

## Chapter 3

# THE CHALLENGE OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN AFRICA

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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 communities have assumed.

For at least three decades, the notion and culture of ancestor worship has been assimilated into Christianity in African Churches in South Africa, in both rural and urban areas. Studies such as Manona (1981:34) and Pauw (1974:104), which refer to a resurgence in ancestor worship among Xhosa Christians in South Africa, support this. This appears to be the case in most countries in Africa, irrespective of the effects of urbanisation and Westernisation of African culture (Coertze 2004:347). Interestingly enough, some African scholars themselves advocated the reinstatement of ancestor worship while others attempted to establish a form of Africanised Christianity by referring to Christ as the Supreme Ancestor in their churches.

This chapter will attempt to answer the following questions:

- How do African churches cope with ancestor veneration?
- What is the nature of ancestor worship in Africa?
- How is ancestor worship articulated within contemporary African Ancestral Theology?

Later, this will be compared to Biblical and theological viewpoints set out in Chapters 6 and 7.

### 3.2 THE CURRENT SOUTH AFRICAN SCENARIO

#### 3.2.1 The current status of ancestor worship in South Africa

In order to gain a clearer understanding of the current status and nature of Christianity in South Africa, one needs to consider *inter alia* the status of ancestor worship in South Africa. The following section will attempt to provide a brief background of the nature of this phenomenon in modern South Africa.

### **3.2.1.1 Similarities in social structures in Black South African ethnic groups**

Hammond-Tooke (1994:2-3) describes the constitution of the Black South African society as consisting of four major groups based on language and culture, namely the Nguni, the Sotho, the Venda and Tsonga. Hammond-Tooke further identifies sub-groupings within each of these four major groups, e.g. the Zulu, Pondo and Xhosa within the Nguni group and the Northern and Southern Sotho and Tswana within the Sotho group. It is interesting to note that although there are significant differences in terms of social organisation which have a bearing on the practise of ancestor worship between the different groups, there is also common ground in the general function and significance of ancestors. Also, the way these beliefs responded to the process of urbanisation and Christianisation is quite similar (Wanamaker 1997:284).

### **3.2.1.2 The effect of urbanisation on ancestor worship and the tribal structures of Black South Africans**

Urbanisation had a significant influence on the social structure and culture of black South Africans. Urbanisation led to the destruction of the traditional patriarchal family and clan structures which were the norm in the rural areas. Young people left their clans and families behind in search of better wages in the cities. In Black South African culture a sense of identity is inextricably intertwined with the sense of community. When these structures collapsed with urbanisation, black South Africans in the cities were forced to find another way to establish that same sense of identity and community.

Chidester (1992:13) suggests that it is entirely possible that the ancestors provided that frame of reference in a strange and alien world which seemed to be particularly hostile to anything African. One can therefore argue that ancestor worship served a unifying function and in a sense constituted a form of defiance against white oppression which frowned upon the traditional practices and marginalised Black South Africans. Hence, Chidester (1992:13) points out that ancestor worship assumed a more urgent character in the nineteenth century and served as a spiritual anchor which seemed to secure the traditions and nation itself which appeared to be threatened and destabilised under European rule.

Mayer (1980) sees ancestor worship as a particular strategy of resistance to the displacement and white domination in South Africa.

As Wanamaker (1997:284) points out, the new circumstances in which many Black South Africans found themselves soon made it evident that the traditional practices around ancestor worship had to be adapted to meet the social and economic changes with which they were faced.

Hunter (1961:486-487) predicted an inevitable decline in the practise of ancestor worship in urban areas because it would be near impossible to adhere to the traditional practices like animal sacrifice associated with it. The fact that the people did not suffer retribution from the ancestors for not practising these rituals undermined the hold it had on the people because their fear appeared unfounded.

In reality, this has not happened. Ancestor worship and the practices associated with it have proven to be more resilient and adaptable than expected. This is similar to the scenario in Japan and Korea. In these countries the age of modernisation and the scientific worldview hardly seems to be a fertile ground for mystical beliefs such as ancestor worship. However, as will be discussed in Chapters 4 (Korea) and Chapter 5 (Japan) it is clear that ancestor worship is still practised by many, although in a more modernised form which is essentially an adaptation of the traditional beliefs and practices for the modern milieu.

### 3.2.2 The current status of Christianity in SA

#### 3.2.2.1 Christianity as interloping missionary religion

Wanamaker (1997:281) points out that South Africa can be regarded as a unique cultural melting pot where fundamentally different religions such as African traditional religions and Christianity co-exist and compete to convert people to its beliefs, practices and behaviour patterns. Even among the various Christian denominations there is strong competition and proselytising.

The table below shows that almost 80% of the country is Christian.

Census 2001	South Africa Total	% Christians	% Total
Mainline Churches	14 259 664	39,9	31,8
Pentecostal/Charismatic	2 625 830	7,3	5,9
Other Churches	4 275 942	12,0	9,5
African Independent Churches	14 598 922	40,8	32,6
Total: SA Christians	35 760 358	100	79,8
Other Faiths	1 706 547		3,8
No religion/Not stated	7 352 875		16,4
Total: SA population	44 819 780		100

(Hendriks 2005:28)

Christianity has transformed the religious, political and cultural profile of the country in the last two hundred years. It is mainly as a result of this influence that there is now a Christian majority. However, this dominance is a fairly recent phenomenon. In this regard Chidester (1997:1) points out that in spite of the fact that South Africa was the most missionised region of the world in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, conversions were relatively rare in those days. The current high profile of Christian religion is a radical departure from those days. Today, most Africans claim to be at least marginally Christian. This apparent dominance of Christianity over the traditional religions is false, according to Chidester. When one looks closely at the nature of Christianity in South Africa it becomes readily apparent that African Christians have achieved a synthesis of traditional religions and Christianity.

This is supported by Salala (1998:133) who argues that many African Christians are considered to be living a double life: one which is essentially Christian and the other

which is essentially traditional. Salala argues that the underlying reason for this duality can probably be ascribed to the fact that Christianity does not address the deepest needs and fears of the African people. This is probably one of the reasons why many African Christians revert to the traditional practices associated with the traditional African religions in times of crisis.

Various scholars (e.g. Anderson 1993:29; Hammond 1986:158; Nyirongo 1997:87) agree that in times of crisis, most African Christians revert to the practices associated with ancestor veneration. Clearly then, ancestor veneration is alive and well in South Africa, in spite of the fact that the country is regarded to be 80% Christian.

### **3.2.2.2 Revival of ancestor worship**

When one considers the dominant position of Christianity in the country, it begs the question why the church has not had a much greater influence on its members with regard to ancestor worship. Interestingly enough, Manona (1981:36) points out that the church had a more pervasive influence in earlier years when most early converts lived a fairly sheltered existence in isolated mission stations. That is no longer the case today. Most church members associate freely with people of other religions and different moral convictions. Furthermore, the church seems to have shed its colonialist cloak of benefactor. The church is no longer able to provide as many material benefits as it did in the past. In addition to this, many black South Africans' perceptions of the church and the clergy were tainted by the church's perceived passivity during the Apartheid regime. As a result, many white clergymen lost credibility in the face of rising Black Theology in protest to the political unrest in the country (Manona 1981:37).

Together with the growing solidarity among black South Africans during the Apartheid regime, there emerged a new self-awareness and black identity which coincided with their antipathy towards Western missionaries. Nelson (1997:576) describes this as the emergence of pride in black culture and in being black. This revival of group identity and everything African was accompanied by a renewed interest and adherence to African culture – specifically ancestor veneration. Essentially then, this phenomenon signified a symbolic resistance to everything which represented Western (and white) culture. Resistance movements openly encouraged a return to African roots, both cultural and religious. It was essentially a desperate attempt to reclaim a sense of identity in an oppressive and alien Westernised cultural reality.

This development ran parallel with another interesting development, i.e. explosive growth of African Independent/Indigenous/Initiated Churches (AIC's). It is understandable that the AIC's benefited rather than the mainline churches.

The unprecedented growth in AIC's was predicted by Oosthuizen (1997:8) who stated that the AIC movement had grown into the most dynamic church movement in the country and that towards the start of the new century it is reasonable to expect that most black South African Christians will be members of AIC congregations. The picture has changed radically from the 1950's when most black South African Christians were active members of mainline churches. He points out that by 1980 mainline churches'

black membership had dropped a significant 52% while that of AIC's had increased to 27%. In 1991 the AIC membership figures had increased to 36% while mainline churches lost a further 41%. Statistics for 2001 are even more alarming. They indicate that AIC's now have a greater membership among Black South Africans (a whopping 40.8%) compared to the mainline churches who have a mere 39.9%.

It is clear then that the growth of AIC's cannot be attributed to political or economical factors, especially since 1994 with the advent of democracy which removed the political incentive for solidarity. It is therefore necessary to look more closely at the relationship between AIC's and traditional African cultural and religious values.

### **3.3 AIC'S AND AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION**

There is a veritable smorgasbord of denominations within the South African AIC movement, many of which consist of a single congregation. The theological tenets and doctrines are equally varied, from evangelical to syncretistic. In some groups Christian beliefs are blended with ancestor reverence while others tend to follow more animistic rituals. Interestingly enough Oosthuizen (1997) considers the distinguishing hallmark of all of these denominations to be the (Christian) sense of fellowship, sharing and brotherly love.

The places of worship range from gatherings in the open to shacks, homes and shelters made from boxes and corrugated iron. When one considers this variety one has to wonder what constitutes a denomination as an African Independent Church. In this regard Appian-Kubi (1979) defines the African Independent Church as a church which was founded by Africans for Africans in the unique African context. All of these churches have exclusively African membership and leadership.

African Independent Churches were founded by Africans for Africans in our special African situations. They have all African membership as well as all African leadership. Some were founded by Africans in reaction to some feature of the Christianity of missionary societies; most were founded among those people who had known Christianity the longest.

(Appian-Kubi 1979:117)

Oosthuizen (1999:158) on the other hand, distinguishes between "independent" and "indigenous" strands of the AIC movement of South Africa. Oosthuizen regards churches which broke away from Western mainline churches as "independent" and churches which were instituted by Africans with no ties to Western missions as essentially "indigenous". Furthermore, as Oosthuizen points out, these independent churches retained some elements of the original religion from which they broke away; the indigenous churches constitute a complete departure from anything Christian in favour of traditional African religions. For the purposes of this chapter, indigenous churches according to Oosthuizen's definition are included in the notion of what constitutes AIC's.

#### **3.3.1 Three types of African Indigenous Churches**

In his history of independent and indigenous churches in South Africa, Oosthuizen (1997:9) identifies three broad categories of AIC's, namely Ethiopian, Zionist and Apostolic in origin.

The Ethiopian cluster of churches was inspired by similar churches in the United States at the turn of the century, especially the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The South African Ethiopian churches took a stand against what they perceived as ecclesiastical colonialism. As a result, they made a significant contribution to the establishment of the African liberation movement in response to the political oppression at the time. The Ethiopian cluster is the smallest and has the closest links to the tenets of mainline religions.

Zionist churches on the other hand emerged from contact with the Christian Catholic Church which was based in Zion City, Illinois. John Alexander Dowie established Zion City as a Christian “restorationist” community where faith healing was practised.

Apostolic AIC’s were established in South Africa by the efforts of John Lake and Thomas Hezmalhalch of the Apostolic Faith Church in the USA. When they arrived in South Africa in 1908 they brought with them the emphasis on glossolalia. The Pentecostal strand of Christianity was exemplified by the Azusa Street Mission of Los Angeles.

Some of the churches that resulted embraced the concept of a Zion City. This is evidenced by the fact that “Zion” appears in 80 per cent of AIC names; most of the churches influenced by the AFM added “Zion” and “of South Africa” to their names.

Both the Zionist and Apostolic movements, unlike the Ethiopian churches, have assimilated more of traditional African culture and religion. A few AIC’s chose not to be identified by the Zionist label, because many Zionist churches have become Africanised to the extent that they bear no relation or resemblance to anything Christian in theological terms.

This is not unlike Olupona (2003)’s description of AIC’s. According to him, those who convert to Christianity in Africa retain significant aspects of their indigenous culture. He likens this phenomenon to the churches in Latin America. In both cases, the first mission converts were marginalised members of the community. Colonialism became the catalyst which catapulted these individuals into elite status. The social dominance of these new Christian elites led the emergence of charismatic leaders who claimed that they had been called by God to establish authentically African churches. This is evident in AIC’s in South Africa today, for example the Zion Christian Church (ZCC).

### **3.3.2 Rapid growing**

One of the primary factors influencing the rapid development of AIC’s in South Africa is the fact that these churches have an intrinsic kinship with African traditional religiosity and African self-awareness. For decades African religiosity have been regarded as been equivalent to irrational beliefs in magic, fetishes, spirits, ancestors and other indigenous values. In reality, the indigenous values and socio-moral precepts have been grossly misunderstood and underestimated. These churches do in fact have a very positive attitude towards traditional cultural values and religion as manifestations of a gestalt of the African persona (Oosthuizen 1997:9; Theron 1996:26).

These traditional customs and rites have been assimilated into the customs and rites of the AIC's. Theron (1996:26) points that following are considered manifestations of divine guidance: that the faithful possess the Holy Spirit, exorcism of demonic forces, healing practices and the ability to interpret dreams. Water baptism resembles traditional ritual cleansing rites and is considered to strengthen the bonds of fellowship among the congregation members. It is also regarded as a form of protection for faithful followers. These Africanised concepts, customs and rites have resulted in a Christianity with a distinctive African fingerprint (Daneel 1971:462).

The cultural notion of "*ubuntu*" which was the most defining feature of ATR is entrenched in the strong sense of fellowship, sharing and caring which is one of the essential characteristics of AIC's today. This sense of community and brotherhood is probably one of the main factors leading to the significant decline in numbers of the mainline churches in favour of AIC's (Beattie 1980:23). This sense of *ubuntu* and brotherhood within the AIC's is one of the reasons why ancestor veneration remains a significant element in these churches.

### **3.3.3 African Indigenous Churches and the ancestors<sup>14</sup>**

It is imperative to consider the theological implications of the relative ease with which AIC's have managed to assimilate and Christianise beliefs and customs related to ancestor veneration.

The traditional notion of ancestor veneration has been remoulded by AIC's. An example of this development has been pointed out by various scholars (Pauw 1975:147; Taylor 1963:163; Nxumalo 1981:67; Staples 1981:314) namely that these churches have managed to overcome the fear and dread of ancestors by inculcating the notion of love. Today the ancestors are regarded with love and positive sentiments. Many consider them to be mediators between their descendants and God.

Daneel's study (1973:64-69) distinguishes between the Ethiopian and Spirit-type churches and points out that both groups officially oppose the ancestor cult but are accommodating towards members who practise the traditional rites. He points out that their approach to funeral rites is similar to that of the Dutch Reformed Church in that the deceased are not addressed (1973:64). In both cases, the sermon at the funeral is for the benefit of the living family members and is intended to comfort them and reassure them of God's love. The symbolic practices on the other hand bear a closer resemblance to those used in the Roman Catholic Church. Theron (1996:41) points out that the Spirit churches are more willing to introduce rites which replace traditional ones while the Ethiopian churches are tolerant towards members who adhere to the traditional practices.

The ZCC in South Africa accommodates ancestor worship. Lukhaimane (1991:227) points out that the ZCC does not impose restrictions on members when it comes to ma-

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<sup>14</sup> For the purpose of this study, it is not necessary to discuss other church denominations, such as African pentecostal, charismatic churches and mainline mission churches since they refrain from practices associated with the ancestor cult.

king sacrifices to ancestors. Interestingly enough, Daneel (according to Theron 1996: 41) did not find this to be the case with the ZCC in Zimbabwe.

This blended form of religion which underlies the theological paradigm of AIC's can be largely ascribed to the fact that the new African leaders considered indigenous traditions as the primary source of truth and authority. Olupona (2003:81) points out that fundamental traditional values became the touchstone for the development of the AIC worship and theology. They retained aspects of tradition and indigenous beliefs. Christian notions of divine leadership, the Holy Spirit, and faith healing are elements of Christianity which were integrated into the African customs and values related to community, ancestor worship and revelation. This synthesis between Christianity and traditional African beliefs led to a pluralist kind of religion which allows individuals to participate in their own way.

There are numerous examples of this syncretised form of religion. For example, African hymns contain traditional values and maxims. Special Africanised church services were created to supplement traditional European liturgies. This process was however, unstructured and unco-ordinated. As a result, the African Independent Church movement should not be thought of as being homogeneous. This was helped on by the relative isolation of the AIC's from other African Churches.

Theron's study (1996:42-43) provides a valuable insight into the manner in which AIC's have accommodated ancestral beliefs into Christianity. He mentions the traditional "bringing home" or induction ceremony (*kugadzira*) and says that it has been replaced with a condolence ceremony (*runyaradzo*) which is more Christian in nature. In many of these Christianised ceremonies the mediatory nature of the ancestors is acknowledged. Unlike the traditional ceremony which takes place after a protracted period since the death of the family member the Christianised ceremony takes place shortly after the death of the family member (Also Daneel 1974:119).

Daneel (1974) further argues that the significance or meaning of the ceremony has changed. In the traditional ceremony the purpose was to celebrate the incorporation of the deceased into the ancestral hierarchy, while the condolence ceremony is aimed at accompanying the deceased to heaven. The *runyaradzo* ceremony is believed to assist the spirit to complete its journey to heaven and accommodate it in the angelic hierarchy (Daneel 1974:118). This ceremony is believed to enable the spirit of the deceased to function as an intermediary and intercessor between the living and God.

Traditionally, the family was responsible for taking care of the deceased ancestor. This responsibility now falls to the relevant church group. Daneel (1973:66) points out that the church officials fulfil a priestly function in this regard. In the new Christianised ceremony, neither the deceased nor the ancestors are invoked. This is because this would be considered a form of veneration which would be unscriptural. During the ceremony, the life of the deceased is described as an example for his descendants to emulate. The Biblical perspective on this matter will be discussed later (Theron 1996:42).

Traditionally, ancestors were believed to be protectors of their descendants. Nowadays, the deceased are believed to be with God and their function is to intercede with



God on behalf of their descendants. Daneel (1974) argues that they do still retain an element of their original protective function. It is believed that they are able to cause afflictions by asking God to punish the disobedient descendants. The deceased are believed to have the function of preparing a place in heaven for the living. Daneel (1974: 119) points out that these functions of Christian ancestors are not restricted to the kinship group, but extend to all Christian relations in Christ, i.e. all members of the Christian congregation (The Biblical perspective on whether or not it is possible for the dead to contact the living and influence their lives will be discussed in Chapter 6).

Dreams are traditionally considered to be the medium of communication used by the ancestors to convey a message to the living. In his discussion Theron (1996:42) supports Daneel's argument that dreams continue to play an important role in AIC's. However, Daneel (1974:334-336) points out that one must distinguish between dreams which originate from the Holy Spirit, angels (*angerozi*), and the ancestral spirit (*midzimu*). Christians should not obey requests from ancestral spirits since they are evil spirits who have not acquired a place in heaven. The origin of the message is likely to be demonic. If the Holy Spirit or angels were to communicate a message in a dream it would be to persevere in their faith and to attend Church services for guidance from God (Daneel 1974:334).

These churches simply adapted the traditional belief in dreams as the means of communication to a Christian context. In reality though one has to question whether according to these beliefs the divine message which is so eloquently contained in the Bible says enough about salvation or not (Theron 1996:42).

It is evident that AIC's accommodate ancestor worship to a certain extent. The traditional rites and customs are still significant but the manifestations of these and the associated meanings have changed and continue to change. This differs from church to church as Kohlbrunner (1975:120) points out.

### **3.4 AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS AND ANCESTOR WORSHIP<sup>15</sup>**

In order to consider the influence of African Traditional Religion on ancestor worship studies of respected scholars in the field, notably those of PF Theron (1996), GC Oosthuizen (1999) and V Mulago (1991) have been consulted.

Theron (1996:11) argues that traditional religion and worldviews of Africa continue to influence the life of Africans in spite of modernisation and urbanisation. Even today African Christians are still influenced by the traditional worldview, even though this may be subtle and unconscious. He argues that although many African Christians do not offer sacrifices or pray to the ancestors, many of them still believe that the ancestors are able to influence their lives. From this it is evident that it is not necessarily the obvious

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<sup>15</sup> Wanamaker (1997:283) cautions against the tendency of generalising about ATR. He points out that the ethnic groups and cultures in sub-Saharan Africa are diverse and varied. There are however, some similarities and a measure of cultural uniformity in Africa which tends to lend itself to generalisations about African traditional worldviews and religions. This must, however be done with caution.

outward manifestation of a religion that makes a lasting impression but the essence of it. One then has to explore which factors in ATR have influenced ancestor veneration.

Therefore, instead of gathering information related to ancestor worship in South Africa, this study will attempt to extrapolate a penetrating understanding of ancestor worship in Africa and its articulation with the African worldview. This is crucial since it is cosmology that underlies the African way of thinking and living.

### **3.4.1 The nature of African cosmology: power and force**

Theron points out that numerous scholars have attempted to define African cosmology in one word. The most apt descriptor of the African cosmology is likely in terms of power or force (*matla* in Sotho and *amandla* in Zulu), or more technically *dynamism* (from the Greek word *dynamis*, “power”). This is because the metaphysical or magical forces are considered to be behind everything. This impersonal force or “*mana*” as described by Codrington (Oosthuizen 1977:249) is considered to be useful to strengthen life. Therefore, if the power of this force decreases it can be detrimental. Van Rheenen (1991:208) and Gehman (1989:68) confirmed this notion and stated that this mystical power which permeates the universe is a common tenet in Africa.

As a result, Mbiti (1969b:167) acknowledges that “the whole psychic atmosphere of African village life is filled with belief in this magic power. African peoples know that the universe has a power, or force or whatever else one may call it.” Gehman (2005:85) concurs that magic powers such as sorcery, magic and witchcraft affect everyone in African society.

When exploring the nature of such magic powers, Gehman (2005:87) defines magic as an essentially ritual act, performance or activity which is believed to manipulate natural phenomena or external and impersonal magic forces which are beyond the ordinary human sphere influence, but may influence the human fate nonetheless. Therefore the underlying assumption here is that the impersonal force may be utilised for the benefit or detriment of mankind. Gehman (2005:87) further asserts that it would be flawed reasoning to assume that the belief in such forces is as a result of ignorance of cause and effect. He argues that peoples who believe in this type of magical cause and effect relationship have a solid understanding of natural laws of cause and effect but have extended it to find plausible explanations for this. Therefore, they would seek to understand why one negative event will occur in the lives on some individuals while others escape relatively unscathed.

There are numerous facets to the belief in magic. Firstly, Gehman (2005:88) identifies the belief in the existence of magic powers. Secondly, he identifies the means by which these powers may be accessed i.e. by means of ceremonies, rites, spells, charms, etc. Thirdly, Gehman identifies the specialist who may have inherited his abilities from the ancestors or is believed to have purchased it for personal advantage.

In his exposition of the nature of magic, Gehman mentions the one big distinction between magic and religion. Religion, Gehman (2005: 88) argues, adopts a submissive attitude to supernatural beings, whereas magic seeks to exercise control over super-

natural forces for man's own purposes. This view concurs with that of Idowu (1973) who defined magic as an attempt by man to tap into and control the supernatural resources in the universe for his own advantage. Idowu further distinguishes this from religion which he says is essentially a reciprocal relationship in which man depends of the supernatural power (deity) for personal fulfilment with the intrinsic belief that the transcendental being in whom he depends is capable of fulfilling these needs. As a result, according to Idowu, religion implies a relationship of submission, trust and dependence.

In his exposition of magic, Gehman explores phenomena such as divination, sorcery, witchcraft, spells and omens. In terms of divination, Gehman (2005:92) argues that divination is based on the notion that the universe is essentially a system of interrelated parts in which a disruption or event in one aspect or sphere would have a concurrent reaction in another. This makes the notion of divination plausible. Gehman thus distinguishes between different accepted methods of divination in such cultures. He distinguishes between divination through interpretation which a specialist is believed to have the ability to interpret omens; and divination through inspiration which implies that divinatory ability is ascribed to the inspirations received from an external supernatural entity or force.

Witchcraft and sorcery are closely related. The distinction between witchcraft and sorcery is very subtle and generally hinges on the methodology used but the penultimate outcome is generally the same. Gehman (2005:94) refers to Evans-Pritchard's distinction between a witch and a sorcerer which holds that a witch uses hereditary psychophysical powers to attain their purposes while a sorcerer resorts to magic and derives power from medicine and spells. This implies that the witch relies on an innate inherent psychic ability as an individual and thus implies that witchcraft is a psychic act.

Sorcery on the other hand, is generally not a threat to society as a whole because their energies are usually directed against an individual; whereas a witch performs her work because of her very nature. Belief in the powers of witchcraft and sorcery is the source of deep-seated fears and superstitions and generally breed suspicion. Africans generally seek the counsel of specialists such as medicine men when this suspicion comes to the fore.

Medicine men and other traditional specialists are believed to be equipped to tackle the problems. They are believed to have the ability to help individuals to resist the attacks from witches. Numerous terms have been used to refer to these individuals such as witch doctor, medicine man or witchfinder. The term "witch doctor" is generally avoided because it has numerous negative connotations attached to it. Africans generally prefer to use the term "medicine man" to convey the notion that this is an individual who is more than a herbalist and is endowed with psychic powers from the ancestors to protect them from the effects of witchcraft.

Given these beliefs, it is understandable that many of the rituals were introduced specifically to control and increase this power as Parrinder (1962:21) argues. It is not always easy to decide whether certain symbolic acts are ritually or magically intended. Surely, even the actors would not know.

This is true for ancestor worship too since this supernatural force is believed to underlie all human existence and activity. Witchdoctors are instrumental in broking this spiritual power between the living and their ancestors. There is a clearly dynamic (perhaps even pantheistic) undertone in these beliefs.

This is supported by Theron (1996:12) who mentions that most Africans believe that the whole cosmos is filled with spirits (i.e. animism, from the Latin *anima*). These spirits of nature are believed to reside in forests, rivers, mountains, hills etc. This belief offers a plausible explanation for natural phenomena. Africans believe that spirits of affliction are utilised by some persons to harm others. This does not mean that these spirits constitute a group of their own. It is believed that they may be ancestor spirits or spirits of nature. Given these precepts it may be accepted that this form of spiritualism underlies ancestor worship in Africa.

This is supported by Crafford (1996:6) who points out that ancestral spirits play a pivotal role in tribal culture in the sense that they preserve the cultural heritage and are able to bestow prosperity or mete out punishment to the living. He also points out that pestilential spirits are believed to be wandering ancestral or evil spirits which can be harnessed by sorcerers (or witchdoctors) to plague others. This permeates the dread and fear of sorcery and fear of the influence of evil spirits.

### **3.4.2 God as a Supreme Being**

Theron (1996:3) describes the hierarchical structure of the African cosmos. In this hierarchy, God is the Supreme Being and Creator who stands at the apex. He is followed by lesser divinities, spirits and ancestor spirits. Humans are placed below these. This structure is then repeated in the kin structures where position and status in the kin structure is largely determined by age and seniority. In this hierarchy or order of the world, balance and harmony must be maintained.

Although most Africans believe in God as a Supreme Being this concept and identity of the Supreme Being is fairly nebulous. He is not worshipped directly or addressed directly in prayer. Instead prayers are addressed to the ancestors who are considered the intercessors with the Supreme Being. Theron (1996:6-7) points out that he is addressed through the ancestral spirits because most Africans believe that he cannot be addressed directly.

This is supported by Oosthuizen (1991:40) who likens the approach of the Divine Being to that of approaching a supreme chief. It would be as difficult to make contact with the Divine as it is for an ordinary person to contact a chief. Africans believe that the Divine presence is too much for the human to bear. This is why Africans approach the Divine through the intercession of the ancestors. This is also in line with traditional hierarchical structures.

#### **3.4.2.1 Humanity and involvement in communal life**

The sense of community and unity is a critical concept in African cosmology. This underlies the African worldview. Mulago (1991:120-121) considers this "vital unity" to be

relatedness in being and life which is fundamental to the life of each person with descendants and family in the clan. He further points out that this relatedness extends to a unity and harmony with God.

Life is therefore only meaningful if it is participative and part of this vital unity. This unity does not only consist of only living members but extends to the deceased ancestors and God. This union is believed to bond everyone living and dead vertically and horizontally with God and each other (Mulago 1991:120).

This notion of belonging to a community is a prerequisite for the individual identity. The individual is believed to exist not only for himself/ herself but for the community. This is supported by Van Niekerk (1999:396) who points out that the cosmic totality is expressed in human community. Therefore in ATR humanity is analogous to family and community. In the traditional religious context a person's actions from birth to death serve to bind him or her as a communal being to everyone around him/her. Therefore the sacrificial meals are a symbolic manifestation of this unity between the family/community and ancestors. It is believed that those who die enter a state of collective immortality. Oosthuizen (1991:41) thus argues that the ontology of classical Africa is therefore anthropocentric. Crafford (1996:9) mentions that anything which threatens this harmony is considered to be evil.

Life in the African view is believed to continue beyond the grave. The here and now and life after death are considered to be inseparable and interdependent. This interdependency and the belief in the immortality of the soul are the cornerstones of ancestor worship in Africa.

Life is considered to be centered on the community. The individual is dependent on the community for survival. Mulago (1991:120) points out that Africans believe that life essentially participates in the lives of the ancestors and that preservation and enhancement of their lives is important to the lives of the living.

Africans believe that the life of the individual is intended to ensure the perpetuation of the family and community. There is therefore continuity of the family, clan and tribe after death. The deceased family members are considered to form the invisible element of the family and therefore constitute the most important part. This is evident in all significant ceremonies such as births, deaths, marriages, investiture, etc. where it is believed that the ancestors are the ones who preside and will only yield to the Creator (Mulago 1991:120).

Kuckertz (1981:86-87) supports this statement and describes it as a communalistic morality which aims to ensure the wellbeing and ordered existence of the community. Furthermore, it strives to maintain the relationships in the clan and between man, nature and the ancestral spirits.

#### **3.4.2.2 The African concept of cyclic time**

In any cosmology one has to consider the notion of time and how it is understood. Western cosmology considers time to be linear with an indefinite past, present and an indefinite future.

In African terms time is viewed in terms of events. This is why many Africans do not consider it important to be punctual for an event. For the traditional African the event is important, not the time. Oosthuizen (1991:42) states that for the traditional African it is more important to be part of the event, even if it is not the entire event rather than to be present at the start.

This description of the traditional African's view of time is supported by Mbiti (1971:24) who state that time is considered to be two-dimensional with a long past and a dynamic present. The future does not feature at all since future events have not taken place and therefore cannot constitute time. However, if future events are certain to occur or if they follow the natural rhythm of nature, they only constitute a potential time at most.

Therefore in the African worldview, actual time is regarded to be what is present and what is past. It therefore moves backwards rather than forward and people set their minds not on future things, but chiefly on what has taken place (Mbiti 1969a:17).

If this holds true, then it appears that the African concept of time is essentially cyclic in nature.<sup>16</sup> The implication of this view of time is that it may perpetuate a sense of passivity and fatalism which further enhances their dependence on ancestor worship in an attempt to free participants from bondage to the past. Mbiti (1971:24) points out that the future and the focus on the future has little value in this notion of time. Events merely come and go and the past is where man finds his roots and his sense of security. There is no emphasis on final fulfilment or the "end of the world" (Oosthuizen 1991:34)

This differs vastly from the modern linear concept of time in which human beings are considered to control time in the sense that they plan for the future and base their present actions thereupon (Oosthuizen 1991:42).

African traditional religions clearly have shamanistic and animistic aspects. This obviously has a bearing on the practice of ancestor worship. Ancestor worship is also believed to ensure that harmony and balance is maintained in the community. The ancestors as the intermediaries between the living and God play an important role in maintaining the community and its wellbeing.

### **3.5 VENERATION OR WORSHIP**

When one considers the modern reality and the effects of modernisation and urbanisation on Southern Africa one has to wonder why it is that ancestor related beliefs and practices continue in spite of opposition from Christianity.

This gives rise to the question as to which elements of ancestor worship have made it possible for it to be assimilated into AIC's with relative ease and in spite of opposition?

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<sup>16</sup> Ideas related to reincarnation which have been noted in Southern Africa specifically relate to this African cyclical view of time. It should however not be confused with the Indian notion of reincarnation. According to Idowu (1973:188) reincarnation is accepted among certain West African groups. In other words, ancestors reincarnate in one or several children in the family. Interestingly enough, although they have reincarnated, they are believed to retain their status and ancestral qualities.

### 3.5.1 Antithetical interpretations of the ancestor cult

I previously pointed out that there has been some controversy in the last few decades about the nature of the relationship between the ancestors and the African people (Bae 2004:342). Scholars such as West (1975:185-187), Kuckerts (1981:10-11), Triebel (2002:192-194) have divergent views. Some consider it ancestor *worship* while others consider it to be ancestor *veneration*. Most Christians reject ancestor worship on religious grounds as Anderson (1993) argues. As a result, African Christians are classified into three types of Pentecostal Churches with regard to their position on the practices of the ancestor cult.

According to Anderson (1993:37) these studies indicate that the majority of Pentecostal churches reject ancestor worship. Even if they do believe that ancestors may appear to their (Christian) descendants, their general response is to reject such visitations as of demonic spirits which need to be exorcised and spurned to avoid further misery.

Other scholars such as Smith (1966:39) regard ancestor worship in a different light. He believes that the term itself is misleading and easily misunderstood. Implicit in the term, according to Smith, is a reference to an existence which is different to that of man on earth and therefore immediately diverts from the African view. Mbiti (1969a:26) concurs and states that “there is nothing here about the so-called ancestor worship”. This is further supported by Setiloane (1986:18), an African theologian, who argues that most Africans “strongly resent the suggestion that they ‘worship’ Badimo [ancestors].” According to him, worship does not adequately describe the nature of the service rendered to the ancestors which has a similar quality to the service one renders to one’s living parents.

Numerous African scholars such as Mbiti (1969a:108), Dzobo (1985:340) and Becken (1993:338) are in agreement on this matter. They believe that the term ancestor worship should be accepted in spite of its religious connotations. I (Bae 2004:342) agreed that “worship” is the better term, arguing from the fundamental principle that African kin-groups are in fact communities which include living and deceased members. Ancestors therefore continue to play a role in the social structure of the living, especially in the life of the clan. They are called upon to intercede on behalf of the living. Clearly this is more than veneration.

The question arises as to whether or not ancestor worship should be considered a social phenomenon as part of the cultural fibre of the community or whether it should be treated as a religious phenomenon. The following section will explore ancestor worship as a social function.

### 3.5.2 Ancestor worship as a social function

Ancestor worship is built on the African concept of the family or clan. Triebel (2002:192) agrees that ancestors continue to be part of the living family and that there is a sustained interdependence inherent in the relationship. In this paradigm the forefather de-

depends on the children's respect for his position which is manifest in veneration and an adherence to traditional customs and orders.

Therefore, Africans believe that the living ought to revere the ancestors *inter alia* by bringing them offerings in order to ensure that they absolve their descendants from punishment and to remedy misfortune. Sundermeier (1973:146) argues that this phenomenon arises from the reality of the family structure and serves to strengthen ties within the community. It is deeply rooted in social structure and serves a social and stabilising purpose. In an earlier article (Bae 2004:345) I argued that ancestor worship should be seen as a social function which emphasises and strengthens kinship and communal identity. When one considers it from this perspective, it is clear that ancestor worship emanates from the family which serves to solidify the communal aspect inherent in the family.

According to Triebel (2002) this is supported by numerous social anthropologists and African theologians. They even concur that ancestor veneration should not be construed as a religious phenomenon but primarily as a manifestation of social behaviour. The honour and respect which is due to parents and grandparents during their lifetime continues after they have passed away. Therefore, ancestor veneration serves to ensure the continuation of family relationships and therefore constitutes an honourable remembrance which can be construed as an adherence to the fourth commandment which requires one to respect your parents.

Consequently, Becken (1993:336) holds the opinion that ancestor veneration is to be considered essentially a social phenomenon. The adherence to ancestor cultic practices emanate from the communal identity of the African people. The crux of the matter is that the ancestor cult is practiced not as a form of worship for salvation or absolution in the hereafter, but rather to provide a social cortex for the clan and members of the clan. Becken does point out that one must not get the impression that the individual is nothing without the community, but rather that the community and the individual share a reciprocal relationship and an interdependence. This relationship is not diminished by death. This interdependence is manifest in rituals such as the ritual killing of an ox. Becken states that this strengthens community bonds between the living and the dead. The deceased family members are considered to participate in the feast while the living partake in the feast.

This notion that ancestor veneration serves an essentially social rather than religious function is supported by Idowu (1973:186), the Nigerian theologian, who states that ancestor cults are essentially a means of communication and communion between the living and the dead. Vilakazi (1986:76) on the other hand, asserts that ancestor cults are founded on the principle that the kinship circle encompasses both the living and the invisible deceased members of the family. Furthermore, theologians like Jean-Marc Ela (1987:33) points out that offerings made to ancestors are essentially a display of respect and a symbol of the perpetuation of the family line and should therefore be considered an expression of the command to children to love and respect their parents. When one considers these points of view, ancestor cults ought to be considered a



purely anthropological phenomenon rather than a religion but these views do not take cognisance of the fear of the ancestors which is intrinsic to the cult.

Dzobo (1985) ascribes the misconceptions about the nature of ancestor worship to the fact that few people truly comprehend what the concept of “ancestor” actually denotes. According to Dzobo (1985) an “ancestor” is not a god or demigod, but rather considered a moral example. Furthermore, he asserts that the Akan and Ewe terms for “ancestor”, namely *nananom ortogbuiwo*, are titles which denote exemplary morality (1985:334).

I support this, especially considering the fact that these titles are earned during one’s lifetime and remain after death (also Bae 2004:344). Therefore, this notion of “ancestor” does not necessarily denote a supernatural being. God is regarded to be a supreme moral example or “grand ancestor” to emulate.

When one considers the nature of African identity, the understanding Africans have of the clan and the role ascribed to parents, it is clear that ancestor veneration or more precisely honouring ancestors is essentially a social phenomenon. However, it is important to bear in mind that although the primary function of ancestor veneration may be social in nature, it does have religious aspects and fulfils an undeniably religious function.

### **3.5.3 Ancestor worship as religious phenomenon**

I earlier (2004:344-345) stated that when one attempts to understand the religious nature of ancestor worship, it is essential to know the meaning of the term “religious”. In this context “religious” would denote any belief or act that suggests that the believers or acting persons consider themselves existentially dependent upon the transcendent power or spiritual personality towards which or whom such belief or acts are directed (Anderson 1993). What I have already described suffices as illustration that ancestor veneration is more than a social or cultural-ethical phenomenon. It should be understood as ancestor worship.

Hence, Gehman (1999:48-49) refers to the testimony of *Akamba* which makes it clear that they confessed to the living dead and that in essence there is little difference between the honour given to God and that given to the ancestral spirits. Furthermore, there was little difference between the way sacrifices were offered to God and how they were offered to the ancestral spirits. Also, prayers offered in the home were essentially a blend of the Creator and ancestral spirits.

Mbiti (1969a:83) explores the religious functions of ancestor worship by offering an explanation for the roles of the ancestors. He said that the ancestors are believed to possess the power to prevent or inflict misfortune. Crafford (1996:15; Pauw 1975:151) supports this argument and points out that the afflictions which the ancestors may cause include drought, famine, sickness, barrenness and even death. They may cause it directly or by influencing the Supreme Being to do it, or even by not interceding when such events are imminent. Consequently, the belief in their power gives rise to either a

dread or feelings of expectancy in the African people. This faith in the power and authority of the ancestors points toward worship rather than veneration.

This is supported by Pauw (1975:151) who maintains that Christians believe that the ancestors manifest their benevolence in their everyday lives by keeping them safe, free of disease and misfortune and other dangers, healing them in times of illness and granting economic success in their business ventures. Therefore, the ancestors ensure that the balance and harmony in the kinship structure is maintained.

Aside from an understanding of what constitutes an ancestor, one has to examine the attitude and approach of the living who call upon the ancestors. In this regard Treibel (2002) postulates that the worshippers' invocation has an implicit sense of anticipation and expectation that the ancestor will ensure a fullness of life. This implies the extent of the perceived power which the ancestors are believed to possess. They are believed to have the power to either cause misery and ruin or ensure a quality of life. Therefore, it stands to reason that the ancestors assume a position comparable to that of God in terms of provision and help. Consequently, Sundermeier (1988:143, 159) asserts that they fulfil a central role in African religion. It therefore follows that ancestor worship does in fact have a significant religious function.

Anderson's study (1993) yields three further motivations for ascribing religious functions to ancestor worship. The first emanates from the different definitions of scholars such as Anderson and Mbiti of what constitutes an ancestor. Mbiti (1969a:334) asserts that the ancestors are still considered to be part of the living community ("the living dead") whereas Anderson's definition implies a definite distinction between the dead and the living. Notably, Anderson describes the ancestors as existing in some "undefined and unknown place to which the living have no access" (1993:27). Furthermore, the fact that the living have no access to this place until they too have passed away implies that the ancestors acquire some godlike status after death in order to influence the lives of the living. Thus the implicit belief is that the ancestral spirits are apotheosised as deities.

Hence Nxumalo (1981:67) argues that the ancestors are no longer in this world after experiencing death but have been elevated to a new status. After death they acquire power to pray to God and be heard which implies that they are closer to God than the living. It is believed that it is from this unique relationship with God that they derive their power.

Secondly, I will argue that the manner in which the ancestors are believed to reveal themselves to the living in the form of dreams and also in the form of day visions and diviners (Anderson 1993:27; McAllister 1986:67) implies a religious element (See also Bae 2004:346). Crafford (1996:15) states that ancestral spirits usually reveal themselves in dreams or in special places like the graveside or cattle kraal or by means of mediums or diviners. There is a marked similarity between the way in which the ancestors reveal themselves and the manner in which God or gods are believed to reveal themselves. It is important to note that Becken (1993:338) points out that in spite of the fact that the diviner appears to assume the role of an indigenous psychotherapist, one

cannot avoid the fact that living attempt to reach the ancestors via the diviner to receive a revelation and guidance of some sort.<sup>17</sup> The purpose of such revelations as Crafford (1996) asserts is to bind the community and the ancestors together and to ensure harmony and balance in their everyday lives.

Finally, I would like to argue that the demands which the ancestors make on the living to ensure this balance and harmony imply a form of atonement (See also Bae 2004:346). The living are expected to make sacrifices to atone for any wrongdoing. These sacrifices are intended to appease the ancestors. It may take the form of gifts or the ritual killing of a cow, goat or chicken, a dish of porridge or the pouring out of a libation of sorghum beer (Anderson 1993:28). In this regard, Crafford (1996:15) cites the example of the installation ceremony which is known in Zulu as the *ukubuyisa ekhaya* (literally translated as “the calling home” ceremony). This ceremony takes place a few months after the funeral and is often considered more important than the funeral itself. During this ceremony, family members gather and slaughter a beast to welcome the ancestor back. Gifts are given and food and drink is served. A special place is set aside in the home for the new ancestor.

Should the descendants not meet these demands, it is believed that the ancestors will withdraw their protection from their descendants and this will result in affliction. When one considers the fact that the living attempt to atone for wrongdoing or attempt to appease the ancestors it is evident that ancestor worship cannot be considered merely in terms of its social function.

From the aforementioned divergent opinions on the nature of ancestor worship it is evident that the social and religious functions of ancestor worship are not necessarily mutually incompatible. However, Hastings (1989:24) is of the opinion that there is no separation between the religious and social functions in ancestor cult.

This study emphasises the religious function of ancestor worship but does not negate the social function. This is because both elements (religious and social) can be perceived to be important in traditional communities of Africa, Korea and Japan. In the preceding sections the argument for the fact that ancestor worship is both social and religious has in fact been made. However, for the purpose of this study more focus is directed towards the religious aspect.

### **3.6 ANCESTOR RITUALS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Arriving at a general description of ancestor rituals in South Africa is fairly complex since the practices vary from cultural group, area and traditional customs. The four major cultural groups, namely the Nguni, Sotho, Venda and Tsonga have different rituals and practices but Traditional African beliefs underlie them all.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, it is feasible

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<sup>17</sup> According to EB Tylor (in Gehman 1999:44) religion originated from primitive man's reflections on his dreams. In their dreams primitive man began to believe that everyone has a spirit and physical body. Primitive man conceived that the spirit survived after death and believed that objects such as trees and animals also have inherent spirits.

<sup>18</sup> Shabangu (2005) lists the main types of ancestor rituals in South Africa as personal rituals, agricultural rituals and festivals.

to consider a description of a Xhosa ancestral ritual as an example to glean an understanding of the African cosmology and then examine it critically from a theological point of view.

Hammond-Tooke (1981:24) in his study which focused on the Nguni-speaking peoples' ancestral rituals wrote that the Nguni traditionally resided in the lush area between the Drakensberg and the sea, from Swaziland down to Port Elizabeth. The Nguni people generally live in scattered homesteads which include extended family members. In some cases the families are polygamous. Consequently, such homesteads were historically the residence of a large number of people.

The Nguni people are very much clan-oriented with clearly distinctive descent groups. This is the basis of their social structure. In anthropological terms, a "lineage" can be described as a group of people who are able to trace their descent from a common ancestor. In the Nguni people this descent is traced in the male line and is therefore described as patrilineal. This is also the case in Korea and Japan where family groups are structured around the patrilineal line.

In his description of the Nguni people's ancestor rituals, Hammond-Tooke (1981:25), indicates that the rituals are usually performed when a member of the lineage falls ill, in such cases where the diviner identifies the illness as sent by the ancestors, or when a particular ancestor appears to a lineage member in a dream, it is considered to be proof that the ancestor is displeased, annoyed or worried and therefore requires a ritual to be performed. Hammond-Tooke states that it is not clear whether or not the diviner is able to identify which ancestor is responsible (unless he/she appears in a dream vision) but it is considered to be indicative that a ritual is required to appease the ancestor concerned.

For the purpose of this study, it is sufficient to focus on one example of ancestor worship from the Xhosa people. This study acknowledges that there are numerous other tribes with different ritual practices. However we will look at a case study described by Kuckertz (1983: 124-131) and Chidester (1992:9-13) in order to illustrate our argument.

### **3.6.1 Case study: Xhosa ancestral ritual<sup>19</sup>**

Chidester's case study deals with the practices of ancestor rituals among the Xhosa speaking people in the Eastern Cape. He refers to Kuckertz's account of a young woman in a Xhosa-speaking homestead who fell ill. A diviner was consulted to determine the cause of the illness. He ascribed it to an ancestral spirit and as a result a lineage ritual was performed in an attempt to restore harmony between the homestead and the ancestors. This ritual was intended not only to honour and appease the ancestors, but to communicate with the ancestors and thereby restore the young woman to health.

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<sup>19</sup> Theron (1996:97-116) provides more detailed descriptions. According to Pauw (1975:207-209) important ancestor rituals commonly take five forms for Xhosa Christians. (1) Birth rituals; (2) Ritual of the "necklace", *intambo*; (3) "Drinking of milk", *ukudlisa amasi*; (4) Occasional beer drinks; (5) Mortuary rituals.

The ritual took place at the cattle enclosure where a cow had been selected for the sacrifice. The animal is thrown to the ground, consecrated and speared by the second eldest man in the lineage group. It is believed that the bellowing of the sacrificial animal is crucial since it is believed to open up communication with the ancestors. In this regard, it is believed that the animal's cry carries the words of the ritual elder to the ancestors as he calls on them to intercede on behalf of the young woman.

Chidester points out that although in this specific instance the cry of the dying animal is believed to invoke the ancestors, the same effect can be achieved by offering beer which is shared by the participants and poured out in the cattle enclosure for the ancestors. Thus in both cases, the offering of the beer or the sacrifice of the animal is considered to be a means of establishing communication with the ancestors. It is important to note that the Nguni people generally believe that an ox is the ideal sacrificial beast but will sometimes substitute it with a goat. They do not accept sheep as sacrificial animals because sheep do not let out a cry and therefore are unable to invoke the ancestor spirit.

After the ancestor's spirit was invoked, the ritual moved to the main residence of the homestead. This house was considered to be more than a residence of the living members of the clan. It was also a sacred place in which the dead members of the clan resided. Chichester indicates that the rondavel was kept dark and cool to ensure that the ancestor was comfortable. Furthermore, in this account of ancestor rituals, certain parts of the home for example the back of the house, the fireplace and the thatched overhang above the single door were considered to be places where the presence of the ancestor could be sensed more intensely.

At this point, the ritual elder, the sick young woman and all the women of the lineage gathered inside. The elder placed a piece of fat which he had cut from the slaughtered animal was placed on the fire for the ancestors. After this, a smaller cut of meat was placed on the fire as a personal sacrifice to the ancestor spirit who had been communicating with the clan. While the meat burned, the members of the family who had gathered in the house were silent.

During the slaughtering process, while the animal was being skinned, prepared and cooked by the men in the cattle enclosure, they cut a muscle from below the shoulder of the animal's foreleg and took it to the main house. This meat was referred to as the *intsonyama* and was used in a ritual of healing. In this ritual, the elder removed a long thin strip and roasted it on the fire. The smoke from this filled the house and was believed to consecrate the house and the people inside. While the smoke filled the house, the ritual elder offered the meat to the young woman (Chidester 1992:10).

The young woman received the meat on the back of her hands, tasted it with her tongue and then threw it towards the back of the house. This was symbolic of her discarding the affliction or misfortune. She then received the second piece. While she held the piece on the back of her right hand, she openly criticised the disrespect she had shown towards the living and the dead. At last, she was instructed to eat the meat by the ritual elder. As she ate the *intsonyama*, the rest of the gathering cheered and con-

gratulated her for having “eaten the ancestor”. It was in this celebratory spirit that the ritual elder, the young woman and the rest of the gathering returned to the cattle enclosure where the remaining portions of the *intsonyama* and the rest of the meat of the sacrificial animal were shared in a festive communal meal. At this meal, no other food or beer was served. The meat of the sacrificial animal was eaten. The ritual concluded with the burning of the animal’s bones.

### 3.6.2 The symbolic significance of ancestral rituals

The significance of ancestor rituals can be understood when one considers the cosmology underlying it. Ancestor worship provided a matrix which offered plausible explanations for cases of misfortune or illness. According to this worldview, such unfortunate events can be ascribed to the acts of the high god or to evil harmful acts perpetrated by witches or sorcerers, or to some impersonal pollution, darkness or hotness which a person may unknowingly inflict on himself by violating some ritual rule of conduct. Chidester (1992:11) thus argues that ancestor religion thus provides a symbolic system which reinforced the authority and rights of elders in the homestead. The third element which explains the significance of such rituals is that fact that ancestor religion acknowledges the existence of a spiritual dimension to the physical reality which effectively invalidates the permanence of death. Therefore, as Chidester (1992:11) argues in ancestor religion death is not considered to be a barrier between the living and the dead who continue to interact with the living descendants.

However, this does not mean that these notions were accepted without controversy. Instead, the role of ancestors in traditional African religion has spawned a hotbed of controversy. The crux of this controversy is centered on the question of whether or not the ancestors are worshipped. The answer to this pertinent question hinges on what the notion of “worship” actually denotes. Some scholars (Anderson 1991:81; Ela 1987: 33; Fasholé-Luke 1974:211; Idowu 1973:186; Krüger et al 2002:34; Ma 2002:203) have argued that ancestors are not worshipped but that the rituals are merely an extension of the type of care and respect they would have paid to living members of the clan. This argument holds that the ancestors are treated with respect and deference but not the type of worship which would be directed towards a supreme or divine being.

This is supported by Becken (1993:336) who considers the ritual sacrifice of animals to be purely anthropological or sociological manifestations. He argues that simply in the anthropological and/or sociological perspective. He compares the ritual killing of animals in the black community to the traditional “*braai*” (barbecue) among white South Africans which serve as occasions for reinforcing the fellowship and sense of community. He further argues that this sharing of meat which is not part of the daily staple of the black community as a particularly significant act. The fact that the invitation is extended to include the ancestors is partly due to the fact that in their cosmology the ancestors are still very much a part of the community and therefore should be included.

Chidester (1992:12) on the other hand argues that ancestor rituals represent sustained and focused interaction with supernatural presences or forces. Although some of the rituals are considered to be driven by a display of respect and honour, others like

healing rituals are clearly intended to invoke the presence of the ancestors to participate in a meal which has all the hallmarks of an act of worship. At these ritual events the ancestors clearly represent lineage elders, judicial authority, and superhuman forces and are manifestation of the spirit realm. Kuckertz (1984:11-16) also maintains that they do represent unknown supernatural dimensions beyond death in the religious beliefs and practices which constitute the basis of the African worldview.

### **3.7 THE ASSIMILATION OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP INTO AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY**

The last three decades have seen numerous scholars attempt to develop a central ancestral theology in the African context particularly in relation to Christology. Du Toit (1998:56) maintains that African ancestor theology has assumed a remarkably uniform structure insofar as Christology is concerned.

In this section the Roman Catholic and Protestant Church's views on whether or not it is acceptable to assimilate ancestor rituals into the Christian religion will be explored. I will provide an outline of the extent to which ancestor beliefs have been integrated with African theology. I will also discuss three prominent African theologians who made significant contributions to the development of a Christology of ancestor worship.

#### **3.7.1 The assimilation of ancestor worship: Roman Catholic and Protestant perspectives**

According to Theron (1996:33-35) ancestor theology has been readily adapted by the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) in Africa. He argues that Roman Catholic Church's view may be described as a synthesis between indigenous beliefs and Christian truths. Daneel's study (1971:272-274) appears to support this because he states that the deceased are not incorporated into the hierarchy of the ancestors but are included in the heavenly community of saints. He also claims that communication with the dead and ancestral spirits still occurs in the RCC.

It is because of this that Theron (1996:35) concludes that the Roman Catholic perspective is one which accommodates the practices of the ancestor cult. Many Catholic theologians believe that the ancestor cult should be accommodated and consider the Christianisation of ancestor veneration entirely plausible and acceptable (Kiernan 1995: 22; Maimela 1985:66; Teffo & Roux 2003:141; Triebel 2002:188). In some cases, some Catholic theologians put it in the same category as the veneration of the saints. They do not find the veneration of ancestral spirits nor the invocation of these spirits in prayer problematic. According to them it may be justified by the doctrine of the communion of the faithful (*communio sanctorum*).

Afeke & Verster (2004:50) in their discussion of the Protestant perspective on this matter point out that the points of view vary from extreme rejection to positions of impartial neutrality and even accommodation. The official Protestant perspective is that these practices are not to be assimilated into the faith but it does not attempt to find a viable alternative or middle ground.

Interestingly enough, Gehman (1999:95) points out that many African Christians revert to traditional ancestral beliefs in times of affliction or death. Certain African Protestant theologians also tend to look at solutions quite similar to Roman Catholic theology, with a liberal accent of universalism.

### **3.7.2 Ancestral beliefs within ecclesiology**

Kukertz (1981:84) points out that for approximately four decades leading African Christians have considered the ancestor worship to be separate from religion and view it in cultural and social terms. Since then they have started to consider the ancestor cult in terms of a theology of the family and as such extend it to be part of ecclesiology. The fact that the family is believed to include living members as well as deceased ancestors, provides a suitable frame of reference for an African theology because it synthesises physical and metaphysical dimensions. The question which arises is whether or not this community with the ancestors included constitutes an element of an African ecclesiology.

Numerous scholars such as Mulago (1969), Mosothoane (1973) and Mbili (1969b) have explored to what extent this is true. Mulago (1969) attempted to integrate the notion of family in ancestor religion with that of community in Christianity. Mosothoane (1973) focused on the communion of saints while Mbili (1969b and 1971) focused on corporate eschatology.

Mulago's study postulated that the vital co-existence between the living and the dead is to be considered the cohesive principle of both the Bantu community and the Church. He argues that the vital union of people and the vital unity of the church both have "Life" as its central theme (1969:157). He considers this life-relationship in the case of the Church to be a manifestation of the Church of Christ which is essentially a sharing in the Life of the Trinity.

It stands to reason that Mulago thus proposes a theology of symbolism. He considers a symbol to consist of two halves which are dependent upon each other for meaning – therefore a vital whole. The cohesive principle is life and vital participation. This principle of life which underlies all is not only the essence of the community but also the dynamic force so that "the life of the individual is grasped as it is shared" (Mulago 1969:139). He therefore concludes (1969:157) that this Bantu notion of vital participation can be construed to form the basis of a specifically African theological structure. Therefore, communion which is essentially a participation in the same life and the same means of life is therefore the cornerstone of this ecclesiological theology.

This was further developed by Mosothoane (1973). His theological work found an alternative theology for the ecclesiology of "communion as participation" which focused on the "communion of saints." In other words, Mosothoane (1973:86) uses the notion of Christ to provide an explanation for the relation of the living dead to the church. He argues that the living and the dead are members of the body of Christ and the church. Therefore, the communion of the living and dead is found in Christ. This notion of communion in Christ provides the key to Christianising the ancestor cult. Thus, Mo-



sothoane attempts to use Christ as a bridge over the chasm of death. For Africans this bridge extends to the belief in the ancestors. It follows then that he argues that the communion between the living family members and the dead is not disrupted by death (Afeke & Verster 2004:52).

Kuckertz (1981:85) argues that this theological reduction allows Mosothoane to integrate the follower of Christ into a dual fellowship: with Christ through baptism and the eucharist and with the dead through birth and the ancestor cult. Both cultic expressions have death as its common denominator. Christ's death and resurrection gives rise to the need for the sacraments of baptism and eucharist because they ensure that the communion of the saints in Christ is maintained. Similarly, he argues that the mortuary rites and the practices of the ancestor cult in general terms have a similar effect in that they provide a means to overcome the separation brought about by death and create fellowship with the dead. This therefore results in two simultaneous fellowships, each of which is based in a faith-confidence ... on the baptismal faith-experience of the saviour's death and resurrection (Mosothoane 1973:92).

Consequently, Mosothoane (1973:87) argues that the eucharist as means of communion had to be a rite into which ancestor veneration should be incorporated since the eucharist does not only imply fellowship with Christ, but with all Christians, living and dead. He therefore argues that African Christians should be encouraged to communicate with their ancestors within the context of the eucharist. Obviously, his view propagates a total integration of ancestor beliefs with Christian life and church worship. Afeke & Verster (2004:52) are of opinion that the eucharist can make provision for mentioning ancestors by name in prayer.

### **3.7.3 Ancestral beliefs within eschatology**

When considering Mbiti's perspective one has to view it from an eschatological perspective. Mbiti (1969b) considers man and God to be living in a single world. God's creation is also the spiritual realm where spirits such as the living dead sojourn. The living dead are believed to experience two planes of immortality. The first "personal" one is understood to continue as long as they are remembered by name and the "collective" immortality which occurs when no living descendant remembers them by name. Mbiti believes that any living person consists of a material body which decays after death and a spiritual body which lives on after death and retains the person's identity. This duality of man ensures that some kind of "communion" is maintained between the living and the living-dead.

In Mbiti's study (1969b:183) the notion of "Christ's cosmic victory" is particularly fascinating. He argues that Christ's cosmic victory on Calvary has meaning and implications for the relationship between the deceased and living Christians, both of whom are now included in Christ's cosmic body. He emphasises that redemption is not reserved for the living but that it extends to those in the spirit realms and those who are asleep in death.

Kuckertz (1981:85) points out that it is clearly as a result of this “cosmic victory of the Cross” which extends to the living, the living-dead and the spirit realm which led Mbiti to his notion of a “corporate eschatology” and a “corporate resurrection” in which we are going to “surrender” our individual personalities (1971:177). Thus, Mbiti (1971: 143) argues that the New Testament does not elaborate on the spirits of the departed, apart from those who are in Christ. Mbiti argues that those who are in Christ are able to live simultaneously in both worlds. Mbiti therefore holds the opinion that Christian fellowship includes fellowship with the departed saints.

It therefore stands to reason that since our communication with God and with one another is grounded in Jesus Christ and the redemption He has brought it follows that death can neither dissolve nor weaken it. Christ has therefore conquered death through his own resurrection. As a result death is not able to impact on the relationship between members of the Body of Christ who have died and those who are still alive. In this regard Mbiti speaks of the Communion of Saints, where fellowship between the living and the departed Christians may rightly be encouraged and cultivated (Mbiti 1971:147).

Kuckertz (1981:85) points out that Mbiti acknowledges that the New Testament does not really discuss the subject of communion with the dead saints with perhaps the only exception being Hebrews 12:22. Christ is the interface between the living and dead saints since they are all “in Christ” and therefore share a common life in Christ. This notion of a common life in Christ is similar to the African notion of collective immortality. It does however surpass the African notion because corporate resurrection denotes “newness in Christ”.

#### **3.7.4 Ancestor beliefs within Christology**

Theologians such as Akrong (1992), Bediako (1995), Bujo (1992), Kabasélé (1991), Muzorewa (1988), Nkwoka (1991) and Nyamiti (1990) have argued that reflecting upon ancestral belief from a Christological perspective has contributed to the development of a Christology which articulates with the rich diversity of the African socio-cultural background. This is undoubtedly one of the most controversial topics in African Theology today. The challenge is to portray an image of Christ which resounds in the African cosmology. As a result, modern African theologians have attempted to find a resonance in the identity of Christ in response to the African realities (Taylor 1963:16).

Wanamaker (1997:291) elaborates on this search for resonance within the African realities when he points out that Christianity considers Christ to be the intercessor between God and man where the ancestors fulfil this role in the African context. It is this commonality which leads Bediako (1992:226) to accept the possibility of integrating ancestor theology into Christianity. He (1992:228) further argues that a theology of ancestors articulates with an Ancestor-Christology in which Christ is considered to be the Lord among the ancestors. Thus, the continued significance of the ancestors within African Christianity is distilled by Christology which reveals the multi-faceted role which the ancestors have fulfilled in the establishment of Christian Africa.

It must be noted as Olsen (1997:259) points out that the manner in which scholars have treated the subject of the significance of Christ with regard to African religious life has been rather divergent. Interestingly enough, each of these studies (Akrong 1992; Bujo 1992; Nyamiti 1990) discuss the doctrine of Christ under the notion of him being an ancestor figure. This is indicative of a trend. Therefore, the studies of three African theologians who have made significant contributions to the Christology of ancestorship will be explored.

#### **3.7.4.1 Akrong's notion of African Ancestor Christology<sup>20</sup>**

Akrong (1992:119-129) attempts to situate his Christology in the Akan people of Ghana's cosmology. Akrong refers to the fact that ancestors are addressed as *Nananom* (singular for *Nana*) which is the term used for grandparents and grandchildren as well as to denote respect when addressing chiefs and God (*Nana Nyame*).

Akrong (1992:127) argues that the ancestral model is the surface structure which supports the underlying structures of Akan culture and religion. He contends that the ancestor belief system entails a theological model which is deeply rooted in the social and religious world of the African. He then uses this model to portray Jesus as an ancestor who is dead but still present with us and who brings life and offers protection from evil.

Akrong (1992:123) situates his portrayal of Christ firmly in the Akan worldview and therefore identifies him as the chief warrior and hero ancestor who has a mediatory and sacred role. In this regard, he is the chief agent in God's salvation of man and the mediator of God's power of salvation.

As a hero warrior rescues his people, so Akrong considers Christ to have rescued humanity from the bondages of evil forces and sin. As the hero-Ancestor Christ becomes the mediator between God and human beings and can therefore also be the subject of worship owing to his unique relationship with God. This notion of Christ as a warrior is similar to Mbiti's notion. However, Mbiti (1972:51) does not integrate this with the ancestor model.

#### **3.7.4.2 Bujo's notion of the proto-ancestor**

Bujo's (1982:143; 1986:67; 1992:93) Christology aims to integrate a Biblical Christology with the contemporary social problems of Africa. Consequently, Bujo tries to transpose the Biblical context onto the African context. He suggests that Christ is the "proto-ancestor", a concept more meaningful for Africans. This implies that Christ is the primary ancestor and the one who personifies the ultimate ancestor to emulate. Similarly, he refers to Hebrews 1:1-2 which seems to indicate that God previously communicated with our African Fathers through the ancestors but now communicates through Christ (1992:83). This draws an analogy between the Hebrew prophets and African ancestors

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<sup>20</sup> We follow Lundström's (1996) exposition of Akrong and Bujo's notions.

(which is problematic because the Hebrew prophets pointed unreservedly to Yahweh, while the ancestors are not understood to point to God as clearly).

Furthermore, one of the key concepts in Bujo's theology is the notion of a "life force". According to Bujo (1986:68), God is the ultimate Supreme Origin of life. This life force is transmitted through the mediation of the ancestors to filter down to humanity. Therefore, the ancestor rituals are an attempt to secure life and abundance from the ancestors.

He also extends this notion of life force to Christ. In Christ, Bujo (1992:93) contends, this life force is available in its abundance. This resonates with the African notion that this life force is transmitted through the eldest son by various means. Bujo (1986:78) goes on to state that Christ shares his life force with believers in the eucharist. The bread and wine serves to reinforce the life and vitality among believers who partake in it.

Lundström (1996:74) describes Bujo essentially as a moral theologian who regards Christ as a model and life-giving ancestor to emulate. He thus urges the Christian community and clergy to emulate this example and has a strong commitment to the social situation in Africa. He urges clergy members to identify with the poor and become servants of the oppressed communities.

Bujo's notion of Christ as the proto-ancestor is problematic. He uses the term to emphasise the uniqueness of Christ's ancestorship. However, the denotation of the term "proto" implies "first" of many as Adam was the first of all men.

### ***3.7.4.3 Nyamiti's paradigm of African Christology and Ancestor Kinship***

Charles Nyamiti (Vahakangas 1998:251-263), a prominent Tanzanian Catholic theologian, provides a significant and extensive exposition of the ancestor analogy with regard to Christ which is firmly rooted in the Trinity. In his study, Nyamiti (1984:23) uses the beliefs and practices of many African traditional societies as his point of departure. These beliefs underscore the primacy of the ancestral relationship between the living and the dead and at times also the relationship between the Supreme Being and humanity. These relationships are seen to comprise of a brother ancestor and humanity with whom the ancestor shares a common parent (God). The ancestor acts as an intercessor between God and the living (Nyamiti 1984:30). This ancestor who has acquired his supernatural status after death is entitled to regular sacred communion. The crux of the matter though is that Nyamiti's definition of brother-ancestorship can be extended to apply to Christ and his relationship with the believers as well as to the African ancestor-brother (Lundström 1996:66; Oslen 1997:261).

This fundamental understanding of the ancestral relationship, leads Nyamiti to examine the inner life of God (Trinity) and discover that there exists an ancestral kinship among the divine persons: the Father is the Ancestor of the Son, the Son is the Descendant of the Father (Nyamiti 1985:32; 1990:139). These two persons perpetuate their ancestral kinship through the Spirit with whom they communicate with as their ancestral oblation and eucharist. In the Trinitarian notion of God there is a true doxologi-

cal and eucharist ritual. This Trinitarian ritual is considered to be the ultimate basis and model of all other rituals. The intended outcome of this Trinitarian ceremony is to achieve the intimate unification of the Father (Ancestor) and the Son (Descendant) in the Holy Spirit (pneumatic perichoresis). Olsen (1997:261) points out that in God the notions of Ancestor and Descendant are essentially doxological, eucharist, pneumatic (therefore inseparably intertwined with the Holy Spirit) and ritual categories.

Nyamiti contends that Christ's ancestorship is rooted in the Trinity. And primarily because of his divine-human status and redemptive function, Christ can be considered our ultimate brother-ancestor (Olsen 1997:261).

Nyamiti postulates the incarnation and redemptive ministry of Christ which culminates in the paschal mystery to be extensions of the Trinitarian ancestral communication to the man Jesus and thus extending through him to the rest of creation. Thus Christ functions ancestrally towards humanity by means of the Holy Spirit by means of the salvation mission he received from the Father. Therefore, God the Father through Christ becomes our Ancestor. According to Nyamiti, His ancestorship grows and reaches maturity at the Parousia. Consequently, the Mass is essentially a true ancestral ritual and the tabernacle is the Christian shrine in which Christ the Ancestor's presence is felt and is therefore available for ancestral communication. Similarly, our bodies constitute sacred living shrines or temples which are inhabited by our divine ancestors (God the Father and Christ in the divine Spirit) (Olsen 1997:262).

Scholars have criticised Nyamiti for his notion of the Ancestor Christ for numerous reasons. Olsen (1997:262) points out that Nyamiti's analogical inculturation method causes key religious concepts from traditional belief systems to be pushed to the point where they obfuscate the uncompromising Christology of the Scriptures.

### **3.8 CONCLUSION**

Based on the foregoing conclusion, it is clear that ancestor worship in the African context is a complex and diverse phenomenon.

This chapter has attempted to answer the question on how African Churches cope with ancestor veneration. ATR in Africa have assimilated ancestor worship in an attempt to meet the needs of African people who attempted to cling to their identity in the face of colonisation and urbanisation. Christian churches have assimilated ancestor rituals in varying degrees. Whereas Roman Catholicism assimilated it readily, Protestant churches rejected it out of hand as unscriptural.

Furthermore, the complex nature of ancestor worship has been explored. The important fact is that ancestor worship cannot be separated from the African cosmology. The African worldview and the African sense of community are powerful cornerstones of ancestor worship in Africa. As the foregoing discussion points out, ATR resulted from the fact that Africans felt that the Church did not meet the needs of the African people in terms of their culture and identity. This led to the Christianisation of numerous ancestor rituals.



The manner in which ancestor worship articulates with contemporary African Ancestral Theology has shown that the most problematic factor in African theology is that the African theologian has to contend with the essentially non-Christian nature of their traditional beliefs. Therefore, this study supports Hastings' view (1976:50) which concludes that African theology constitutes a dialogue between the African scholar and the perennial religions and spiritualities particular to Africa and the African context.

The essence of African religion is non-Christian and therefore poses challenges to African theology. In order to avoid the trap of developing a theology which deviates from the Scriptural truths, one has to strive to pursue a Biblical theology as the primary focus. It is very difficult to equate African traditional religion with Christ's message and transpose it in the African idiom.