations. Since witchcraft activities "are as real to the traditional African as scientific claims are to the modern scientist" (Teffo & Roux 1998:143), it would not be surprising therefore for most Africans to believe in apotropaic measures to ward off witchcraft and sorcery attacks. People resort to diviners and healers to supply them with protective objects (see Mbiti 1969:201). The rationale behind this is that the good use of magic will counteract the evil use thereof, provided, of course, the user's medicine is more powerful than that of the enemy or the attackers. The purpose of the user is to feel safe and protected. Prevention against *boloi* or *ubuthakathi* (witchcraft) may include the employment of charms, amulets, medicines taken orally or externally applied or by incision. This may also involve the use of articles on the roof or in the fields, the doorposts of the house or the corners of the yard or homestead (see Setiloane 1976:54; Mbiti 1969:201; Knappert 1995:90-91).

When it comes to the church, the general feeling is that "the people have not been sufficiently armed to fight against witchcraft and sorcery, in spite of many years of Christian teaching" (Mbiti 1971:9). According to Lagerwerf (1987:136), most of the mainline or historic churches are well aware of this need, but have to face the problem that the message of God's caring love, prayers and the sacraments are experienced by many Christians as not fully adequate in assisting them to deal with witchcraft and the fear it brings.

In order to try to meet this need, in the Roman Catholic Church, devotional objects like holy water, the rosary, medals and prayer books often seem to replace

the traditional amuletic objects rejected by the missionaries. The Protestant churches, on the other hand, rejected devotional objects from the very beginning and, as a result, have lost and continue to lose many members to African Initiated Churches and Pentecostal/Charismatic movements, which as part of their liturgical experience, try to provide intimate and supportive structures, thus giving concentrated attention to healing and also mobilising spiritual reserves to counter the aggression of sorcery and witchcraft (Kiernan 1995:124; cf. Makhaye 1973:161; Sprunger 1973:169-170; Khathide 2002:347-348). Christians who decide to stay within the mainline or historic churches, especially where ministries of healing, deliverance and exorcism are lacking, tend to "lead a dual life" (Lagerwerf 1987:37), what other scholars would call "split-level" Christianity (see Bulatao 1992; Pobee 1996:2; Imasogie 1983:23), in which deeply committed Christians faithfully attend church services on Sundays but feel compelled, in times of existential need, to go to a local shaman for healing, to a diviner for guidance or to an exorcist for deliverance from spirit oppression. Some scholars, among them Imasogie (1983) and Hiebert *et al* (1999), feel that it need not to be so, given the spiritual repertoire available to Christians as found in the Bible (see also Milingo 1984).

## 4.3.5.10 CONCLUSIONS

African people, like other peoples in the world, believe in witchcraft because many things happen that they can explain in no other manner. In such cases, the evidence as interpreted within the African worldview, would point to the occurrence of witchcraft. Witchcraft, as part of its socio-cultural function, provides through its symbols an explanatory framework within which people are afforded an opportunity to intellectually cope with the tensions and frustrations that confound them. As witchcraft appears to explain the frustrations and problems, witch-hunts seem to provide a solution to them. In order to cope with witchcraft activities, people use all sorts of amuletic objects acquired from diviners *(izangoma nezinyanga),* prophets and even from the church (e.g. Catholic Church) to ward off attacks of witchcraft and evil spirits. If the church (or churches) does not provide some ministry to help its members deal with the fear and occurrences of witches, it inadvertently allows its members into a biblically undesirable position of "split-level" Christianity. Although there may be scepticism about belief in witch-

craft, it remains a reality for many Africans, sophisticated and unsophisticated, rich or poor, alike. This vital aspect of the African socio-spiritual life, which was regrettably omitted or neglected by western theologians and missionaries with resultant disastrous effects, faces the African church with an ever increasing urgency.

## 4.3.6   DIVINERS AND HEALERS

Peek (1991:1) states that "every human community recognises a need for the special knowledge gained through divination". In other words, divination is a universal phenomenon (see Danfulani 2000:87). But within a framework of a worldview that believes in the existence of witchcraft, spirits and powers, divination is a phenomenon that is taken more seriously (see Ndwandwe 2000:215; Abijole 1988:127).

Unfortunately, some cultures, especially those which are of Euro-American origin, tend to categorise divination as nothing else than a psychological technique or powers of telepathy and extrasensory perception designed to relieve anxiety and give a person confidence to face the vicissitudes of life (see Imasogie 1983:60). Peek (1991:3) says that the European tradition tends to characterise the diviner "as a charismatic charlatan coercing others through clever manipulation of esoteric knowledge granted in appropriate worth by a credulous and anxiety-ridden people". Imasogie (1983:60) concedes that relieving anxiety may be one of the functions of divination. But this categorisation of diviners has been found by researchers like Peek and others not to be entirely objective. Peek (1991:3), in his enquiry, has found "diviners to be men and women of exceptional wisdom and high personal character". Burnett (1988:182) contends that, unlike in the West where such a person (i.e. a diviner) may be placed in a mental hospital as being in need of psychiatric help, within shamanistic societies such a person is held in honour and is regarded as a useful member of society (see Jell-Bahlsen 2000:45; Olupona 2000:xvi).

Insofar as epistemology is concerned, Peek (1991:3) further argues that the western scientific tradition is but one way of knowing. The point that he makes is that the 'one way of knowing' which, in this case, is western science cannot claim

monopoly and discount other systems of knowing which have proved effective over the centuries, as invalid or primitive (see Mbiti 1969:203). Peek (1991:3) also indicates the difference between African divination and European systems of knowledge. He says that African divination systems involve a combination of "logical-analytical" and "intuitive-synthetical" modes of thinking while in the European tradition the separation of these modes is rigidly maintained (cf. De Boeck & Devisch 1994:100).

In Africa, the necessity of divination is made possible by the belief that there is no event or sickness that occurs without a spiritual or metaphysical cause, hence people must look beyond physical events to their spiritual etiology (see Imasogie 1983:60; Lagerwerf 1987:14-15). Different peoples of Africa have questions, problems and choices for which everyday knowledge is insufficient and yet action must be taken (see Peek 1991:2). The information is necessary in order for a person to respond effectively and that information is available often only through a diviner. Thus, divination continues to provide a trusted means of decision-making, a basic source of vital knowledge.

Divining processes and methods are diverse (see Van Rheenen 1991:176, 180; Peek 1991:2; Setiloane 1976:46), but all follow set routines by which otherwise inaccessible information is obtained. In almost all known systems of divination, some type of device is usually employed, from a single sliding object to the myriad symbolic items shaken in diviners' baskets (see Chernoff 2000:265-267). Sometimes, the diviner's body becomes the vehicle of communication through spirit possession (see Peek 1991:2). Some diviners operate self-explanatory mechanisms that reveal answers. In this category, we can include *isangoma* among the amaZulu. The session of the diviner and the client is characterised by shouts of *Vumani bo!* ("Do you agree?") said by the *isangoma* upon which the client(s) would respond, *Siyavuma* ("We agree" - see Callaway 1991:27-35; Ngubane 1977; Shorter 1998:72). Yet other systems require the diviner to interpret cryptic metaphoric messages (cf. Cuthrell-Curry 2000:458). The final diagnosis and plan for action are rendered collectively by the diviner and the client(s). Peek (1991:3) says the critical input of the divinatory congregation, especially that of the consulter/adviser and the particularising discussions between the diviner and client(s), serves to demythologise the domineering diviner image.

Diviners are people who, by virtue of their extra sensitivity to spiritual reality and years of training (cf. Setiloane 1976:54-57, see under "the making of 'ngaka'), have become "fathers and mothers of secrets" (Imasogie 1983:60). They are able to decipher the past, the present and the future as well as uncover the human and the spiritual causes of events and the possible solution to their problems. According to Turner (1968:43), the diviner's avowed aims, "is to make known and intelligible in Ndembu terms what is unknown and unintelligible".

As the diviner is supposed to have the ability to move about between the natural and spirit worlds, he/she stands at the crossroads between the spiritual and human/physical worlds as an intercessor, mediator and a bridge of communication (see Danfulani 2000:87). The diviner, as an agent between the human and the spiritual worlds, "explores and exploits the mystical world to normalise, ameliorate, restore and reconcile estranged relationships for harmonious and habitable universe" (ibid). In cultures where ancestral belief is central, the diviner acts as an agent between the living and the living-dead (see Ndwandwe 2000:216). The diviner also uses a specialised body of knowledge in manipulating and controlling the spirit world for the benefit of the human and spiritual communities (see Danfulani 2000:87).

According to Mnyandu (1993:107), the duties of the diviners include the following:

* to diagnose illness in his/her clients (cf. Magesa 1997:212);
* to prescribe methods to heal them (cf. Krige 1950:298-299);
* to establish cause of misfortunes (cf. Setiloane 1976:44);
* to settle conflicts (cf. Danfulani 2000:89);
* to predict future events (cf. Sogolo 1998:179);
* to warn clients/community about problems to come (cf. Knappert 1995:70);
* to mediate between community members and their ancestors (cf. Westerland 2000:152);
* to intercede for the community to the ancestors (cf. Ndwandwe 2000:216);
* to give counsel to the chief of the area (cf. Hodgson 2003:218-219).

Shorter (1998:72) is, however, critical of the diviners whose warnings of disaster are never put to the test. But this accusative generalisation could hardly be referred to people like Ntsikana, Mohlomi or Mantsopa (see Hodgson 2003:218).

Diviners/mediums believe they are called to be in the profession they are in. Their work is dependent on the ancestral spirits and, for that reason, they are seen as vehicles of ancestors (Ndwandwe 2000:217) or instruments of higher powers (Magesa 1997:216). One of the main functions of the diviners is to fortify the home or persons through the application of protective substances in order to ward off witchcraft or sorcery attacks. In some African Initiated Churches, the prophet may assume some duties of the traditional diviner by using, for example, water instead of medicine (cf. Shorter 1998:72). But some do combine the role, functions and methods of a diviner and a prophet. Though some diviners may be accused of charging their clients exorbitantly or even wild guessing, they nevertheless play an important role in bringing stability in the African symbolic universe.

4.4     THE AFRICAN DEVIL?

Some questions have been raised as to the reference to the devil in Africa as understood from the perspective of the Christian scriptures. Bosch (1987:40) indicates that, whereas Bible translators experienced no problem in finding African "dynamic equivalents" (see Kraft 1979:261; Bediako 1995:97) for the God of scripture, for example, *Modimo, Mwari, Nkulunkulu, Thixo,* et cetera, they usually could not find any such equivalent for Satan. The result was that in most cases they rendered "Satan" untranslated; they only Africanised the word (e.g. uSathane in isiZulu).

In some instances, though, translators endeavoured to come up with dynamic equivalents for "Satan" in the indigenous languages, for example, in the Yoruba Bible (Nigeria), "Satan" is translated as *Eshu,* the Ewe Bible (Benin) calls him *Legba,* whereas the Rundi Bible (Burundi) translates "Satan" with *Rwuba* (cf. Bosch 1987:40). Kato (1975:37) relates that among the Jaba people in North Central State of Nigeria, the spirits have always been associated with *Kuno* whom he equates with the Christian concept of Satan (cf. Imasogie 1983:29).

Mbiti (1969:204) reports that the Vugusu of Kenya say that there is an evil divinity which God created good, but later on turned against him (i.e. God) and began to do evil. This evil being is assisted by evil spirits, and all evil comes from that lot. Onyinah (2002:63) tells that missionaries translated the western devil in Akan as *Obonsam*, which is a derivation of *bone* (evil) and *sam* (thrown about in disorderly way). The term *"obonsam"*, therefore would refer to a person who is an embodiment of scattered evil but, etymologically speaking, the term would designate a wizard or a male witch (ibid:63; cf. Meyer 1999:77). But Onyinah (2002:64) goes on to argue that the Akan do not attribute the cause of evil to one personified being. According to him, evil occurs when there is *mmusuo* which is anything, taboo or sin, which is done contrary to the law of the land, God, the gods, ancestors, community or one's neighbour.

In Southern Africa, there have been suggestions that *UmTyoli* (an accuser) in the Xhosa Bible is the indigenous equivalent for the Christian understanding of the devil. UmTyoli is conceived as an evil spirit found among the human beings who can be held responsible for bad and sinful things including certain dispositions shown by humans (see Hodgson 1982:95-96). UmToyli is also regarded as the creator of evil things such as poisonous snakes, bats, owls and other and creatures connected with witchcraft and sorcery. Hodgson (1982:95), however, contends that the UmTyoli concept appears to have been borrowed from the Khoi cosmology. In the Khoikhoi mythology //Gaunab, who is unambiguously associated with evil, is in conflict with Tsui//Goab, who is the giver of rain and abundance (see Kiernan 1995:18). Under the influence of missionaries //Gaunab assumed the role of the devil as did //Gamab among the San. Among the Khoikhoi, //Gaunab was regarded as the source of all evil. All sickness was thought to come from him, or his servants, the witches (cf. Westerlund 2000:153-159).

Having surveyed some of these African images of what could be referred to as representations of the Christian concept of Satan, it would appear that there is no figure in Africa that is truly comparable to the devil of the Christian scriptures. Bosch (1987:40) argues that in Africa there is no figure that is irrevocably, intrinsically and absolutely evil and the final antithesis to God as the Christians understand the devil to be (see Jn 8:44). *Eshu*, who is the closest being to the equivalence of the Christian concept of Satan, can be placated through prayers and the

offering of sacrifices (see Oduyoye 1983: 400f; Idowu 1966:81). For Bosch (1987), *Eshu* is "a devil with a likeable streak in him", which disqualifies him from fitting the Christian concept of the devil. The other references (e.g. *UmTyoli, Obonsam, Legba*, etc.) appear to have been inherited from western missionaries. There is no conclusive evidence that there was in Africa the devil or the idea thereof as Christians understand Satan to be according to the scriptures.

## SPIRIT POSSESSION AND EXORCISM

## THE REALITY OF SPIRIT POSSESSION

For most westerners, the subject of spirit possession usually commences with the question, "Can spirit possession actually occur?" (Burnett 1988:162; cf. Silvoso 1994:103-104). One of the contributory factors to this state of affairs is the worldview problem. According to Kraft (1989:88), westerners demonstrate a view that virtually ignores the spirit world so that it is not by accident that technologically oriented Euro-Americans easily find themselves treating people, the universe and even God as if they were machines (cf. Jacobs 1992:147; Wink 1986:6-7).

The other factor that makes the study of the subject of spirit possession difficult, is the lack of clear analysis. This is evidenced by books written on the subject which focus more on the descriptive elements, which frequently result in the details of the practice obscuring the major issues involved (see Burnett 1988:162).

In the history of the anthropology of religion, there have been various attempts to explain and understand spirits and spirit possession (see Behrend and Luig 1999:xiv). For example, for Lewis (1971:205), spirits were "hypotheses which, for those who believe in them, afford a philosophy of final causes and a theory of social tensions". Zempleni (1977) tried to interpret the ancestor spirits which took possession of a Wolof priestess in reference to the psychoanalytical "family story". Lambek (1996:238) referred to spirits as "products of imagination, partial constructions that are fictional but not simply fictitious". Beattie (1977:4) called them "abstract qualities". The early missionaries who came to the African shores with the intention of proclaiming the gospel, inadvertently demonstrated

ignorance in understanding and dealing with spirits and spirit possession. This was largely due to their Enlightenment-rooted presuppositions which, in essence, denied the existence of the spirit world (see Khathide 1999a:64; Hiebert 1983; cf. Mbiti 1976f). This caused early missionaries to simply fail to see a natural consequence of primal worldviews which allow for the interrelationship between the natural world and that of spirits and gods. The secular worldview, according to Burnett (1988:162), tends to exclude such a relationship, and so it questions the whole concept of spirit possession. It therefore seeks to describe these phenomena in physical, psychological and non-religious, terms.

Contrary to what the secular worldview says about spirits and spirit possession, anthropologists have shown that almost all primal societies believe in the possibility of an individual being possessed by an external spiritual being (see Burnett 1988:162). Behrend and Luig (1999:xiii) contend that, instead of the disappearance of spirits, there is a proliferation of spirit possession cults the world over, not only in African, Asian and Caribbean countries, but also in the midst of New York, Toronto and various towns in Europe. The proponents of the spiritual warfare school believe that our world is infested with spirits which are the agents of evil and wickedness (see e.g. Murphy 1992:viii-xiv). In the whole question of pastoral counselling and the activities of spirits, de Jongh van Arkel (1987:145) comes to a conclusion that

> we cannot reject the possibility of demon possession, nor the ministries of deliverance and even exorcism just because some people who operate in this field are unbalanced and guilty of malpractice, or even because some methods have not been functional in certain cases. If we follow that line of logic, we should arrive at the same conclusion regarding medical care and even the ministry of the church.

In primal societies worldwide, the concept of spirit possession is never brought into question. Anthrolopological studies of possession, trance, shamanism, ecstasy and related phenomena, all of which fall under the rubric of altered states of consciousness, document human access to such states across the globe, includ-

ing the Mediterranean world, both present and past (DeMaris 2000:3; see also Pilch 1996:133f; Mary 2001:315f). Behrend and Luig (1999:xiii) rightly observe that spirits and their mediums are part of the local as well as transglobal cultures. Spirit possession is not just an African phenomenon; it is experienced globally. Burnett (1988:162) says that anthropologists have shown that over 90 per cent of all the societies in the world have some concept of spirit possession.

But it is in predominantly primal societies like in the African continent where spirit possession is mostly experienced because it is an acknowledged reality there (cf. Tlaba 2000:17-20). The African worldview/s allow for the occurrence of such phenomena. It is something that the church in Africa has to constantly wrestle with. Behrend and Luig (1999:xv) observe that relations between Christian churches and spirit possession cults exhibit the same features of intense competition. While African Independent (Initiated) Churches have integrated aspects of spirit possession and witchfinding cults into their services through prophetic and deliverance ministries, former missionary churches have been reluctant in this regard (see Luig 1977). The fact of the occurrence of the phenomena is illustrated by various studies that have been conducted in different communities on the African continent, for example, Mary (2001) on the people of Gabon, Ben-Amos (1994) Edo people, Giles (1999) Swahili people. Both Hurskainen (1985) and Peterson (1985) have written about possession among the Maasai. Boddy (1989) has documented the activities of the Zar cult in northern Sudan. This long list also includes investigations into witchcraft and spirit possession among the Congolese (DRC) by Masamba ma Mpolo (1984:149-167; 1984:39-56) and Hebga (1982) in Cameroon.

Perhaps the issue of spirit possession in Africa was highlighted by the ministry of exorcism by Father Emmanuel Milingo from Zambia (see Milingo 1984; Verstraelen-Gilhuis 1981:99f). Milingo, after having been appointed Archbishop of Lusaka, felt pastorally obliged to respond to the desperate spiritual needs of Zambians. Those who were tormented by *mashawe* (spirit possession) - something that traditional healers understood and could deal with, came to Father Milingo for exorcism. Milingo (1984) emphatically underlines that his pastoral experiences had taught him the reality and power of the devil and his agents, and that they should be counteracted. Though Milingo drew a lot of criticism from his

colleagues and overseers in Rome, he was never convinced thereof that the gifts of healing and exorcism bestowed upon him were diabolical in source and nature. Milingo (1984:52) was strongly persuaded that ministers of the gospel had to respond pastorally and biblically to the problem of spirits and spirit possession than just accept co-existence with the enemy, the devil.

In brief, this serves to show that the problem of spirits as agents of evil in general and spirit possession in particular, is widespread in Africa. It is something which Africans acknowledge as real and something for which they seek help from African traditional healers, or from the church as in the case of Father Milingo or both.

## 4.5.2    SPIRIT POSSESSION: GOOD AND BAD

In studying spirit possession across many different cultures, a researcher begins to see various patterns (see Hebga 1982:99-121; Milingo 1984:32f; Lagerwerf 1987:66f). Burnett (1988:163) distinguishes between four types of possession. The first aspect of the possession phenomenon is mediumship in which the person claims to act as an intermediary between human beings and the spirit world (cf. Tlhagale 2000:45; Ndwandwe 2000:215). The focus here is one of communication between the spirit or spirits and the world of humankind. The second aspect of spirit possession, according to Burnett (1988:163), is shamanism, which has widely been studied by anthropologists. In this category, the practitioner claims to work in conjunction with spirits with the aim of achieving healing within the community. The third aspect of spirit possession can be called 'trance', or the 'mystic quest', in which the person seeks to enter into a mystic relationship with a god or spirit, with resultant ecstatic emotions. Finally, possession occurs when society claims that a person is under the control of a spiritual being. Spirits of evil can possess people and inflict all kinds of diseases and sufferings (Turaki 1999:176).

These different types or aspects of spirit possession have been grouped and labelled collectively by various theologians and anthropologists or anthropological theologians. These are sometimes grouped under altered states of consciousness (see Pilch 1996:133; DeMaris 2000:13). Altered states of consciousness

are defined as conditions in which sensations, perceptions, cognition and emotions are altered. These are characterised by changes in sensing, perceiving, thinking and feeling. Ludwig (1968:77f), in reference to altered states of consciousness, talks about alterations in thinking, disturbed sense of time, loss of control, change in expression of emotions, change in bodily image, perceptual distortions, changes in meaning and significance assigned to experiences and perceptions, a sense of the ineffable, feelings of rejuvenation and hypersuggestibility (cf. DeMaris 2000:13). While others prefer to call these different aspects of spirit possession altered states of consciousness, Cox (1995:81) prefers to label them as part of primal spirituality (cf. Khathide 2002:343f).

Spirit possession can also be divided into good and bad, positive and negative, or voluntary and involuntary phenomena. DeMaris (2000:4) explains that cultures like that of ancient Israel, as well as the rest of the Mediterranean world, recognise both positive and negative possession, and associate the former with ritual activity. DeMaris illustrates this by quoting the baptismal report to Jesus' entry into an altered state which was judged by society as positive rather than negative, that is, as a possession by the Holy Spirit and not by a demon. Most cultures consider negative possession as befalling individuals and is ritually unregulated; whereas positive possession happens to individuals or groups and is ritually controlled (Lewis 1989:48-49; Lee 1968;36-41). DeMaris (2000:19) attempts to elucidate the difference by saying that the regulated triggering of spirit possession in willing subjects through ritual means stands in stark contrast to sudden, involuntary, spontaneous possession which most cultures regard as potentially harmful and dangerous.

Insofar as spirit possession on the African continent is concerned, Mbiti distinguishes between what is good and bad possession. Good or positive possession, according to Mbiti (1969:176), occurs in this manner:

> During possession the individual loses temporarily the control or exercise of his personality, and depicts or mirrors the influence or semi-personality of the spirit or divinity in him. Useful information is obtained from the spirit world, so people believe, whether or not that information is genu-

ine. For that reason, mediums are associated with diviners or medicine-men or priests whose duty it is to receive, relay or interpret the message received via the mediums.

Negative possession is explained by Mbiti (ibid:82) in the following way:

> But on the whole, spirit possessions, especially unsolicited ones, result in bad effects. They may cause severe torment on the possessed person; like the spirit may drive him away from his home so that he lives in forests; it may cause him to jump into the fire and get himself burnt, to torture his body with sharp instruments, or even do harm to other people. During the height of spirit possession, the individual in effect loses his own personality and acts in the context of the 'personality' of the spirit possessing him. The possessed person becomes restless, may fail to sleep properly, and if the possession lasts a long period it results in damage to health. Women are more prone to spirit possession than men (cf. Knappert 1995:196; Lagerwerf 1987:66-71 Milingo 1984:44-45).

These are some of the characteristics and manifestations of spirit possession. There may be minor variations from one society to the other, but the main elements remain more or less similar.

In discussing controlled (positive) and uncontrolled (negative) possession, DeMaris (2000:18) points out that in first-century Judean society, as in other societies where possession is common, perceptions of it varied (cf. Bourguignon 1968b:13-15; Goodman 1988b:21). Such societies prize possession when those possessed, spirit mediums and healers, for example, bring vital information or the power to cure illness, to the community (see Mbiti 1969:82; Krige 1950:299; Ndwandwe 2000:215; Burnett 1988:171). Knappert (1995:157) explains that mediumship gives the possessed person a higher status in society, for example, women in male-dominated society gain respect from their hosting of some awesome spirit, even chiefly status.

On the other hand, societies react negatively to possession when it results in insanity or sickness (Sharp 1999:6; Lewis 1989:48-49; Heusch 1981:155-158). Primal societies recognise that when a foreign spirit intrudes into a human body, various manifestations may occur which may include sickness. Another manifestation could be a spirit's control over an individual's body so that it acts in a characteristic of the spirit rather than of the normal person (see Burnett 1988:164). Such manifestations and illnesses may lead a western medical person to conclude that the affected person needs psychiatric examination (Knappert 1995:196-197).

Spirit possessions, especially solicited ones, that occur in communities and individuals regularly depend on ritual activity to induce altered states of consciousness or to trigger entry into the state of possession, although spontaneous entry into such states does occur (DeMaris 2000:4). A person or group of people seeking to become possessed by a spirit may use a variety of different methods which are recognised by the particular society (see Burnett 1988:172). Rhythmic music and dancing with a strong beat is a common practice. Drums are commonly used in Africa, especially by *izangoma*, as they are among the *shamans* in many parts of the world. For example, the Hamadsha, a society of trance healers in Morocco, ritually induce their own possession by music, dance and self-mutilation, an event the public views with approval and enthusiasm. In their role as trance healers, the Hamadsha society members are vital to the therapeutic system of Moroccan society for, among other activities, they exorcise those possessed by devils or *jinn* (Crapanzano 1973:xi-xiv, 133-168; cf. DeMaris 2000:18; Behrend and Luig 1999:xiii-xvi). Almost similar things, with local variations, of course, can be observed in other spirit possession cults (see Colleyn 1999:68-78; Masquelier 1999:34-49).

A strange type of possession occurs when a medium-cum-prophet claims to be possessed both by the Holy Spirit and the ancestors almost at the same time or at different times. Though a rare phenomenon, a prophet at an African Independent Church service may speak on behalf of God (Holy Spirit) and for the ancestors. It may also happen that a person be possessed by the Holy Spirit at church while, at the same time, serving as a traditional healer/medium *(inyanga or isangoma)* at home. In his inquiry into the African Initiated (Independent)

Churches (AICs), Anderson (2000:287) reports that in some of these churches, the offices of prophet and diviner do coalesce. Sometimes, the prophet is the agent not only of the Holy Spirit, but also of the ancestors (cf. Daneel 1974:232; Sundkler 1961:200; Oosthuizen 1992:169). But it also needs to be noted that in other African Initiated Churches, prophets have simply taken over the function of the traditional diviner. This appears to be the case in the Zimbabwean churches, studied by Daneel (1974:224-225). The Shona "ultimately emphasise their dependence on the Holy Spirit" as the real revelatory agent (ibid:232; cf. Behrend and Luig 1999:xv).

## .5.3  ANCESTRAL POSSESSION

Mbiti (1969:81-82) observes that, "Spirit possession occurs in one form or another in practically every African society". Spirit possession by the living-dead is commonly reported (ibid:86).

Spirit mediums or diviners in Africa are believed to be possessed by ancestors to communicate with the living (see Anderson 1991:83; Willoughby 1928:104; Ma 2002:207). Daneel (1971:100) speaks of how Shona ancestors communicate with the living by selecting a medium *(svikiro)* from among the living descendants. Mndende (1996:248) describes how among the amaXhosa, during the diviner's dance *(intolombe)*, the diviner will *nqula* (call in the form of praising) all the ancestors from both the paternal and maternal side. She or he would even call those on the grandmother's side.

Mbiti (1969:172) relates how in Kampala (Uganda), he witnessed how a young man came to consult a diviner. According to the report, the young man sat down in the diviner's room where a crowd of twenty-five to thirty people had gathered. One of the men started to sing a highly rhythmical song, and the rest of the crowd joined in with singing, clapping and rattling small gourds. The medium-to-be (i.e. the young man) sat quietly on the floor without even turning his head. The singing and rattling went on for about thirteen minutes when suddenly the young man's hands began to tremble. Three or four minutes later he started talking in an entirely different voice (cf. Anderson 1991:83; Krige 1950:302). The singing stopped and the diviner could then talk with the medium for about fifteen min-

utes, in the middle of which the medium (or the spirit in him) requested another song to be sung. At the end, the medium jumped like a frog, banged his head hard on the floor and with his fist hit his own chest very hard twice or thrice. Then he was 'normal' once more. When Mbiti (1969:172) cross-examined him afterwards, he assured him (Mbiti) that he was not aware of what he said or did during the time he was acting as a medium. Daneel (1971:119) says that during the possession trance, the family may discuss their problems with the possessed medium; for they are actually talking with the ancestors. This is common not only among the Shona people but among the AmaZulu as well (see Krige 1950:302).

The story of mediumship as told by Mbiti, can be said to be representative of what happens throughout Africa. The desire of an ancestor to possess someone is usually signalled by a lengthy illness (cf. Appiah-Kubi 1981:27), with the targeted person beginning to grow delicate and eccentric, dreaming extraordinary and numerous dreams (cf. Kitshoff 1996:25) about wild beasts and serpents and also hearing voices telling him or her what to do and where to go (see Krige 1950:302-307; Anderson 1991:84; Daneel 1971:100). Spirits that come into people for reasons of mediumship are not considered harmful or diabolical; they are seen as friendly, are welcomed by people and remain briefly or temporarily in the mediums concerned (Mbiti 1969:173; see also Kato 1975:36; Skhakhane 2000:120-121). Most mediums are women, an issue we now turn to.

4.5.4    SPIRIT POSSESSION AND GENDER

A number of studies have sought to understand the psychological and sociological aspects of spirit possession trance states which are evidently more common among African women (see Mbiti 1969:173). Kinoti (1996:240) attributes the occurrence of spirit possession mostly among women, to the fact that possession trances are mostly sought by those who are oppressed, such as women and the poorer classes in class-stratified societies. Spirit mediumship is seen as a way for women who are "existentially inferior ... and jurally subordinate" (Kilson 1972:173), to resolve their emotional problems, whether they be frustration at male dominance (Lewis 1981), lack of avenues to gain self-esteem (Walker 1972:7), or ambivalence about maternal roles (Kilson 1972:171). Kinoti (1996:240) contends that by means of the trance state the weak, that is, the

poorer classes and women, try to achieve the power and respect which they lack in their ordinary roles; they seek to achieve justice. Kinoti maintains that they act out and pronounce their desires without rebuke, because it is not they who are responsible but the powers beyond which have possessed them. In a possession trance, the socially marginalised and disempowered are able to coerce others into paying attention to them (Zeuss 1979:186; see also de Rosny 1985:214-215).

But Ben-Amos (1994:119) feels that these assumptions about the status and functions of women's religious associations should be questioned. She refers to her study of the Olukun cult among the Edo in Benin City, Nigeria, to refute these assumptions because there the women's religious associations are not necessarily peripheral or low in status. In the worship of Olukun, women play a primary religious role as priestesses in both the urban and rural areas. According to Ben-Amos (ibid:119), "The status that urban Edo women achieve in this cult is permanent, not temporary, and the psychological benefits of participation are not temporary outlets but a real redefinition of self". Behrend and Luig (1999:xvii) further state that in Africa, spirits of various pantheons often establish their masculinity or femininity as fluid than fixed, offering gender as a continuum of qualities found in both females and males (cf. Cornwall 1994:126). Colleyn (1999:68), in negating popular assumptions about spirit possession, uses the *Nya* cult in Mali to show the case in point. The *Nya* cult is a rural cult; possession is the privilege of a minority of male members of a society into which they have been initiated; possessed men still belong to powerful lineages; their careers never begin as an illness; trance has no therapeutic value; possession confirms dedication to a specific localised deity; spirit possession is related to divination, a means of expression of a superior 'voice' and a shamanistic technique.

Though Ben-Amos, Colleyn and others emerge with interesting and significant aspects concerning spirit possession and gender, there is still overwhelming evidence that in most African societies spirit possession still remains a mostly feminine experience (see e.g. Mbiti 1969:173; Lagerwerf 1987:13; Kinoti 1996:230f). Hurskainen (1985) calls attention to the fact that among the Maasai spirit possession occurs almost exclusively among women and that the first, and by far the most efficient cure, is said to be that given by the churches. It is said to be

permanent, provided that the women continue to attend Christian teaching and Sunday services regularly (cf. Peterson 1985:174f). Kinoti (1996:240) reports that in many African Initiated (Instituted) Churches such as the Roho churches and the Akurinu churches of Kenya, women are constantly being 'possessed' of the Holy Spirit and are exercising charismatic roles even though ecclesiastical roles may still be out of reach. This makes Kinoti (ibid:241) suggest that there seems, partially so, to be a connection between gender power struggle and a woman's regenerative and mystical powers (see Olupona 1991:6). This issue of spirit possession and gender is worth further exploring in the light of the emerging dissenting voices on the subject.

## 4.5.5    EXORCISM

In Africa, spirit possession is not always to be feared. There are times when it is not only desirable but people induce it through special dancing and drumming until the person concerned experiences it (see Mbiti 1969:82). When the person is thus possessed, the spirit may speak through him or her, so that she or he plays the role of a medium, and the messages she/he relays are received with expectation by those to whom they are addressed. This can be referred to as positive or voluntary, spirit possession. It is deemed necessary for the livelihood and sustenance of the individual, family or community. People who experience such spirit possession are respected and held in high esteem by society (see Fisher 1998:125).

But when spirit possession is 'unsolicited' (Mbiti 1969:82) and when it results in bad effects driving the possessed person to leave home so that they live in forests, when it causes them to jump into the fire and get themselves burnt or torture their bodies with sharp instruments or harm other people, it is then that spirit possession is considered negative and anti-social. In that case, exorcism is sought. Exorcism is one of the major functions of the traditional doctors and diviners *(nganga/inyanga)*. When spirits 'endanger' (Mbiti 1969:82) a village, there are usually formal ceremonies to drive away those notorious spirits.

Among the Jaba people of North Central State of Nigeria (see Kato 1975:37), there are certain medicine-men who specialise in the 'profession' of exorcism. The instruments used in exorcism include a drum, calabash and a locally made

guitar. A date is set for the exorcising ceremony. The chief exorcist sings, calling the names of the spirits in the possessed person. The high volume attracts not only the possessed person into dancing, but also neighbouring women as well. After dancing for about two hours, the possessed person falls down as if dead, apparently from exhaustion. She lies for a while, then gets up renewed in strength. From that time the spirits leave her.

Knappert (1995:197) describes the exorcism ceremony along the Tanzanian coast in the following manner:

> The treatment may last for two weeks and will be far from cheap. A *ngoma* 'dance' will be organised which will last for a week for each spirit [cf. Schoffeleers 2003:267]. A goat will be slaughtered for the last and biggest dance which will take all of the last night of the exorcism ceremony. At the end of this dance, towards dawn, the patient will have to drink raw goat's blood, and she will be draped in cloths of three colours, namely red, white and black, and she will dance in the centre of the circle of women dancers. Suddenly she will have an attack of the shudders. Trembling all over her body she will shout and scream; this is the sign that the spirit wants to speak. The exorcists will ask the spirit: What is your name? The spirit will shout out its name, what it wants., through the woman's mouth. Finally, the exorcist will command the spirit: Go away, leave this woman in peace. The spirit will rise to the woman's head and go out through her mouth and disappear.

Knappert (1995:87) also reports that in Zimbabwe, if a person has been bewitched, the evil spirit has to be driven out by transferring it to an animal. Alternatively, the patient can be taken to a crossroads away from the village, where the exorcist will command the spirit to leave the body of the patient and to wait there at the crossroads until some unlucky traveller passes who will then, in turn, be possessed by the spirit.

In other African societies, more or less similar techniques are used in a ceremony of exorcism. Spirit possession with negative effects is something that each community must confront and deal with. The involvement of the church is critical in helping people deal with spirits and spirit possession. Perhaps it is against this background that the ministry of Father Milingo (1984) and others involved in the Christian ministry of exorcism need to be understood. By virtue of the church's mandate and desire to bring holistic healing to broken humanity, it has little option but to help those tormented by spirits.

## 4.5.6 CONCLUSIONS

Spirits and spirit possession are part and parcel of African socio-spiritual life. To overlook this aspect will be a missiological omission and miscalculation on the part of the church that hopes to fulfil its ministry on the African continent in an effective way. In order to accomplish the task of being an effective witness in Africa, the church needs to take cognisance of the African worldview which acknowledges encounters and interactions between the physical/visible and the spiritual/invisible worlds of which spirit possession is one of them. Though dealing with issues like spirit possession is admittedly complex and difficult because they cannot be empirically tested, the church is compelled to theologise on them because people on the continent believe in the encounters between the visible and invisible worlds and, in some real way, are affected by these interactions.

## 4.6 CHURCHES' RESPONSES TO THE SPIRIT WORLD

## 4.6.1 NEGATIVE AND NON-ENGAGING RESPONSE

When early western missionaries arrived on the African continent, they took a negative stand *vis-à-vis* the African spirit world. The belief in missionaries was that the converts to Christianity, after attaining some (western-based) education and religious instruction, would simply outgrow the idea of the existence of the spirit world, which, unfortunately, is something that has not happened two centuries down the line. The non-engagement of the missionaries in issues regarding the African spirit world was directly caused by the presuppositions of the Enlightenment of

which western missionaries were products (see Silvoso 1994:103-104; Jacobs 1992:147; Kraft 1989:88).

Karanja (1999:37) also points out that the non-engagement stance by missionaries, especially among the Kikuyu, was caused by the fact that the missionaries did not want to pressurise their mission adherents or believers *(athomi)* to repudiate all Kikuyu customs lest they renounce Christianity (ibid:39).

In Africa, the legacy of non-engagement is felt more pronouncedly in the historic or mainline churches (see Lagerwerf 1987:36-37). Though the need is felt in these churches, they have to face the problem that the message of God's caring love, prayers and the sacraments are experienced by Christians as not fully adequate. As a result, the Protestant churches are losing many members to African Independent Churches or to Pentecostal churches. The evangelical movement in Africa, though it declares Christ's sovereign rule over the spirits, prefers to say little about the spirit world, concentrating rather on the salvation of the individual or 'soul', hoping that that experience will be a panacea for all other problems.

## 4.6.2   SPLIT-LEVEL OR DUAL SYSTEM RESPONSE

In situations where some forms of Christianity have been perceived as not dealing adequately with intercession for immediate and concrete needs in the culture, a great possibility exists of older patterns of magical intercession, divination, exorcism and even witchcraft, occurring among Christians. The feeling among these believers, as summed up by Schreiter (1985:156), is that, "The Christian deity may be all-powerful, but that deity does not relate to that dangerous section of bush outside the village as well as a local deity does". Hence, the need to maintain relations with the local deity. Schreiter blames this on the fact that Christianity can seem too abstract, too concerned with words, and not sufficiently able to meet the day-to-day needs.

Again, a measure of blame can be apportioned to the influence of the Enlightenment, of separating 'natural' and 'supernatural' realities (see Hiebert, Shaw & Tiènou 1999:16-17). According to Hiebert *et al*, the separation of visible and invisible realities gave rise to sciences that studied this world and the outcome was the

naturalistic explanations that had no place for God. Belief in the supernatural heav-
enly realities was relegated to the bottom of the ladder of human experience. Such
a dualistic approach to life left no room for supernatural realities such as earthly
spirits and spirit possession, witchcraft, ancestors and magic. These were ridiculed
as fairy tales and belief in these was labelled as barbaric and primitive. Missionar-
ies coming out of such a worldview, who brought the gospel to Africa, preached a
message that left Africans with a perception that the God of the Bible was insuffi-
cient. This caused many African Christians to return to traditional ways of resolving
issues in cases of existential crises. This unavoidably led to split-level, two-tier or
dual Christianity in which many African Christians find themselves today. Some of
this form of faith is overt but most of it is covert, away from the eyes and knowl-
edge of church leaders.

4.6.3   A SYNCRETISTIC RESPONSE

Syncretism has become a loaded term, often with negative connotations (see
Nussbaum 2002:99 - see also footnote). It is important, here, to give a description,
albeit short, of what we mean by the term (cf. Anderson 1999:228; Schreiter
1985:144f; Hollenweger 1999:185; Beyers 2003:1). If we were to understand
syncretism in a historical and mostly negative way, it would refer to the combining
of elements of Christianity with folk beliefs and practices in such a way that the
gospel loses its integrity and message (see Hiebert et al 1999:378; Murphy
1992:381). But if syncretism were to be understood in a positive light, it would
refer to borrowing from "pagan" cultures, as has been the tendency throughout
church history, in order to contextually and in an understandable way, present the
New Testament message without substantially altering the basic tenets of the Chris-
tian faith (cf. Khathide 2002:351; Schreiter 1985:144). To this end, syncretistic
borrowings should therefore be seen rather as signs of life than of the corruption of
the gospel (cf. Irarrazaval 1998:258). Daneel (1991:26) distinguishes between a
syncretist distortion in which the essential features of the gospel become blurred
and the legitimate indigenisation or contextualisation, in which Christian communi-
cation is adapted and rendered intelligible without forfeiting crucial scriptural truths.

In the instance of people in different cultures borrowing elements from Christianity
and incorporating them into their own religious structures, it would amount to nega-

tive syncretism. Anderson (2000:203) illustrates this by relating a phenomenon in South Africa of diviners who may consider themselves Christian, although they are usually not. Anderson maintains that even their healing power is specifically not Christian, coming directly from guiding ancestors. Oosthuizen (1987:76) has also observed that some believers in the African Independent Churches use ropes of different colours round the body, ankles and neck, the vestments, the stars, the beads, the pieces of string round the wrists in order to protect or fortify themselves against evil forces. Then there is also "washings" *(isiwasho)* whereby holy water is used to wash off the negative magic or get the evil forces out of the system. All these objects are believed to have "power" which come from God, the Holy Spirit and ancestor spirits (Oosthuizen: ibid; cf. Ma 2000:72).

Another form of some syncretist distortion is found in the issue of mediatorship. Daneel (1991:189) has discovered that, "There is no doubt that *Christ's media-torship* is sometimes misconstrued in the Shona churches". Anderson (2000:180), in his research among the African Initiated Churches in Soshanguve, South Africa, states that one ZCC (Zion Christian Church) respondent said that even God was unable to do anything without the ancestors. Another said that, "a person could not pray to God without mentioning the ancestors; they were the mediators who would make the prayer successful" (Anderson: ibid). The putting of Jesus Christ in the same category as ancestors as mediators between God and humanity, compro-mises the absoluteness and uniqueness of Christ. It is for that reason that Thomas (1985:387-397) talks about the need of a Christ-centred syncretism in which the legitimacy to translate, interpret and incarnate the Christian message into different socio-spiritual and cultural contexts is not questioned, without minimising "Christ ... the one Saviour of all, the only one able to reveal God and lead to God" (Pope John Paul II - *Redemptoris Missio* 5; cf. *The Lausanne Covenant* 3).

4.6.4   THE SPIRITUAL WARFARE RESPONSE

Although the ministry of spiritual warfare and deliverance is relatively new on the African continent, it is one of the fastest growing ministries across the denomina-tional spectrum. Its rapid growth is ascribable mainly to the influence of itinerant evangelists like Reinhard Bonnke and others. Another contributory factor to this growth is the fact that the historic or mainline churches, in order to halt the exodus

of their members to Pentecostal/charismatic and Africa Initiated Churches, had to introduce the ministry of deliverance in their services (see Lagerwerf 1987:37). The appearance and proliferation of the charismata in many historic churches has led some to coin the phrase: "The charismatisation or pentecostalisation of the African Church", to describe this phenomenon (see Larbi 2001:80-90). Prayers for deliverance from demons and harmful spirits are offered at many church services even during the week (see Laurent 2001:333). The number of faith-healers and those who minister in deliverance is increasing in the churches of whatever background and doctrinal persuasion on the continent.

As much as spiritual warfare appears to be making heavy inroads in Africa, it is not without problems. So many practices, some of which are biblically questionable, are conducted in the name of deliverance and helping people. Seeing that the movement is relatively new, some of its proponents and those it serves tend to be gullible because of the lack of proper theological categories and guidelines. Because spiritual warfare is predominantly based on the charismata or the gifts of the Holy Spirit without the necessity of ordination or training, most of the movement's practitioners tend to lack theological depth which unfortunately lead to the demonisation of everyone and everything. Undoubtedly, practitioners of spiritual warfare and deliverance need to be equipped in wise, discerning counselling to avoid embarrassing and hurting those who seek their help (see Murphy 1992:491).

## 4.6.5   INCULTURATION RESPONSE

One of the ways in which African Christians have endeavoured to protect and fortify themselves against negative magic and spirits of evil, has been the use of devotional objects (see Lagerwerf 1987:36). In the Roman Catholic Church, for example, devotional objects like holy water, the rosary, medals and prayer books often seem to 'replace' the traditional fetishes earlier rejected by the missionaries. Members of the African Initiated Churches may be found using apotropaic objects as a means of self-inculturating on their way to self-fulfilment (see Nussbaum 2003:98). The purpose, albeit not always so openly stated, is to transform traditional beliefs so that Christianity is presented as an attractive and viable African alternative (Anderson 2000:216). The problem of inculturation will always be the

danger of wanting to yield too much ground to culture without allowing it to be challenged by the message of salvation (Schreiter 1985:150; cf. Shorter 1988:261f; Bujo & Muya 2003:7).

## 4.6.6  CONCLUSIONS

Judging by the various responses, it is clear that African Christians consider the spirit world not as illusionary or just products of imagination or something depicting socio-psychological problems in a person or group, but as a reality, that the Christian faith needs to address itself to deliberately and holistically. African Christians, having known traditional ways of encountering such problems regarding the spirit world, need not feel that Christianity is unable, or unwilling for that matter, to deal with issues of the spirit or invisible realities. The fact that the western version of Christianity could not afford its messengers, in the form of missionaries, to deal with spirit-world issues, does not necessarily mean that the Bible, particularly the New Testament, is silent on the subject. The reverse is true.

## 4.7  SUMMATION AND CONCLUSIONS

When early missionaries came to bring the gospel to Africans, it is clear that they might have reckoned that belief and experiences in the African spirit world was hopefully going to dissipate with time if Africans were given more education and religious instruction. Such thinking was to be expected from people (missionaries) who had been born and bred in a worldview that sought to explain life in rationalistic and scientific ways rather than spiritual ones. Although African scholars have done some sterling work in terms of the concept of God in Africa, not much research has gone into other spiritual entities and realities like divinities, spirits (good and bad), ancestors, witchcraft/sorcery and diviner-healers. Many spiritual entities and experiences and the effect they have on ordinary Africans, are still not accounted for. This is partly due to the fact that many African theologians were, or are still, mentored by western theological specialists either at home or abroad. Yet, the study of the African spirit world and its impact on humans and the material world, remains significant and imperative because of its relevance to the church's missiological function and calling in Africa. Furthermore, such a study will hopefully help Christian theology discover its roots of dealing with and engaging the world of

spirits - a ministry that was a norm in the life of the believers of New Testament times and post-apostolic period. Knowing about the spirit world and being able to engage it, is not something that should be peripheral to both Christian theology and mission; it should be central. This has become more urgent given the demographics that display a tilting of Christianity to the south where communities are predominantly spirit-sensitive. If this is the case, as statistics show it is, Christian theology can no longer afford to remain a hegemony and privilege of the Euro-American theological specialists who are still entrenched in doctrinal debates of past centuries. The greater part of Christian theology must demonstrate, in its content and presentation, the inclination toward the needs of people of the southern hemisphere of which the African spirit world, among others, should receive priority attention. There is definitely no doubt that more theological input and guidance is needed in this area.