Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 THE PROBLEM

Over centuries a relatively clear articulation developed between the Gospel and traditional Western thought and therefore conveying the Gospel to people who share this view is relatively simple. However, one of the greatest challenges facing the Church is to ensure that the Gospel is heard by people from diverse cultures without having their understanding blocked by the fact that they do not share Western cosmology and worldview.

A person's understanding of the world and universe is very closely linked to their identity, religious and cultural heritage. When individuals convert to the Christian faith which entails a different worldview and implies a different set of values, they embark on a journey during the course of which they are faced with an identity crisis of significant proportions. This is exacerbated by pressure from their communities to stay true to their roots and traditional value systems.

Missionaries who attempt to plant the Church in countries which traditionally subscribe to the practices of or associated with ancestor worship face an uphill battle. Cultures and communities influenced and formed by these traditions and rituals function according to a worldview different not only from the West but in many cases from the Christian worldview as such.

When one considers the phenomenon of ancestor worship it is clear that there is no comfortable fit with the Gospel. Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church have adopted different strategies to deal with this dilemma. Unfortunately, in some cases it has led to religious plurality and syncretism.

The phenomenon of ancestor worship in Africa, Japan and Korea will be explored in this study. The approaches which Protestant church groups have adopted in each of these countries to deal with this problem will be discussed in theoretical, theological, missiological and Biblical terms.

To simply denounce the practices associated with the ancestral cult is inappropriate and most of the time counter-productive. One has to bear in mind that these practices are outward manifestations of deep-seated beliefs and cultural values and constitute essential vectors of identity. If the ministry is to succeed in countries where people are bound by traditional religions which are essentially animistic, missionaries have to be sensitive to the needs of the people, yet at the same time remain true to the principles of the Gospel. This does not necessarily imply a compromise or accepting religious plu-

ralism but rather a sensitive awareness of the needs of the community in which the missionaries are ministering the Gospel or where the Church has been established.

In order to address these needs, missionaries and churches need to have a deep understanding of the nature and significance of ancestor beliefs and rituals or practices associated with it. This is necessary to gain a clear understanding of whether or not the practices are contrary to the Scriptures and which functions these practices serve in the respective communities. Understanding the cultural or ethical need of the community is important because unless preaching the Gospel is able to address these needs on a fundamental level, the Gospel will not find a people who are receptive to its message. In the past, missionaries have assumed a rather colonial mindset when they evaluated traditional cultural practices. In many cases this meant that they were unaware of the close relationship between cultural identity and religion. By rejecting all religious rituals out of hand they also rejected the cultural heritage and cultural identity of their flock. This left an existential void in the lives newly converted Christians.

What is required then is to examine the beliefs, practices and rituals of ancestor worship in its broadest terms to gain an understanding of their anthropological and socio-cultural significance. Once one has defined the practices in these terms, one can analyse and evaluate their acceptability in theological terms.

Examining these beliefs and practices in terms of theology includes hermeneutical and exegetical analyses of relevant Biblical scriptures. If only one of these facets are emphasised, for example hermeneutical analysis to the exclusion of exegesis, one runs the risk of inculturation and religious plurality as found in the hermeneutical crisis in African Christology today. If the hermeneutical aspect is neglected and only exegetical insights are taken into account, contextualisation will suffer.

Finally, the contention of this study is that only once the above-mentioned analyses have been done, is it possible to make a decision on which mission principle would best serve the needs of the Church and the people involved while at the same time ensuring that the Gospel is not compromised in any way.

Therefore, the problem in this study centres on the following questions:

- What is the theoretical and anthropological understanding of the phenomenon of ancestor worship particularly in terms of the prevalence of ancestor worship in Africa, Korea and Japan?
- What challenges does ancestor worship pose to the ministry of the Church today?
- What is the Biblical perspective on the premises underlying ancestor worship?
- How have Protestant churches, African Indigenous Churches and the Roman Catholic Church attempted to deal with this challenge respectively and how have they justified it in theological terms?
- What is the most effective strategy for missionaries in order to arrive at a praxis which addresses this multi-faceted problem?

1.2   THESIS OF THIS STUDY

This study is based on the presupposition that ancestor worship is incompatible with Christianity. This study also asserts that the Bible as the inspired Word of God is the ultimate authority and therefore uses the Bible as the ultimate benchmark.

Furthermore, the thesis of this study asserts that the Gospel is to be protected at all cost and that any contextualised interpretation of the Gospel that amounts to a compromise or which can possibly lead to syncretism is unacceptable. Therefore, when attempting to evaluate ancestor worship and its associated practices, the study will explore the deep structures of this phenomenon to determine not only its socio-cultural significance, but also to determine its religious and cultic aspects and evaluate all in light of the Scriptures.

There are numerous scholars who argue that ancestor worship is nothing more than a social (cf. Dzobo 1985; Becken 1993; Ro 1988) or cultural phenomenon and thus deny its intrinsic religiosity. Others have acknowledged the religious significance of the ancestors, while Mbiti (1969) pointed out their intermediary role. Although the actual rituals may differ somewhat in Africa, Korea and Japan, this study acknowledges and explores the common underlying religious-phenomenal characteristics and motivations of ancestor cults.

This study argues that ancestor rituals are inherently religious (cf. Berentson 1991, JY. Kim 1984, Shibata 1983) and therefore constitute a cultic alternative to Christian Biblical worship. For the same reason the phenomenon is termed ancestor *worship.*

This study finally supports Hiebert's notion of a contextualised mission principle aimed at transformation.

1.3   SCOPE OF THIS STUDY

This study will attempt to provide a solution for missions (and churches) which face challenges in their ministry as a result of ancestor worship. Africa, Korea and Japan were selected because the phenomenon of ancestor worship figures prominently in these societies.

An important part of the research this study was devoted to determining what role ancestral beliefs, rituals and/or cult plays in the cultures and contemporary life of these societies, notwithstanding different religious persuasions. From the start it was clear that at the roots of these cultures and communities lay the mores of ancestor worship and that its influence is more fundamental and encompassing than is generally known in the West. Even the considerable changes that globalisation and modernisation have brought to these countries did not succeed to uproot or displace it.

It would be pointless to attempt to understand ancestor worship theologically if the empirical realities we are to interpret were not correctly depicted. Therefore a limited phenomenological analysis of ancestor worship will be conducted in terms of its religious and social significance. This will be done in the light of methodologies particular to cultural anthropology and Science of Religion. Biblical exegesis and interpretation,

and identifying effective models of missiological strategy forms the next phase. The focus of this study is not so much on the history of ancestor worship or an exposition of the traditional customs involved, but the theological analysis and evaluation of published research conducted in the fields of Science of Religion, sociology and theology.

Chapter 2 focuses on a phenomenological and general understanding of ancestor worship. This chapter asserts that in order to glean a reliable understanding of the phenomenon, one needs to explore and understand the underlying cosmology involved. This is because these worldviews are primary constructs which underlie the worshippers' ways of thinking and believing.

There is an obvious danger in generalisation. Africa, South Korea and Japan harbour a great variety of ethnic groups, cultures and religions (or cults). On the other hand, there are enough similarities between them to accept certain commonalities and to allow us to risk some generalisations about ancestor worship. Thus, Chapter 2 will attempt to define ancestor worship, the notion of death within the paradigm of ancestor worship and the identity and purpose of the ancestors in these societies. This chapter will also attempt to find an explanation for the prevalence of ancestor worship in the modern world.

The great variety and richness of each area (Africa, South Korea and Japan) is examined in the subsequent chapters. Chapter 3 examines the phenomenon in the African context. There are few places in the world where one will find the unique fusion of traditional religions and Christianity as in Africa. There are considerable juxtaposed points of view in terms of doctrine between Christianity and traditional religions in African Churches and yet in some cases the tensions are less apparent because of the attitude of assimilation which some of these religions or churches have assumed.

Chapter 3 thus also explores and compares the manner in which African Churches have attempted to cope with ancestor veneration and the nature of ancestor worship. Ancestor worship in Africa will also be examined in terms of contemporary African Ancestral Theology in order to gain a clearer understanding of research of scholars in the field.

Chapter 4 focuses on ancestor worship in Korea. In spite of the fact that South Korea is considered a First World country (especially compared to African countries), the practice of ancestor worship is still prevalent and has proven to be a matter of ongoing interest for anthropologists and theologians alike. Ancestor worship in Korea is generally defined in terms of Confucian or Neo-Confucian ancestor worship (Ro 1988; Adams 1995). Therefore, Chapter 4 attempts to gain a clearer understanding of the nature of the religious background in Korea, how the ancestor rites are practised, and how Christianity has responded to ancestor worship in Korea.

This chapter will also attempt to determine which religious elements of recent memorial services ought to be banned from the Christian worship and which elements ought to be revived in the Church. These factors of ancestor worship in Korea are examined within the Christian paradigm in order to assess the implications of ancestor worship for the Church in Korea. As a result it may be possible to consider including the

practices at contemporary memorial services in the Christian paradigm without constituting a conflict with the kerygma. In order to achieve this it is necessary to gain an understanding of the state of affairs of contemporary Korean Christianity.

Chapter 5 attempts to provide a profile of the nature of ancestor worship in Japan and how it relates to the Japanese cosmology and the ensuing the religious implications of their beliefs. An attempt is also made to understand the reasons why ancestor worship has been able to maintain its pervasive influence in that country in the face of the vast numbers of missionaries who have been attempting to establish Christianity. This will establish the clear link between Japanese culture and religion and why outright rejection without acknowledging the socio-cultural needs and cosmology of the people offers no real solution to the problem. Chapter 5 will also look at the Japanese churches' attempts to deal with ancestor worship.

Chapter 6 concentrates on Biblical accounts of aspects of ancestor worship and attempts to identify Biblical guidelines in assessing the phenomenon and its cosmology. Ancestor worship hinges on the perceived relationship between the living and the dead. These beliefs are intrinsic to the cosmology of the Japanese, Koreans and Africans and thus in turn inform their ritual practices. This chapter shows that in all three cases, there is the underlying belief that the dead will benefit from the actions of the living descendants and that the living and the dead exist in an essentially symbiotic relationship.

Chapter 6 explores the synergy of the underlying beliefs about death and the afterlife. Therefore, the parallels between the beliefs of these three nations will be discussed in terms of the Biblical perspective on the relationship between the living and the dead and death and the afterlife. The answers to these questions will attempt to provide a clearer picture of what a Christian's attitude towards ancestors ought to be as dictated to by the Holy Bible.

Chapter 7 comprises a theological and missiological reflection on ancestor worship. The chapter considers the multi-faceted religious elements which have influenced ancestor worship and permeated the ethnic and traditional beliefs central to this study. These elements are assessed theologically and the question as to the co-existence of ancestor worship and Christianity is addressed.

Consequently, the chapter also considers the questions of whether or not ancestor worship constitutes a form of idolatry and whether it is at all possible to integrate ancestor worship into Christianity. The differences between the cosmologies of traditional religions and Christianity are outlined and the hermeneutical problems which emerge in contextualised theologies and which may or may not constitute irreconcilable differences are explored.

1.4   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research for this study consisted mainly of phenomenological, systemic and Biblical analyses, theological assessment and missiological strategy design. This is an essentially qualitative study and was based on an extensive literary survey.

In his book, *Studying religion*, Krüger (1982) effectively describes theology's two-tiered structure. According to Krüger (1982:12-13), the first level of theology can be labelled human-scientific, as theology has a lot in common with the discipline of Humanities. The procedure of the second phase entails normative criticism, evaluation and reflection, and may even include Christian dialogue and/or reflection, as the findings of the first phase are tested against evangelical norms. In this study, the Bible serves as primary source when critical norms are to be identified or formulated.

Strategy	
Theological level:	Theological foundation
Human-scientific level:	Theoretical understanding

Van Rheenen's Three Disciplines of Missiology model (1996:137-140) is similar:

Strategy
Theological foundation
Theoretical understanding

Level one – Theoretical Approach/Foundation

The first level (Krüger's first tier) represents the cognitive approach to and phenomenological understanding of ancestor worship, making use of an anthropological and Science of Religion perspectives. Looking at ancestor worship from this point of view illustrates the basic religious and social premises that underlie ancestral cults. Also ancestral beliefs and practices should be regarded as forming part of the religious consciousness and worldview of the peoples who preserve and practise it. With this consideration in mind, the concern of this thesis is primarily with the central religious elements of ancestor worship, while certain distinctive ethical codes relating to it are also considered.

Level two – Theological Foundation

At the second level, exegeses of relevant passages from the Bible were done to determine how Biblical authors viewed ancestor worship and related phenomena. Theological reflection attempts to formulate fundamental values and principles as basis for this study.

Level three – Missiological Strategy

The third level represents the theological and missiological approach, which suggests how missionaries and ministers of the Church should approach adherents of ancestor worship in order to minister the Word to them and facilitate its transformational effect on their worldview and religious perspective. Synoptical analyses of the missiological strategies that missionaries and ministers have made use of in the past to challenge ancestor worship were made.

By allowing levels 1 and 2 to interact (by way of missiological reflection) this study aims to highlight those elements of ancestral worship that are incompatible with the Gospel. It also explores the possibility of re-orientating converts' understanding of their

relationship with the ancestors, and of life and death as such, in order that they may realise the new life in Christ as their only Mediator and Saviour.

Chapter 2

ANCESTOR WORSHIP AS A MULTI-RELIGIOUS PHENOMENON

2.1   INITIAL DESCRIPTION OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP

The purpose of this chapter is to address the question of how to understand and describe ancestor worship as phenomenon. I will offer also a brief overview of the aspects of ancestor worship.

As I focus on these aspects (also with references to African, Japanese and Korean similarities), special attention will be given to the definition of ancestor worship, the concept of death within ancestor worship, the identity and function of ancestors, the worldview underlying these beliefs and practices and the reasons why ancestor worship is still surviving in the modern world.

The social anthropologist, Meyer Fortes, has studied various African cultures and in his 1960 paper *Some Reflections on Ancestor Worship in Africa* has made a comparison between the societies he was studying and the societies of China and Japan. He found many similarities (Ma 2004:55).

To be sure, there is an obvious danger in such generalisation. In Africa, South Korea and Japan there is a great variety of ethnic groups and cultures with many differences between them. On the other hand, I think there are enough similarities between them, to allow us to risk some generalisations about ancestor worship. It is thus possible, in my view, to make general observations and to outline certain commonalities. But we must also bear in mind the great variety and richness of each area (Africa, South Korea and Japan) which will be examined in chapters 3, 4 and 5. Even though this account is certainly not exhaustive, it will give us considerable information about ancestor worship.

A number of works on ancestor worship have been written in the last few years. The majority of these works are social anthropological studies, which have proven to be very informative and useful to our present theological exploration of the subject (Toorn 1996; Lindsay 1996; Lai 1997; Dinslage 2000; Oduyoye 2000; Johnson 2001; Ma 2003; Mullins 2004).[1] The main reason why this topic has been covered so extensively is that there are possibly more people practising ancestor worship or involved in ancestor wor-

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[1] Historically, ancestor worship has been one of the world's central institutions, regardless of temporal and geographic boundaries. It has also been a popular and fruitful area of investigation for anthropologists attempting to gain knowledge of different cultures and societies. For more information about the concept of ancestor worship as a social and ethical function, see Busia (1961:86-89), Welton (1971:1-18), Wolf (1999:131-182), Offner (1979:1-16), Shibata (1983:35-48), Smith (1989:27-38), Kim (1996:16-24).

ship than people who practise the Christian faith.[2] Moreover, the trend which emerges is that instead of dying out, ancestor worship is thriving in the modern world. Even a large number of Christians in the developing world practise ancestor worship periodically as a traditional custom. This means that all so-called "Third World" churches are faced with the question of ancestor worship.[3] On that note, I will begin with a description and discussion of ancestor worship.

2.1.1 Ancestor worship is widespread phenomenon

Ancestor worship can be regarded as one of the great phenomena of religion and as one of the most important religious expressions of humankind.[4] In fact, ancestor worship can be found wherever primal or traditional culture and beliefs have survived (notably in Asia, Africa, North and Latin Americas, Oceania and Australia). It is even practiced by people who participate in a modern technological economy and culture, pointing to deep existential and religious needs which drive them (Hwang 1977:340).[5] Here are some global examples of ancestor worship.

In Asia the Vietnamese Cult of the Ancestors is a clear example of a traditional animistic belief system. The persistent manner in which it is still followed today is surprising to outsiders (Reimer 1975:155).

Japanese folk religion has ancestor worship as its central feature. In Japan ancestors were originally seen as the founders of households and the originators of successive household heads. Morioka (1984:201) describes Japanese ancestor worship as the "belief in the superhuman power of the dead recognised as ancestors, and the many rituals based on this belief".

In Korea ancestor worship signifies the solidarity of agnatic (or patrilineal) groups and the fundamental morality of the participants (Lee 1987:56).[6]

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[2] According to Woodhead (2002:153), "Christianity is the largest of the world's religions and the most extensive across the globe. Estimates of the total Christian population of the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century put the figure at around 2 billion, or 32 per cent of world population." Nevertheless, ancestor worship is practiced within all major religions including Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and traditional religions. For the widespread belief in the ancestor cult, see Gehman (1999:28-31).

[3] In my article (Bae 2004:338) I argue that ancestor worship is a dilemma for Christian communities all over the world, especially where people have adapted Western theology to their Third World cultures. For the purposes of the scope of my article, I limited my study to Korea and Africa as examples of places in which ancestor worship is being practiced. Here I expand the scope to include Japan.

[4] Geană (2005:350) argues that one of the most elaborate responses to the human perception of being-in-time (as the essence of historicity) has been the cult of the ancestors. Consequently, the ancestor cult may be considered foundational for historicity.

[5] For the prevalence of the ancestor cult as a primitive religion in the world, see Beckwith (1970:2), Dupré (1975:92-93), Gill (1982:125-127), Hultkrantz (1979:206-231), Thorpe (1992:11-117). And for more recent information, see Amanze (2003:43-59), Fowler (2003:303-329), G. Johnson (2003:327-346), Hoare (2004:113-137), Komuro (2003:60-68), Sayyid & Tyrer (2002:57-75).

[6] It is well known that Vietnam, along with Korea and Japan, has been heavily influenced by China, especially in terms of its Confucian culture. This influence is most visible in ancestor worship. For the influence of Confucianism on Vietnam, see Phan (2002:421-430), Neil (1993:11-41).

Even in Indonesia the traditional religion of *Marapu* (the ancestors) is still widely practiced. The more traditionally minded believe that the *Marapu* are supernatural guardians of the forest who help the inhabitants keep their possessions (Fowler 2003:303).

In Africa ancestor worship is also at the centre of traditional religion and as such poses a formidable challenge to Christianity. One of the most contentious issues in missionary work in Africa has been the question of the veneration of the ancestors, as almost all African societies, even those with a substantial Christian segment, strongly believe in ancestors (Amanze 2003:43).[7] In addition, as a result of globalization and a great deal of migration, Africa's ancestral belief system has spread to diverse countries, including America, and has infiltrated other religions. For instance, The Feast of All Saints celebrated in New Orleans is a mixture of the Catholic remembrance of the dead and African American culture (Brown 1994:50). Even many African Christians accept ancestor worship as an integral part of their culture and daily life. It is not strange that many members of the church (including office bearers) are involved with traditional rituals on the side.

In Oceania, the generic name given to the islands of the Pacific Ocean, various ancestor worship practices characterise the colourful cultures of these remote islands.[8] New Guineans believe in ancestral spirits, as well as vaguely defined nature spirits. Their traditions include religious performances during which frightening masks and vivid body paintings are worn (Thorpe 1992:91-93).

Historical ancestors are given divine status amongst the Polynesians, remembering the ancestral migrations which brought them to the islands on which they now live. The names of the ancestors who came from the other side of the ocean are remembered and revered as gods (Guerreiro 1997:16).

Johnson (2001:40) describes the Hawaiian religious beliefs as follows:

> For the Hawaiians, *'aumakua* means an ancestral god, guardian spirit, family god and ancestral spirit. Formal and informal rituals are present in Hawaiian culture and for Hawaiian families plants, animals, the earth itself, the ocean and the atmosphere invoke *'aumakua* associations every day of their lives. These associations also influence the Hawaiian peoples' names and the patterns of their religious practices and beliefs.

In North and South America the indigenous shaman or medicine man is at the centre of religious life. There is a clear link with nature meaning that in addition to being animistic these cultures can also be termed totemistic.[9] The shaman is believed to be able to travel above and below the earth, and to be in contact with the supernatural world in these places. Using meditation, his body remains in a trance and his spirit travels to these invisible realms to converse or seek counsel with the ancestral spirits (Dupré 1975:110-111). Even today these positions and abilities are celebrated. In Bra-

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[7] For a more detailed survey on ancestor worship in Africa, see Dinslage & Storch (2000:121-127), Kalu (2001:54-84), Kaplan (2000:114-151), Mafico (2000:481-489), Oduyoye (2000:73-82), Triebel (2002:187-197).

[8] This vast area is further divided, for geographical purposes, into Melanesia (New Guinea, New Hebrides, et al), Micronesia (Caroline, Marshall, Mariana Islands, et al), and Polynesia (New Zealand, Hawaii, Easter Island, et al).

[9] For the traditional religion of South America cf. Cole (1982:61).

zil for instance, an annual reunion of the Fraternity of American Descendants with their ancestral spirits takes place (Jack 1995:22).

Looking at the above examples, it is clear that ancestor worship is not restricted to people in "primitive" societies. Though the term may mean one thing to the educated and another thing to the uneducated, the core tenets are the same, being expressed in many different ways, varying from person to person and from group to group. Ancestor worship is found on every social and educational level within the same cultural milieu. Actually, the social anthropologists have done a superb job of providing us with both general works and specific case studies on the many ways in which ancestor worship is being practised amongst different peoples in various parts of the world.

2.2   DEFINITION OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP

Before commencing a discussion on ancestor worship, a preliminary clarification of terms and a definition of concepts will be offered.[10]

In the broad sense, ancestor worship comprises a variety of religious practices and beliefs focussing on the spirits of ancestors. It is most often persons who used to be important, such as the head of a family or clan and the chief of a tribe or state, who are revered in these rites. Ancestor worship in a narrow sense refers to the specific actions which are performed during the rites relating to the propitiation of deceased relatives and/or ministration to their needs. Ancestor worship here is an attempt to preserve good relations with the departed kin.[11] These actions, on the part of the living who are in a position to render help, try to pacify or oblige the spirits of the dead – by offering them what they may need in their new existence (Hwang 1977:343).

An important clarification needs to be made here, that is the distinction between ancestors and the dead. Although at times the line of division between the two may not be so strict[12], it follows logically that the category of "the dead" is larger than that of "the

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[10] Reimer (1975:156), in his article *The Religious Dimension of the Vietnamese Cult of the Ancestors* gives two reasons to explain the complication of analysis of the ancestor worship in Vietnam. First, no recognised systematised formulation of beliefs exists. Although the Cult of the Ancestors is the most universal and unified institution of Vietnamese animism, specific beliefs about it are not entirely standardised, even within a given area. Religious beliefs are highly individualised. Secondly, the Vietnamese tendency toward religious eclecticism and toward syncretism – that curious ability to hold conflicting beliefs at the same time – brings confusion. It is not uncommon to find people who profess adherence to modern scientific secularism which denies the existence of a soul, yet still hold to traditional ancestral beliefs.

[11] Following a similar line of thought, Helen Hardacre (1992:263) states: "The term ancestor worship designates rites and beliefs concerning deceased kinsmen. Rites of ancestor worship include personal devotions, domestic rites, the ancestral rites of a kinship group such as a lineage, periodic rites on the death day of the deceased and annual rites for the collected ancestors. Generally excluded from the category are rites for the dead having no specific reference to kinsmen, and beliefs about the dead in general that lack any special reference to kinship."

[12] Gluckman(1937:117-136), in his article *Bantu Studies*, disagrees with this statement, and shows clear differences between ancestor worship and the cult of the dead. "Ancestors represent positive moral forces who can cause or prevent misfortune and who require that their descendants observe a moral code. The cult of the dead, on the other hand, is not exclusively directed to deceased kinsmen, but to the spirits of the dead in general. Here spirits are prayed to for the achievement of amoral or antisocial ends, whereas ancestors can be petitioned only for ends that are in accord with basic social principles."

ancestors". The "dead" is an open category (which includes all people who have died, either recently or long ago), whereas the category of "ancestors" relates to (more narrowly) the founders of a kinship group, of a community and even of a nation (These two aspects of "the dead" and "the departed kin" will explored more extensively in following paragraphs).

2.2.1 Ancestor veneration, cult or worship?

For the purpose of this study it is necessary to make a clear distinction between the use of the terms ancestor cult, ancestor veneration and ancestor worship. Although some scholars like Nyirongo (1997:87), Anderson (1991:81), Kruger et al (2002:34) have argued that the term "veneration" is preferable to that of "worship" on the grounds that there is no evidence of an apotheosis of the ancestors, this study rejects this view. The reason for this is evident in the arguments proposed in the following chapters which clearly point out that not only do the ancestor rituals have a significant social function, but also do these practices display an undeniably religious or cultic character.

Khathide (2003:314) argues that although the notion that ancestor rituals are to be considered in the context of their social significance and therefore as a form of veneration rather than worship, there are some unresolved issues. Khathide refers to Triebel's (2002:192) assertion that this view does not take into account the fact that the ancestors are feared. Furthermore he contends that Zahan (2000:13) has pointed out that "veneration" cannot be the preferable term because there are many practices which constitute worship in themselves, for example the erection of altars upon which sacrifices are made to the ancestors. It points to religious acts and intentions. Furthermore, the prayers which are said during the ceremony are implicitly religious in nature, rather than a mere manifestation of reverence for the deceased ancestors.

Furthermore, this study supports Ro's assertion (1988:7) that "ancestor cult" is not an appropriate term to use in this context, mainly because of the pejorative connotations attached to the term "cult". Ro further acknowledges that some scholars have preferred to use the term "ritual" but as he rightfully argues, this does not take cognisance of the religious ideas and beliefs underlying the rituals.

Some anthropologists and Catholic scholars have asserted that the social and ethical dimensions of ancestor rituals can be separated from the religious connotations attached to it. The reason for this has to do with a specific missionary approach – that of assimilation and accommodation. However, for the purpose of this study, ancestor worship must be seen as a whole and therefore the social functions and ethical motivations intrinsic to these practices cannot be isolated from the religious elements. Consequently, this study will give preference to the notion of ancestor rituals as a form of worship and thus the term "ancestor worship" will be used throughout this study.

2.2.2 Who are the ancestors?

2.2.2.1 The identity of ancestors

In most societies where belief in ancestors is common, a record of people who have lived and have died is kept in the memory of the living members of the community. They have moved into the category of ancestors, or the living dead. The concept of ancestral involvement in everyday life is more than a story or a myth. It is lived by millions in many areas in the world. How would we begin to define this category?

"The living dead who hold influence over their living descendents" is a succinct and common way of defining ancestors. Their identity is further explained as transcendental beings representing the religious, ethical and institutional values of society in their community. Their abode and influence range from the physical to the spiritual world.

2.2.2.2 Ancestors are the dead

Ancestors have long held an important position in anthropology. For instance, the definitive mark of "primitive religion" according to Spencer, Tylor, and Frazer was considered to be "ancestor worship" (McCall 1995:256). Seen by these scholars from the perspective of anthropology, the concept of ancestors is closely linked to that of the departed kin. But what about the rest of the dead and their various forms? Also, what is the link between ancestors and totemism, shamanism, spiritism and theism?

Lehmann and Myers (2006:284) make the following observation: "A major problem with Spencer's argument that ancestor worship was the first religion is that many societies at the hunting-and-gathering level do not practise ancestor worship. The Arunta of Australia, for example, worshiped their totemic plants and animals, but not their human ancestors." One shortcoming in the study of ancestor worship has been the fact that the term "ancestor worship" is often reserved for those societies where the dead are specifically called by a term that is translated as ancestor. This is problematic as it excludes societies whose religious practices concern ghosts, shades, spirits, souls, totemic plants and animals, or merely the dead (Steadman & Palmer 1996:63).

The differences and links between ancestors and totemic plants and animals is a fine line. Totems (animal or plant) are clearly ancestral in that they link a person with a line of ancestors. Some scholars include it in ancestor worship. The Australian form of totemism is an example of this, seen by some as a form of diffused ancestor worship "... [because by] taking the name of an animal such as kangaroo ... people express a communal obligation to the founders of their kinship group" (Harris 1989:405).

The description and study also becomes problematic in the case of religions that based on more general, and therefore, supposedly non-ancestral, spirits or gods. The role of ancestors are overlooked. An example of this is the hunters and gatherers living in the Kalahari, who are often called the !Kung. Lee (1984:103) argues that the !Kung's "religious universe is inhabited by a high god, a lesser god, and a host of minor animal spirits", but he also notes that "the main actors in [the !Kung's religious world are the //gangwasi, the ghosts of recently deceased !Kung".

According to Steadman and Palmer (1994), another example of a religion which is initially described as shamanic, concerned with spirits and not ancestors, though could be regarded as performing ancestor worship, is the Yanomamo religion:

> Although the Yanomamo religion actually centres on shamans ingesting hallucinogenic drugs and controlling spirits, Chagnon (1983:92) reports that "when the original people [the *no badabo*] died, they turned into spirits: *hekura*." Because the *no badabo* were the original Yanomamo, this means that ancestors are actually central to Yanomamo religion.

This failure to recognise the connection between ancestors and spirits or gods often results in societies being excluded from the ancestor worship category.

Another complicating factor is that the deceased and ancestors cannot be taken as synonyms. In some cases a minimum requirement for ancestral status would entail to be remembered. "When the living dead are forgotten in the memory of their group and dropped from the genealogy as a result of the passing of time (four or five generations), they are believed to be transformed into "nameless spirits", non-ancestors ..." (Lehmann and Myers 2006:284).

Smith (1974:56-57) points to a seemingly opposite principle in Japanese ancestral worship. "Among the Japanese … the soul of a recent deceased person has to pass through a number of stages until reaching the condition of ancestor."

The examples show that in defining ancestors as "the dead" it is important to realise that, even if not evident at first, references to ghosts, spirits, and the dead in a society's religion, mean that ancestors are implied in one way or another.

2.2.2.3 Ancestors are the departed kin

Differing from the examples cited above, some scholars go for a narrower definition of ancestors, distinguishing the dead (or spirits) from ancestors. They view that all spirits can not be ancestors; there are conditions necessary for a deceased spirit to become an ancestor. To illustrate this, Hammond-Tooke (1981:23) refers to the Dahoenas of West Africa who distinguish clearly between the dead and the ancestors. They have complex ceremonies to transform some dead into ancestors, meaning that not everybody who died automatically becomes an ancestor. These conditions to be venerated as an ancestor are not the same for all the tribes, nations and areas in the world where ancestor worship is practised, and definitely not agreed upon by scholars. In general, however, the following are the most common conditions needed to be an ancestor:

2.2.2.3.1 To have lived, procreated and died

Whitley (2002:121) gives a minimal definition of an ancestor as "someone who has procreated, died, but has descendants who remember him/her." Fortes (1976:4) agrees with this base requirement by noting that "ancestors receive recognition insofar as their descendants exist and are designated as such." The notion of having children is self explanatory, to be invoked a person must have descendants to invoke him, therefore the need for having children (Shorter 1983a:15).

2.2.2.3.2 To be remembered by those left behind

A recent definition of ancestor, as used by Bloch (1996:43) states that "the term ances-tor is used in anthropology to designate those forebears who are remembered". Of course, ancestors need not be invoked by their names and remembered as individuals, they may be conceived of as part of a "collective", but the important part is that they are remembered. The remembering starts, as noted by many ethnographers, with individu-als before moving into collective anonymity (Whitley 2002:121). It does not necessarily imply a genealogy of named individuals. Present generations are linked to ancestors through descent. This is borne out by rituals which emphasise the idea of continuity. Once again, within this prerequisite, it follows that not all dead are ancestors, and not every monumental grave can be defined as "ancestral". Goody's (1962) research sug-gests that "human bodies buried in unusual places of subjected to unusual treatment are more likely to be those of social outcasts than those of ancestors" (Whitley 2002:122).

2.2.2.3.3 To have had a significant social status whilst alive

Ephirim-Donker (1997:129) explained ancestors as following:

> To be an ancestor the deceased must have been an elder, and upon his or her demise become one of the eternal beings. The ancestors are thus a distinct group of eternal saints apart from other spiritual personalities who are also endowed with immortality but are not ancestors.

Besides the rites of passage after death, to be admitted to ancestor status often de-pends upon certain pre-death prerequisites. These include, among others, to have had a long life, a certain social standing, self-control, morality and integrity. Ancestorhood quite often implies moral superiority, understandable, since it is mainly persons of character and moral who form the "electorate" when an ancestor is to be "elected" to the rank of an ancestor. Ancestors thus become role models to emulate (Amanze 2003:64-65).

Who is regarded as important will vary between particular societies, and according to patterns of kinship and property holding. Within societies with strong patrilineal prin-ciples of descent, those who are regarded as important, and attain ancestor status will be different from societies who have bilateral kinship patterns (Whitley 2002:122). Kopytoff (1971) notes how that in some African lineage-based societies, such as the Suku of the Congo, ancestors are simply the more elderly of the elders. In other socie-ties, almost all dead people are considered ancestors, even if they have no descen-dants, or were of no significant status in life. The only exception to ancestorhood would be notorious people such as witches, who were considered evil (Amanze 2003:64-65).

2.2.2.3.4 To be revered in specific places and ceremonies

The final step in many societies for the dead to become "ancestors" is to go through a series of "rites of passage". Whitley (2002:122) notes the following examples of reverie and ceremony within the LoDagaba and Taiwanese cultures:

> Rites of burial and rites of "ancestor worship" are ritually and often spatially distinct. An-cestors are frequently revered in places which bear no obvious relation to the place of

burial. Among the LoDagaba, ancestors are venerated in ancestral shrines located in byres; in Taiwan, ancestor shrines venerating named ancestors are located in a variety of places (in the home and in ancestral halls), but rarely at the place of burial.

When we consider the various options for ancestorhood above, they all seem plausible and logical. The reason ancestors are distinguished from the dead might be due to veneration or reverence toward ancestors above that of the dead. When we look at it the other way though, ancestors can be placed in the category of the dead because they are dependent upon the living or their descendants to be ancestors.

A question that arises is how to explain rituals concerning distant ancestors that don't fit into these four categories? To explain sacrifices to ancestors who have no emotional ties with the ones offering them and who left no inheritance, Mbiti makes the distinction between the living dead and other spirits. This second group is the spirits of those who have disappeared in the world of the unknown. "The living do not know them anymore, they have ceased to be members of the family. Such spirits have no personal communication with human families" (Mbiti 1990:26).

Thus our only final conclusion can be to say that the ancestors are the deceased. Linked to Mbiti's "living dead" above, to further classify who and what ancestors are, we need to move to looking at their identity and function.

2.2.3 The function of ancestors

From the forgoing description, it is evident that the dead need to meet some prerequisites to be ancestors in general. Aside from the ancestors, there are whole groups of beings that are not ancestors, such as those who weren't born properly: "Dead or still-born children, miscarriages, and abortions are generally conceptually distinguished from ancestors" (Hardacre 1992:264). Added to this are the people who lived, yet did not meet the requirements outlined above. Gehman (1999:12-13) talks about this group, saying that women, children, unimportant men, unmarried men, those who died without children, as well as young adults less than eighteen years of age, are not likely to become ancestors.

Ancestors are those from whom the living can derive some benefit, and must be people of effect, means, importance or status. This is linked to the function and identity of ancestors. To reinforce this thought, Bediako (1990:38) says that "only those who lived exemplary lives and from whom the community derived some benefit" becomes ancestors. Why is benefit a key-concept in understanding the ancestors? What exactly is the role of these persons classified as ancestors in relation to the descendants who call upon them?

The role of ancestors is closely linked to that of their identity. As being a living part of the community, and often its head or elder, they play a role as the representatives of the social law and tradition, and are construed to be indispensable to uphold the harmony and order within their societies. This role allows them to be benefactors of welfare to obedient and harmonious societies, or wrath to those who create disharmony and imbalances. As seen in their identity, being linked to the Supreme Being, ancestors also play a role as intermediaries or mediators between God and their descendants.

2.2.3.1 The living dead as members of the family and community

The term "living dead" was originally used by JS Mbiti (1971:10) to describe ancestors in Africa. It has since has been adopted fairly generally by scholars and representatives of African Traditional Religion. Amanze (2003:44) explains the meaning behind it: "To many African people the dead people are not dead at all. Death is only a transitional state to a spiritual life free from material hindrances. The deceased are at once dead and alive, and because of their paradoxical nature they are known… as the living-dead."

Shorter (1983b:199) agrees that "living dead" is a better translation than "ancestor". In Mbiti's own words "the living dead is a person who is physically dead but alive in the memory of those who knew him in his life, as well as being alive in the world of the spirits. The living dead are still part of the extended family and as such has a close relationship with the living" (Mbiti 1990:25).

In the work that coined the term, Mbiti explains why the term is an apt reference for ancestors by giving insight into the African worldview. Africans understand human beings as being composed of both a physical and a non-physical part. By referring to the Akamba people of Kenya, the non-physical part is shown to comprise spirit (or breath), heart, life, and mind (or intellect). All of these non-physical parts rely on the body to exist. The spirit, as the "life-principle" is shown to exist through breathing. As long as the spirit is present life is present in the body. When a person dies, it is only the physical part that dies, the rest of the elements (spirit, heart, and mind – the life-principle) continue to live. These bear the personality of the person into the next dimension as his/her whole being (minus the physical part) moves into the spiritual world. Looking at the Akamba's beliefs, it is even thought that the person receives an identical body to that left in the physical realm (Mbiti 1971:131).

The "living dead" then refers to persons who continue to live on in the spiritual realm (i.e. minus physical bodies). This idea of the immortality of the soul is one that occurs often in Western and Eastern thinking, and is partly compatible with the Christian view of life-after-death. It is the belief in East Asia that the life after death parallels the life on earth, and the spirits still live in the same way we do, and have the same needs.[13]

In Africa the living dead are part of the reality of life. Their existence and reality is not questioned, and they are still seen to influence those on earth, either in good or bad ways. The ancestors are therefore still in some way part of the community of the living, and as such, living dead is a very apt term (Triebel 2002:188). Mbiti explains the term further by saying that the living dead have died and are buried, but they still live because they influence the lives of the living. "As long as they are still remembered, these living-dead are still people, and have not yet become 'things', 'spirits' or 'its.'" (Mbiti 1969a:25)

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[13] The Christian understanding is that the soul is not inherently immortal. Eternal life is the work of the cross and we believe that the body is included. In addition the deceased occupy a different realm to the living and no communication between the two is possible.

2.2.3.2 Intermediaries and mediators

In the African belief system, the notion of a Supreme Being exists, but often this Being is far removed from the actions and lives of the living. This God has no role in judging, or rewarding good or bad behaviour, and is "too big" to have any relationship with humankind. This aspect of an "impersonal God" is the reason in many cases why the ancestors have a high position, and it is a primary reason for the second identity of ancestors – that of intermediaries and mediators (This aspect will be explored in further detail together with the encompassing theological paradigms associated with this view of God. Therefore, this serves as a brief explanatory note about the function the ancestors are believed to have in terms of serving as intermediaries or intercessors with God).

Consequently, the common belief is held that the ancestors are "…the closest links that men have with the spirit world" (Mbiti 1969a:83). In the state in which ancestors exist as spirits, they are believed to be god-like and implicitly able to communicate with God. However, they are also essentially man-like, due to their origin and therefore believed to be able to communicate with humans. It is this status as well as their moral superiority that means that in most African societies ancestors serve as intermediaries to the Supreme Being, they are part of a long chain of "intercessors whose ultimate function is to intercede on behalf of humankind" (Amanze 2003:45).

It is this notion of the ancestors as intermediaries who are in such close contact with God that enables them to mediate power and service to the living (we will explore this further below). It is therefore important for the living relatives to ensure that they are constantly appeased. Donald M'timkulu, in his paper *Some aspects of Zulu religion*, observed among the Zulu that if people neglect the ancestors, it is believed that the ancestors no longer use their powers of mediation or position as intermediaries to ensure or bring well-being upon their family. He has also noted that, though they are revered and given power over the living, there are certain limitations to the ancestors. They are not in themselves either omnipotent or omnipresent but rather, in most cases, "bound by the relationships of consanguinity and propinquity to land" (M'timkulu 1977:21).

We have already noted Mbiti's words that indicate that ancestors are considered to be "…the closest links that men have with the spirit world" (1969a:83). Therefore, most of their functions are centered around the position they are believed to have as being the closest links to God. Hence, as they invoke wrath or blessing on God's behalf, so they are also believed to convey messages from God and therefore are instrumental to ensure that the gods are appeased.

Once again, as senior elders, they have direct access to the spirit world, and are often associated with God in prayer. Just as a chief is approached through an intermediary, so prayer may go to God through the ancestral spirits (Parrinder 1969:69).

During prayers, the living pray by reciting all the names of their ancestors. This list reaches as far back as the names can be remembered, and therefore, through a chain of ancestors, their prayer reaches God. Interestingly enough, Parsons (in Bosch 1974: 46) points out that many Africans are not familiar with this notion. According to Parsons

many Africans do not really experience the ancestors as mediators. A mediator implies another end party in the experience, but for many their religious experience ends with the ancestors, and not with God. They are then the focus of the worship and prayer, and not God. Only in exceptional cases, when they or their community are in serious trouble they may want to call upon God directly, "in desperation, after all other efforts have failed".

This may well be true in many communities, but the more common understanding of the role as mediators between the spirits and the people is represented by Smith's exposition (in his study of the ancestor cult in Swaziland) (1950:111):

> On earth it is against the law to approach a grandfather directly if the father is alive, or to appeal to the king without first speaking to his *induna* (minister, counsellor). In the spirit world the hierarchy of age and authority is similarly respected. Requests are made to the invisible father and he forwards the message to the next above him, unless a specific ancestor is demanding attention. Swazi believe in the unbroken continuity of kinship after death and vaguely assume that eventually the wishes of men reach *Umkhulumcadi* (the First Being).

2.2.3.3   The representatives of law

Once again, Mbiti (1969a:83) has the defining words concerning the identity of ancestors:

> They are the guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities. Offence in these matters is ultimately an offence against the forefathers who, in that capacity, act as the invisible police of the families and communities.

Being persons and examples of moral superiority, and mediating the desires of the Supreme Being, the ancestors are the representatives of law and order. Offences committed against their orders results in punishment, and often occurrences of misfortune, illness or death are read as coming from the anger of the ancestors. This anger is brought upon by misconduct by me or by my family, disobedience which is seen to be questioning their authority (Triebel 2002:189).

An interesting aspect that dictates behaviour toward ancestors is the notion of "balance" – similar to the Ancient Near East's concept of shame and honour, and the Eastern search for harmony. The ancestors are incorporated into a very sensitive network of relationships comprising a family and its ancestors, another family and their ancestors, the clan and its ancestors, and even another clan together with their ancestors. This network is, under ideal conditions, in balance.

If something is moved the balance is upset and the whole network is affected. The notion of community is important here, for if the balance is disturbed at one point, everyone will be affected. It is therefore the responsibility of all to re-establish the lost harmony, and to prevent further misfortune from the ancestors. This is done by the whole community appeasing the ancestors, through ceremonies and offerings. This re-establishes the law and harmony, for which the ancestors are believed to be responsible (Triebel 2002: 189).

2.2.3.4 Giving the living welfare as well as wrath

"Ancestors possess powers which can cause or prevent misfortune" (Uchendu 1976: 292). The main function of the ancestors as it relates to the community is that of the power they are believed to be able to wield. This power can be used to reward the obedient communities, and to bring wrath to those that are unbalanced. Although giving wrath may seem destructive, it is important to note that it is commonly believed that the ancestors are still alive, present in the life of the individual and community, and aware of what is going on. They are interested in the affairs of humans, and desire the well being of the community above all else. The exercise of their power in a wrathful way is to bring about well being. As Amanze (2003:44) says:

> The most significant element in their interaction with the world of the living is that they are ever concerned with the, well-being of their descendants, and any breach of traditional customs is viewed as an offence against them. They have the power of displaying their wrath upon those who break the laws of the family and neglect their ancestors.

This power causes fear and hope in the descendents. The practice of ancestor veneration is therefore to deal with the power, by appeasing or influencing the ancestors (Triebel 2002:188). This function is also present in Asian understandings of the ancestors. There too, it is believed that the soul of the dead may cause harm to the living. Actions are carried out, such as possessing charms and performing certain rituals, to protect the living (Tan 1985:84).

One final example about this important function of ancestors is given by Amanze (2003:47) where he relates the work of CR. Hopgood in his paper *Concepts of God amongst the Tonga of Northern Rhodesia* (1950). Observation of the Tonga people in Zambia confirmed this function. Ancestors are believed to be constantly involved in the life of the living, possessing considerable power both for good and ill. Most of the negative happenings, misfortune and disease are, by and large, attributed to the influence of an offended ancestral spirit. It is therefore important to make offerings quickly to appease the ancestors, and to remain on their good side in the future.

2.2.3.5 Ancestors as senior elders

A little excursion needs to be made here, to add the function of Senior Elder to the roles of ancestors. This is very closely linked to both their actions as giving welfare and wrath, and also to their position in the spiritual hierarchy between mankind and the gods. If the power and position of ancestors is given to them by their descendants, why then is it possible, and allowed for them to give well-being or harmful wrath to the living? What would cause the ancestors to do such things? This seems to be explained through the notion and function of senior elder.

My main reason for adding the function of senior elder comes from the work of Igor Kopytoff. In his 1971 article, *Ancestors as elders in Africa*, he argued that within the holistic worldview of Africans there was not a significant distinction between the ancestral elders and the elders still living. Using linguistic studies, he showed that the Bantu term for ancestors is the same term used for living elders. He classified the ritual sacrifices made to the ancestors as gift exchange, and said that there was no "supernatural"

element in the ancestor rites. The distinction between living and dead lawmakers and the supernatural elements were all additions brought into the discussion by Western thinking. The functions of the ancestors are therefore the same as that of elders. Being senior elders, they are responsible for the well-being of the community, "always watching to see that the living preserve what their forefathers established" (McCall 1998: 256).

Those who are practising ancestor worship or veneration believe that ancestors are the guarantee of a good life. Their receiving of offerings shows that they are remembered in order that they may protect life, happiness, and well-being. If misfortune, accidents, illness occur, they have to be called on and be given offerings in order to take away the troubles. The fear of ancestors, who being neglected, will bring misfortunes or even destroy life, is a mature point in traditional religion. So ancestor worship is really the heart of traditional religions.

2.2.4 The relationship between ancestors and others

As noted above, especially in the understanding of the function of ancestors, it clearly shows that most people who have ancestral beliefs think that ancestors are the guarantee of the continuation of life. Life and the force of life (or the "stream of life") is handed over to us by the ancestors. The relationships between the different parties therefore need to be good so that life may continue.

Breure (1999:63-66) looks at three interesting relationships involving ancestors. His reflections help us to understand the function and identity of ancestors.

2.2.4.1 The ancestors and the living

There is an ambivalent relationship between the living and the dead. Wherever you go, the spirit world is evident – pervading the whole of human life, pressing in to their folklore, social relations and vocabulary. It forms an integral part of the whole existence of African communities. This relationship is a mutually dependent one – the ancestors need the living to remember and worship them and the living need the ancestors as moral exemplaries and powerful benefactors. Communion occurs between the departed and the living relatives, yet it is not full communion. There is a sense of separation because death has come between them, though they are still alive and part of the community (seen specifically in the term "living dead").

This ambivalence emanates from the need for balance. The spirit world must not be allowed to get either too close to or too far from the human world. The ancestors are wanted and not wanted (Mbiti 1971:134). If they are too far away, forgotten or neglected, then the spirits are weak and unable to bring well-being. If they are too close, they begin meddling in the affairs of the community and disrupting the harmony. The whole of life is under the pressure of maintaining the balance with the spirit world.

Breure (1999:37-38) gives two quotes which highlight and explain the relationship between these two parties: (1) A tribesman: "I loved them because of their provision, and I also feared them because they might take their things"; (2) Taylor: [The relation-

ship is a] "strangely mingled sentiment of awe, anxiety and affection which the living feel towards the ancestors."

2.2.4.2   The ancestors and God

The relationship between humans and God in many African cultures is fascinating. At first glance God does not seem important at all. There is an idea of a Supreme Being, but it is very vague. Rituals and myths are few and far between. God is a "retired God" (Hammond-Tooke 1981:23). Yet, in this ambivalent relationship too, to exclude God is unthinkable. God's presence is indeed not very prominent, yet God is the one who is holding everything in place.

The African understanding holds that God is primarily the Creator-God. This is similar to the thinking of deists – God created, and then withdrew. There are memories and beings watching over creation, but the Creator-God has withdrawn. Today man cannot understand God. To say that one understands God is an expression of disrespect, as God is too big to be understood. The living cannot live with God. The ancestors therefore are needed to serve as intermediaries between the living and God.

2.2.4.3   A communicating relationship

These relationships are constituted through communication. The ancestors speak with the living through dreams, visions, nature and persons. At times they can be seen, particularly when they appear in dreams. At times only their presence is felt. Often the communication is facilitated by a mediator (diviner, witchdoctor, priest, shaman), and in many traditions this position is a very powerful one, enabling the living to consult with the ancestors.

Sacrifices are important tools of communication; at many occasions an animal is slaughtered. As a rule it goes with prayers and invocations. Communication takes place on set days, as well as spontaneously, especially in times of trouble. "There is in short no place and occasion when African peoples may not perform acts of worship or reaching into the spiritual realm, through offerings, sacrifices, prayers or invocations" (Mbiti 1971:93).

We have thus far in the description of ancestor worship and the ancestors examined their identity and function, and relationships between them and the living. This acknowledges that the ancestors play a very important role in their societies as a living part of the community, and yet also being given powers the same as the Supreme Being by the descendants. They regarded to be sources well-being as well as wrath, and are remembered through various rites. Here the considerable question arises: Why then is ancestor worship still prevalent in the world? Why too, is its occurrence flourishing rather than dying?

2.2.5   Their prevalent abodes

As seen in the discussion of the living dead, it is generally agreed that the spirits of those classified as "dead" are not confined to any locality. Being spiritual in nature, it

follows that they are not confined to the physical world, or to our understanding of space and movement. Their prevalent abodes can range from the grave, areas in nature, areas of human habitation, to even the bodies of human beings (what we call possession). They are also able to assume the shapes of animals and appear to humans. Snakes are believed to be the most common form taken (Amanze 2003:44).

Obviously this understanding of the abode of the spirits differs according to culture. The Ancient Near East had "שְׁאוֹל"(*Sheol*), the place of the dead where the spirits lived. It was a cavernous space under the flat earth. Spirits were also often associated with the sky, coming from God, hence the common image of angels (messengers, spirits) having wings – so they could fly to God. In East Asia, ancestral spirits are believed to reside in three areas: some ascend to heaven, others remain in the grave to receive the sacrifices, and yet others stay with the spirit of the ancestral shrine placed in the temple or the home (Tan 1985:79). It has been proposed that in African thought the living world of the ancestors is associated with the ideas of repose, tranquility, and peace, giving a notion of perfection. This idyllic place is so because of the nature of its inhabitants, the ancestors (Zahan 1979:49).

2.3 WHY ANCESTOR WORSHIP HAS NOT DISSIPATED?

The answers to this question are complicated and diverse. Ancestor worship is closely linked to the descendants' worldview. The worldview involved has been studied by scholars from various disciplines and described in various socio-anthropological and religious-phenomenological categories. It is not a set of ideas and beliefs that modernisation, cultural relativity or missions can easily change. This is because it is linked intricately to the afterlife, the soul, and to a society's governance, and regulation of inheritance and succession. The functions of ancestor worship include supporting social control, upholding the elder system and to foster conservative and traditionalist attitudes. It is not in competition with other worldviews, but it is involved with other religions through syncretism. In Japan ancestor worship is found to be combined with the practice of Buddhism, and ancestral rites compose a major part of the practice of Confucianism in Korea. As we have seen through the African thoughts above, it is linked there with traditional beliefs.

With these reasons and facts, one has to ask what the over-arching motivations of ancestor worship are that allow it to flourish even in plural and modernised societies? I have identified and highlighted three motivations.

2.3.1 Socio-anthropological motivation

As noted in the first point of this chapter, ancestor worship is widespread in the world today. There are still many areas in the world where ancestor worship is practised periodically for the good preservation of their societies, from modernised nations as well as developing ones. The primary reasons for this are socio-anthropological, linked not so much with religious or political perspectives, but having a social and cultural function.

The main function has to do with the relationship between the ancestors and the living family. This relationship will uphold the family, clan, tribe and even nation and this is a primary motivation for the continuance of ancestor worship. Various scholars have made the following observations:

> It is important to understand this interdependence, this mutual relationship of living people and ancestors. This is the only way to understand the subject of ancestor veneration or ancestor cult.
>
> (Triebel 2002:188)
>
> It is an intense relationship between the living and the dead, a mutual relationship where both are dependent on each other. In the traditional Shona view, "community" refers to both the living and the dead of all ages.
>
> (Gundani 1995:35)
>
> Among Africans the living and the living-dead live in a symbiotic relationship. There is no iron curtain that separates their existence. Consequently, they are interdependent and capable of communicating with one another. The well-being of the living is dependent on the goodwill of the living-dead and of those yet to be born.
>
> (Amanze 2003:46)

To see this motivation in practice, let us think of the case in Korea, Africa and Japan. In the case of Korea, the foundation of Korean society is the family, and "filial piety" is the principle of all actions in the family. This filial piety serves as the bond of unity, and for upholding conservative and traditional roles and views. Ancestor worship is of primary importance in that it nourishes filial piety and guarantees family unity and continuity. By encouraging and continuing ancestor worship in Korea, one is actually promoting harmony and unity, and providing a strong reinforcement of group solidarity. Various feast days, and annual celebrations (such as Chu'suk) involves trips to the shrines and graves, and end with meals in which all share the food and drink provided for the occasion. In these instances it is easy to see how ancestor cult is a wonderful means of bringing people together to experience togetherness, communion and fellowship. Looking at the Western world, it also serves as a check against excessive competition and exaggerated individualism.

The social anthropologist, Meyer Fortes made a simple comparison between the ancestor worship practised in pre-literate African societies, and the societies of China and Japan. In Africa, a primary motivation again is that of the importance of family in the greater social structure. This is shown in the South African understanding of Ubuntu, as well as captured in the famous sentence of John Mbiti (1969a:108): "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am." Not the individual but the community is important. "Man is family" is an African saying. Without community no human being can exist, and it is the community that gives meaning and continuance to the individual.

Linked to this community view is the idea of the "stream of life". One has life by being connected to a greater stream – that of the family and community. This stream reaches back right through the elders, ancestors, to the Supreme Being. One has to take care that the stream of life will not be interrupted, an in many instances the teachings of the community highlight that fact that the ancestors as the earliest remembered people, are at the spring of the stream of life (Sundermeier 1988:23). To take care of this stream, one has to remember the ancestors; they are the foundation, the reason

for our being. This worldview, linked to the family structure again, allows one to understand the present time through the ancestors, and gives a very important socio-anthropological motivation to the continuance of ancestor worship.

In the third geographical area of my study, namely, Japan, the notion of family is again the primary motivation here. This is very similar to their neighbours in China as shown by Hwang (1975:50):

> The teaching of filial piety is the backbone of the Chinese ethical system and religious thinking. Consequently, ancestor cult is a very important tool of the Chinese educational system. It helps the Chinese to live the teaching of filial piety when they are alive, mourn for them when they die, and continue to honour them when they are gone.

In all these contexts, a primary motivation is that of the family, a socio-anthropological motivation. Even in the context of life in the real world, the practice of ancestor worship has the "family" as its core. We now move to the next motivation for the continuance of ancestor worship, that of religious phenomenal reasons.

2.3.2 Religious-phenomenal motivation

As mentioned already, certain people in societies where ancestor worship is flourishing might have practised ancestor cult for social interdependent relationship. But this reason surely falls short of explaining every form of the cult. We recognise the inadequacy of this as the only explanation because we have no way to explain ancestral sacrifices offered to more distant ancestors, ancestors who have no emotional ties with the one offering them and who left no inheritance to them either.

So, it is plausible to think that there is another reason to practise ancestor worship, that is to say religious-phenomenal motivation. One of the motivational factors here is that of fear. It will be interesting to study how fear is a motivating force for much of human behaviour, and especially how it is used in most religions, even Christianity. It is not surprising that it also enters into the practice of ancestor cult. The fear of death, the unknown, makes them dependent upon the spirits (Anderson 1993:27). Scholars who have studied the practices closely observe that rituals are maintained out of fear that if the living fails to perform the required duties and rituals, the deceased ancestors may inflict trouble and misfortune on their descendants.

Some writers would, however, argue solely for a sociological motivation for ancestor worship, saying that ancestor worship is not a religion. Pyun (1988) is of this thought, saying that it may not be called a religion, because according to them ancestor worship springs from ethical rather than religious considerations and Anh (1969: 25) has the same view of its religious status, because it does not have a founder, a written creed or a clergy. Others argue that it is not a religion because it obviously co-exists with other religions (I have often mentioned how in Korea it is linked to Confucianism, in Africa with traditional beliefs, and in Japan with Buddhism).

However, it is noticeable that ancestor worship co-exists with these other religions because of the syncretistic relation and link to things religious. From an anthropological point of view, ancestor worship is very much a religion. Coming back to the religious motivation of fear, Yamaguchi (1985:47-52) asserts that fear of the dead grounded on

religious background as at least one of the major motivations. He maintains that ancestor worship is used as an individual and communal tool to relieve personal anxiety about the misfortune of illness, death, infertility, and the like.

Wallace (1966:52-87) differs from Ahn, and meticulously points out that ancestor worship fits into the category of religious behaviour: it is linked to the supernatural, and spiritual world; it has a central place of worship (the home of the eldest son); has a leader/clergy (the oldest surviving male in the extended family); involves a congregational gathering (family gatherings on specific death anniversaries); uses prayers, ritual sacrifices and worship; and finally in its traditional forms, there is even a holy book – the genealogy book – used to guide the family in worship. For centuries in Asia, (and we may add Africa), while the fortunes of imported religions like Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism rose and fell, the Cult of the Ancestors was there to explain this life and the afterlife. It represents a religion in every way (Reimer 1975:165).

2.3.3 Socio-political interwoven motivation

As with much of life, often motivating factors are as a result of a combination of factors. Apart from a solely socio-anthropological basis in the link of the family, or a purely religious motivation fuelled by belief and faith duty, there is a third motivation, one that seems an interweaving of the two. I have called this the socio-political motivation.

Central to this motivation is the thought that most of culture and religion is a creation of society. We all have different cultures, and these cultures are created by us and our stories. Even our religious beliefs are highly influenced by our societies and stories. Bediako (1990:38), and as we shall see soon, Mbiti too, believes that the ancestors are "made" by the community. They belong to the category of myth, "ancestors being the product of the myth-making imagination of the community" (Bediako 1990:39). The influence and power of the ancestors we not from the ancestors themselves, but it is the influence and power of myth. After having their function as upholders of law and exemplary senior elders Bediako (1990:38) asks a telling question: "are not ancestors in effect a projection into the transcendent realm of the social values and spiritual expectations of the living community?"

If this is the case then ancestors have no independent existence from the community that produces them. However, they give the community the possibility to validate, and to place in the spiritual dimension source of authority and power in the community. As a spiritual source of authority and power, religious comparisons and beliefs are made, and this position is also important politically for the social harmony in which life and continuity of the community are believed to depend.

Probably the work that best shows this interwoven motivation is that of Fortes. In research on the Tallensi tribe of Ghana, Fortes says that it will be difficult to understand the religious beliefs without considering the social structure of the tribe. In his 1960 presentation *Some Reflections on Ancestor Worship in Africa,* he pointed out that ancestor worship is one of the prominent characteristics of religious systems in Africa, having broadly and deeply influenced the entire social life of the Tallensi tribe. He also

emphasised that in societies where ancestor worship flourishes; this belief is rooted in the religious systems as well as in the social relationships like the family, the clan, and adoption of heirs.

He proposed the following definition to show the interwoven motivation that links ancestor worship and social structure (Ma 2004:55):

> Ancestor worship consists of a system of religious beliefs and rituals, and these beliefs and rituals correspond to the behavioural norms of society … only when power and obligation complement each other can authority be maintained. In such societies authority and power are created through social relationships derived from kinship or adoptive relationships, and they are also put into practice through these relationships ... in this sense ancestors symbolize the unending continuity of social structure.

In conclusion, we found that in societies where ancestor worship flourishes, there are two main elements that prolong this growth and belief in ancestor worship: This is the social structural function (rooted in such social relationships as the family, clans and nation) and the religious phenomenon seen in individual religiosity. These motivations are interwoven closely in their circumstance and there is an inextricable relationship between the two positions examined above. Accordingly, the living's feeling towards the ancestors are ambivalent. They are loved and feared, respected and dreaded. In addition, at least Fortes' view that "ancestors symbolise the unending continuity of social structure" is particularly significant (Ma 2004:56).

To say it clearly, the idea of ancestors and the worship of ancestors as social function and religious phenomenon constitute an important base for the perpetuation of social structures through the clan in Africa, Korea and Japan. These are the main factors which explain the perpetuation of its practice in the modern world.

2.4   CONCLUSION

To conclude this initial description of ancestor worship, the most important attribute of the ancestors and their worship is the final point that is highlighted by the work of Mbiti and Bediako, and linked to the socio-political interwoven motivation. It is, as seen above, according to Bediako, that the ancestors are "made" by the community, "ancestors being the product of the myth-making imagination of the community" (Bediako 1990:38-39). Each of us has a peculiar culture. Culture is a man-made construct, and just as this is, so too are the ceremonies associated with the culture, and the beliefs therein. The influence and power of the ancestors are not inherent in themselves, but are accorded to them by the living descendents on earth.

When discussing ancestors Mbiti agrees with this: "Most, if not all, of these attributive deities are the creation of man's imagination" (1990:76). As with all study of non-verifiable subjects, the problem is that the ancestors cannot be examined and proven, but nevertheless, they are real for the cultures and people concerned. To the people concerned they are reality and need to be treated as such when asking why ancestor worship is still continuing in this modern time.

In the following chapters of my thesis I will therefore examine further how ancestor worship as a creation of man's imagination has been syncretised with other religions, and adapted to and informed the cultures in Africa, Korea and Japan.