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Burning incense for a focus group discussion: Acquiring a spirituality of liminality for doing liturgical research in an African context from an emic perspective

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Abstract: In this article the author critically reflects on his experiences while conducting qualitative liturgical research in local communities in South Africa. After a brief sketch of the context and introducing his approach, three types of examples are presented and reflected upon critically. In conclusion, an argument is presented for a specific kind of spirituality that is needed in order to undertake ethnographic-style participatory observation for liturgical research on African soil, namely a spirituality of liminality. For a researcher who is not a member of the tradition and culture in which the research is being conducted, this spirituality of liminality is necessary in order to develop an emic perspective without defining the people whose worshipping tradition is being researched as ‘other’. This spirituality of liminality is an important characteristic for a researcher who engages in qualitative ethnographic-style liturgical research in a postcolonial context.

Zusammenfassung: In diesem Artikel reflektiert der Autor kritisch auf seine Erfahrung von qualitativer liturgischer Forschung in Gemeinden in Südafrika. Nach einer kurzen Beschreibung des Kontextes und einer Einführung der Vorgehensweise werden drei Beispiele vorgestellt und kritisch betrachtet. Der Autor kommt zu dem Schluss, dass eine besondere Art von Spiritualität notwendig ist für ethnographische teilnehmende Beobachtung für liturgische Forschung in Afrika, nämlich eine Spiritualität der Liminalität. Dies ist notwendig für Forscher, die nicht der beforschten Tradition und Kultur angehören, um eine emische Perspektive erlangen, ohne die Teilnehmer der beforschten Gottesdiensttradition als ‚Andere‘ zu definieren. Diese Spiritualität der Liminalität ist ein wichtiges Merkmal von Forschern bei der Durchführung von qualitativer, ethnographischer Liturgieforschung in postkolonialen Kontexten.

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Introduction: the researcher, liminality and postcolonial South Africa¹

I write this article mostly in the first person singular, seeing that both my person and identity as a researcher as well as my own experiences while doing research are of integral importance in order to develop the argument I would like to advance here. Not only my particular identity but also my specific context are important factors to consider in the argument. The article is not an example of auto-ethnography in the strict sense of the word, but it does include aspects of it,² seeing that I will be working in a reflexive way and specifically regarding my own experiences while conducting ethnographic-style research. It is more an example of an exercise that lies somewhere between auto-ethnography and reflexive ethnography.³ It is thus imperative to start with some observations regarding my identity and the context within which I work and also conduct my research.

I am a white male who is currently a full-time lecturer at a South African university, a member of a mainline Protestant church and also an ordained minister in that church. I did my training at universities in South Africa and Europe that were strongly positioned in a Western-orientated philosophical and theological tradition, and in all my years of training from my bachelor's degree through to my doctoral thesis I received almost no input that was not firmly embedded in this tradition. When a subject did indeed touch upon content that was so-called 'African', it was always in a module offered by the Department of Missiology and often grouped with all the so-called 'others' such as Islam or

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at a meeting of the International Academy of Practical Theology, Toronto, Canada, April 12th 2013.

2 Cunnigham, S.J. and M. Jones. 2005. "Autoethnography: A tool for practice and education". CHINZ; Duncan, M. 2004. "Autoethnography: Critical appreciation of an emerging art". *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3/4, Article 3. Retrieved 27/10/2010 from http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/3_4/pdf/duncan.pdf (Proceedings of the 6th ACM SIGCHI New Zealand chapter's international conference on Computer-human interaction: making CHI natural) Vol. 94, 1–8; Wepener, C.J. 2012a, "Wat maak 'n kerkorrel gereformeerd? 'n Verkenning van Afrikaanse 'gereformeerde' musiek in die jare 1980 en 1990 in Suid-Afrika", *Verbum et Ecclesia* 33(1), Art. #709, 8 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v33i1.709>; the method of auto-ethnography was utilised for liturgical research in the latter article.

3 "Reflexivity, in ethnography, has come to mean thinking carefully about who has done the research and how, under what conditions, how it was written, by whom, and what impact these might have on the value of the ethnography produced". <http://karenoreilly.wordpress.com/what-is-ethnography/reflexivity/> (04/11/2013). See also R.R. Osmer 2008. *Practical Theology: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 57–58.

Hinduism and, although this was not always explicitly stated, in need of correction, change or enrichment from Western-style theology.

My own experiences in conducting qualitative participatory-style liturgical research for the past decade and more changed my outlook and approach to both the subject of Liturgical Studies and to doing liturgical research. Perhaps as a researcher I am currently ‘betwixt and between’ (as Victor Turner himself describes the state of liminality) different academic traditions, continents and Christian traditions, and this article is an attempt to grapple with this experience and therefore the notion of liminality is perhaps a meaningful guiding concept in this article as it also often is in modern Liturgical as well as Ritual Studies.⁴

The concept of liminality originally comes from the Latin word *limen* meaning threshold and was used within the context of the anthropological study of rites of passage.⁵ The concept refers to the experience of being in a border-crossing situation, for example, a boy during his period of initiation during which he is no longer a boy but also not quite yet a man. He has thus crossed one threshold but still needs to cross a second and is during that period in a so-called state of liminality. In essence and for the purposes of this article, liminality is about the crossing of borders and thereby being in a liminal state and also about the complexity and fluidity of these borders and the crossing of these borders in a

4 Barnard, M, J. Cilliers & C.J. Wepener. 2014. Flows of worship in a network culture. *Liturgia Condenda* 26. Leuven: Peeters Pers; Barnard, M. “Flows of worship in the network society. Liminality as heuristic concept in practical theology beyond action theory”, in *Die Skriflig* 44/1 (2010) 67–84; Wepener, C.J. 2012b. “Liminality: Recent Avatars of this Notion in a South African Context”. *Scriptura* 110, 293–307; Wepener, C.J. 2009. “From fast to feast. A ritual-liturgical exploration of reconciliation in South African cultural contexts”. *Liturgia Condenda* 19. Leuven: Peeters Pers, as well as more critical voices from the field of Ritual Studies: C.W. Bynum: “Women’s stories, women’s symbols: a critique of Victor Turner’s theory of liminality”, in R. L. Grimes (ed.): *Readings in ritual studies* (Upper Saddle River, NJ 1996) 71–86; A.G. Gold: “Still liminal after all these years: teaching ordeals and peregrinations”, in C. Bell (ed.): *Teaching ritual* (= American Association of Religion Teaching Religious Studies Series) (Oxford/New York 2007) 29–44.

5 For some of the main authors and core publications see, Van Gennep, A. 1996. “Territorial passage and the classification of rites” in RL Grimes ed. *Readings in Ritual Studies* (Upper Saddle River, NJ 1996) 529–536; Turner, V.W. 1969. *The ritual process. Structure and anti-structure*; Turner, V.W, *The forest of symbols: aspects of Ndembu ritual* (Ithaca, NY 1967), specifically the chapter entitled “Betwixt and between: the liminal period in rites de passage” 93–111; Turner, V. W, “Passages, margins and poverty: religious symbols of *communitas*” in *Worship* 46/7 (1972) 390–412; Turner, V.W, “Liminality and *communitas*” in RL Grimes ed. *Readings in Ritual Studies* (Upper Saddle River, NJ 1996) 511–519; Grimes, R.L. 2000. *Deeply Into The Bone. Re-Inventing Rites of Passage*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press.

globalised world as pertaining to conducting research in modern Liturgical Studies.

In this article liminality in Liturgical Studies will thus also be the focus to a certain extent, but here specifically as pertaining to qualitative research in the field of Liturgical Studies in a South African context, which is in many ways quite different to conducting similar research in some other parts of the world. The focus will thus be on doing liturgical research in an African context beyond the text, and the notion of African context here conveys the aim of explicitly also including the worship of traditions such as African Initiated Churches (AICs) and (neo-)Pentecostal churches in Africa, which are similar to but also significantly different from similar churches elsewhere in the world. And as Dana Robert and Inus Daneel have observed with regard to (liturgical) texts that can be studied in AICs: “AICs leave a meagre paper trail.”⁶ There are almost no texts in the traditional sense of the word that can be studied, such as worship manuals, prayer books or worship leaflets for the pews (there are in fact no pews, sometimes deliberately not even walls or a roof). The only way of studying the worship of these churches is to actually go where the action is, participate in it and document it and, as Clifford Geertz remarked, “try to figure out what the devil they think they are up to.”⁷ Researchers in this particular context are thus forced to study liturgy beyond the text, because there are few or no written texts and consequently ethnographic-style research methods and in particular participatory observation⁸ are becoming more and more essential in conducting this kind of research in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁹ To generalise, one can say that one of the

6 Dana L. Robert and Martinus L. Daneel, “Worship among Apostles and Zionists in Southern Africa,” in *Christian Worship Worldwide: Expanding Horizons, Deepening Practices*, ed. C. E. Farhadian (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007).

7 As quoted by Clare V. Johnson, “Researching Ritual Practice,” *Studia Liturgica* 35.2 (2005) 212.

8 Cf. in this regard Lloyd, T., Steven, J., Tovey, P. 2010. *Social Science Research Methods in Contemporary Liturgical Research: An Introduction*, *Joint Liturgical Study* 39; Clare V. Johnson, “Researching Ritual Practice”; Wepener, C.J. 2005. “Researching Rituals. On the use of participatory action research in liturgical studies”. *Practical Theology in South Africa*. 20/1, 109–127; Wepener, C.J. 2010. “Liturgical research in a changing South African socio-cultural (liturgical) landscape: challenges and opportunities for method and theory”. In: Swart et al (eds.) *Religion and Social Development in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Perspectives for Critical Engagement*. Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 403–415; and for ethnography in *Practical Theology in general* see Moschella, Mary, C. 2012. “Ethnography”. in: Miller-McLemore, B. *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*. Malden, MA/Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 224–233.

9 For the geographical choice of “Sub-Saharan Africa” see Ben J. De Klerk, *Liturgical Involvement in Society. Perspectives from Sub-Saharan Africa*, (Noordbrug: PTP, 2012) v-x.

main characteristics is the bodily expression of worship¹⁰ that is enacted and in most cases never written down, and as such only exist as performed texts.

For some researchers such as me, however, this approach entails the continuous crossing of various borders and this brings me back to the question of my personal identity and the notion of liminality.¹¹ I will argue in this article that this crossing of borders entails more than joining in the (liturgical) action. It entails a very particular kind of border crossing which requires a spirituality of liminality that is necessary in order for someone like me to be able to conduct this research in an African context. This spirituality of liminality, I will argue, is a spirituality of crossing borders, on the one hand, but also and concomitantly a spirituality of being and remaining in the liminal space that exists because of the border crossing.¹² The liminal space in which a researcher thus finds him- or herself is being appreciated as good and is embraced. In essence a spirituality of liminality is a spirituality of being *en route*, of not having arrived and thus being in the position of providing final answers. I will try to expand on this by means of examples from my own research endeavours in South Africa over the last decade and a half. The examples include the crossing of scientific borders, of theological borders and even of borders within the researcher him/herself, not that these can be neatly separated from one another. In what follows I will explore these border-crossing experiences by means of illustrations, beginning with a cluster of examples from research on AIC worship in South Africa. Firstly, however, it is necessary to take a brief look at some statistics on present-day Christianity and worship in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Liturgy in Sub-Saharan Africa

According to Jesse Mugambi, there was a growth rate of 3.82% in Christianity in Africa between 1910 and 2010. In South Africa 40.7% of the population belonged

¹⁰ E. Elochukwu Uzukwu, *Worship as Body Language: Introduction to Christian Worship: An African Orientation* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1997).

¹¹ See in this regard also the observation of the Dutch liturgist Marcel Barnard, who is a white male, on conducting research in a predominantly black neo-Pentecostal church (Redeemed Christian Church of God), namely “it made me feel alienated and at the same time welcome and at home” Barnard, M. 2008. “African Worship in an Amsterdam Business District: Liturgy in Immigrant Churches”. In Jansen, M & H. Stoffels (eds.). *A Moving God. Immigrant Churches in the Netherlands*. Vienna/Berlin: LIT Verlag, 135.

¹² E. Campbell-Reed and C. Scharen. 2013. “Ethnography on Holy Ground. How Qualitative Interviewing is Practical Theological Work.” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 17/2.

to Christian churches in 1910 compared to an estimate of 81.7% by 2010. Johnson and Ross indicate that in 1910 there were a total of roughly 19 700 adherents to AICs in Southern Africa compared to about 20 814 000 by the year 2010, which marks an increase according to their calculations of 7.21% over one century. Amongst the six major Christian traditions listed by Johnson and Ross, the AICs showed the fastest growth rate over the past century in Southern Africa. Along with this, neo-Pentecostal churches are also growing strongly. The remaining number of Christians broadly belongs to Mission Initiated Churches (MICs), in itself still a very large group. And all of these churches' members, of course, worship. Somewhat older data from CASE (Community Agency for Social Enquiry) indicated that as many as 91% of persons between the ages of 18 and 35 in South Africa indicated that they attend worship services. Along with this the World Values Survey of a decade ago (1999–2002) indicates that the most conservative figure for persons attending religious services in South Africa at least once a month is 71.77%. Thus in Africa we are indeed still worshipping in churches and liturgical scholars have only recently started to include these fastest growing worshipping traditions in Sub-Saharan Africa in their research endeavours,¹³ although it is still a greatly under-explored area in the discipline of Liturgical Studies.

Burning incense for a focus group discussion

In order to launch a relatively large National Research Foundation (NRF) project in KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, I visited local religious leaders to explain what we want to do and why we want to do it.¹⁴ At the end of a three-hour meeting the

13 Mbaya, H. 2011. "The socio-practical dimensions of isitshisa in the Corinthian Church of South Africa". *HTS Theologies Studies/Theological Studies* 67(2), Art. #930, 8 pages. doi:10.4102/hts.v67i2.930; Wepener, C.J. & G. ter Haar. 2014. "Sacred sites and spiritual power. One angel, two sites, many spirits". In Post, P & Nel (eds.). *Sacred Sites, Contested Grounds. Explorations in Africa and Europe*. Trenton: Africa World Press; Barnard, M; Mbaya, H. & C.J. Wepner. 2014. "Burning, Blessing and Burying. Social Capital Formation in Churches in South Africa". In Wilhelm Gräb/Lars Charbonnier (eds.): *The impact of religion on social capital formation and social development in different cultural contexts. Entering the field in an international and interdisciplinary perspective*. Berlin/Münster: LITVerlag; Wepener, C.J. & E.E. Meyer. 2012. "The liturgical inculturation of the priestly understanding of cleansing in the Corinthian Church of South Africa (AIC) with special emphasis on the book of Leviticus". *Religion & Theology* 19/3&4, 298–318.

14 For a complete full-length description of how the research field was entered see Wepener, C.J. and M. Barnard. 2010. "Entering the field. Initiating Liturgical Research in an AIC". *Acta Theologi-*

priest of a local AIC, Rev. PW Dingani, had only two more questions or rather prerequisites. First he wanted to know whether the project leader (me) with whom he was having the meeting was an ordained minister in a church. And concomitantly he also wanted to know whether the ordination had been conducted by means of the ritual laying on of hands in a worship service; I could answer both questions in the affirmative. Secondly, at the end of the meeting the priest requested to hear the project leader pray, which I did and this also concluded the meeting.



Figure 1: (taken by M Barnard in March 2010, Phepheni, Eastern Cape, South Africa)

In the years that followed in this same research project, the researcher very often participated in worship gatherings and was asked to wear my formal liturgical attire when participating, as he would do in his own denomination when leading worship. In Figure 1 the author can be seen together with co-researchers in the NRF project mentioned. I am wearing the traditional clothes a Reformed minister would wear in South Africa, which basically consists of a black suit and white tie, and his colleague and co-researcher in this NRF project, Rev. Dr Henry Mbaya, is wearing his priest's collar as an Anglican Reverend.

ca 30/2, 192–210 and for a description of Sunday worship in this particular AIC see Wepener, C.J.; Mbaya, H. & M. Barnard. 2011. "Worship in the Corinthian Church (AIC), in Phepheni, Eastern Cape, South Africa". *Studia Liturgica* 41/2, 252–273.



Figure 2: (taken by the author on 21 March 2013, Phepheni, Eastern Cape, South Africa)

As part of a visit by the author to the one specific congregation in this AIC in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa in March 2013, the researcher conducted a focus group interview on death rituals in this congregation and community.

Figure 2 was taken at the beginning of that interview. Firstly the drums were sounded, after which I was told that I may now enter the church building where they preferred to have the discussion. Then Rev. Dingani did an invocation prayer and lit the incense that he had placed in a silver bowl, which burnt throughout the time that we were talking. It should also be noted that participants came to the meeting dressed in their church clothes that are usually reserved for liturgical rituals in this church. The meeting in the church building was concluded with the singing of several choruses and the Lord's Prayer, which is the same way in which all their worship services conclude.

Although the photographs included in this article may give readers some idea of the kind of worship that is being participated in and documented, it is a fairly difficult exercise to describe in words AIC worship in a rural church in South Africa. In a plenary delivered at the meeting of the Societas Liturgica in 2013 in Würzburg Germany, I described the language of worship in Sub-Saharan Africa, of which AIC worship form a large part, as being the language of the body, – of the (evil) S/spirit(s), – of power, – of the Old Testament, and – of healing. In any worship service in most AIC's in South Africa this is true and a researcher will observe and participate in worship where the spirit world is dominant in all aspects, making dreams, visions and spirit possessions a regular part of most worship gatherings. Furthermore these services are conducted with full bodily participation by all by means of singing, dancing, the playing of drums and African horns and in which healing is a standard part of most worship services. These worship services will rarely be shorter than three hours with much interaction between the researcher, the worshipers and the church leaders before and after the gathering.

In what follows I would like to reflect on the above examples before I introduce a second set of examples from my field work. Firstly, the question and request at the outset of the project regarding my ordination and the request for a prayer in my view point to the fact that there were indeed invisible borders between me as representative of the research team and the religious community. And what the priest was actually doing was to see whether the researchers who would arrive in future to participate in their worship will, so to speak, be 'taking off their shoes' at the door of his church before they enter the space to conduct their research. Non-religious and/or non-ordained researchers would probably not have gained access to this particular congregation and denomination. I am convinced that the reaction of a researcher to a request involving a particular ritual – for example, accepting or refusing to pray – potentially tells the participant something about the researcher's own (faith) convictions. In this regard Rev. Makhubu states his concern as "fear that outside scholars, such as anthropologists, are not motivated by a genuine sympathy ('sincere love') for and interest in

the Independent Churches.” In my view these requests served a similar function as a ritual taboo, namely exclusion aimed at preserving.

Taken together all the examples, the question and request to the researcher as project leader at the outset of the research project, the request to wear formal liturgical dress during participatory observation, as well as this focus group discussion for which incense (among other things) was burnt, the nature of qualitative research in a denomination and local congregation such as this one, are clearly vastly different to what is done in more Western-style churches in South Africa, where I have also done research. In the light of the above examples from actual experiences, qualitative participatory liturgical research in the African context entails a kind of border crossing that puts the researcher such as me in whilst completely immersing myself in the worship action in a state of liminality, of being on the threshold. My own already mentioned training and background make a dualistic worldview almost a default setting not only when approaching academic work, but also worship, liturgy and ritual. Incense burning, drums playing and those church members participating wearing their full church dress are a constant reminder that such a dualistic worldview as mine is foreign to Africa.¹⁵ The border between Sunday worship and a focus group discussion regarding death rituals is easily dissolved and the researcher should realise that it is not the participants but indeed he himself who is ‘the other’ in this context and that engaging the spirit world of Africa in research is essential for the understanding of not only liturgy, but also liturgical research.

In this regard the Ghanaian theologian Cephas Omenyo,¹⁶ with special reference to the Akan in Ghana, observes that the empirical and meta-empirical are inseparable; but this is also true for many other peoples from Sub-Saharan Africa. He also quotes John Pobee in this regard, namely that “the sphere of the supernatural is much broader in the African culture than in any European context”. A researcher such as I thus enters into a space somewhere between a dualistic worldview regarding the visible and invisible worlds, which places one in a liminal space. However, this position does indeed make you more attentive and what I describe here is very closely connected to what Richard Osmer calls “a

15 Cf. Olupona, J.K. “Foreword”. In Olupona, J.K. 2000. *African Spirituality. Forms, meanings and expressions*. World Spirituality: A Encyclopaedic History of the religious Quest Volume 3. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company (Herder & Herder): xvii-xviii; Ter Haar, G. *How God Became African. African Spirituality and Western Secular Thought*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009):34–45.

16 Omenyo, C.N. 2011, “New Wine in an Old Wine Bottle?: Charismatic Healing in the Mainline Churches in Ghana” in Candy Brown ed. *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Healing* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press), 234.

spirituality of presence”.¹⁷ However, you are not the priest of the people you are listening to and participating in worship with, and you are acutely aware of the fact that on the level of ontology and epistemology you and the worshipping community are worlds apart.

In most cultures liminality is seen to be a sacred space or time, and this border crossing requires the researcher ever so often to take off his or her shoes; to continually postpone the temptation of arriving (at answers and conclusions). All in all I have come to realise that in this kind of research the most important borders that need to be crossed are borders within you as researcher; otherwise it would be impossible to do participatory observation in a way that does not exclude either the empirical or meta-empirical, but actually approaches the phenomenon of worship and ritual in a holistic way. At this stage I do not have adequate words for what is needed, but I do know it has to do with a participatory observation spirituality that fits the particular context. A certain kind of spirituality is needed because this kind of engagement with people and their worship can either entail a reinforcement of a colonial paradigm¹⁸ regarding the other, or it can actively strive to move beyond such a paradigm and decolonise the mind.¹⁹

Participatory observation and the need for prolonged engagement

The second border that I want to draw attention to regarding the way in which qualitative research is carried out pertains to the amount of time that a researcher is prepared to commit or invest. In other words, it has to do with the (dis)advantages of long-term engagement in the field versus brief visits.

As a researcher I have conducted participatory observation regarding worship and liturgy in, among other places, Langa (Cape Town), Mbekweni (Paarl), Phepheni (Kokstad region), Wyebank (Durban), Mlazi (Durban) as well as different parts of the greater Tshwane area (Marabastad, Sunnyside) and in almost every instance I was afterwards served a full meal without, of course, either

¹⁷ Osmer, *Practical Theology* (n. 3), 33–34.

¹⁸ See Nealon, J. & S. Giroux. 2012. *The Theory Toolbox. Critical Concepts for the Humanities, Arts, & Social Sciences*. Lanham/Boulder/New York/Toronto/Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

¹⁹ Ellis, S. 2009. *South Africa and the Decolonization of the Mind*, (Inaugural Lecture, Free University of Amsterdam).

expecting it or asking for it. Here it would be possible to propose arguments on hospitality or ubuntu, but for this article I would like to stress the significance of these meals as being closely connected to the idea of a longer-term relationship with the worshipping community than just a quick hit-and-run. In Figure 3 women are busy preparing a meal for the visiting researchers. They cook enough for the researchers and all other members of the congregation who are present to join.



Figure 3: (taken by the author in Phepheni in 2011)

During my first visit to the congregation in Phepheni in 2008, and every visit since then, I as well as some of the co-researchers have received presents from the church members. Personally I have received cool-drink glasses, a water jug as well as wine glasses on different occasions. In Figure 4 co-researcher Rev. Dr Henry Mbaya receives a chicken from the congregation as a present at the end of one of our visits. After my first visit I also learned that I cannot visit the congregation empty handed and have since then taken gifts such as books, photographs (of them), chocolates as well as blankets. Both the receiving and giving of presents has become an integral part of every visit.



Figure 4: (taken by author in September 2011 in Phepheni)

Any argument for also conducting liturgical research on ‘liturgy beyond the text’ in contrast to only textual liturgical studies is, I believe, not necessary in the African context, seeing that almost all worship is in any event performed without

texts, as pointed out above. What is thus needed is active engagement and descriptions by means of participatory observation and specifically idiographic rather than nomothetic research strategies.²⁰ I am convinced that this is a serious issue for practical theologians and, especially in an African context, for liturgists; it represents one of the unique contributions that we can make in South Africa, namely adhering to Richard Osmer's first descriptive-empirical task and thus bringing actual liturgical praxis at grassroots level into the theological debate. Firstly, much of what is happening in churches in Sub-Saharan Africa has not yet been described and documented and is only now for the first time being done with a purposeful focus on worship and liturgy.²¹ What is needed in the discipline of Liturgical Studies is more descriptions, but not descriptions that are based on a researcher's recollection of a worship service that he or she once attended in a mission church and then proceeds to base a whole research article on worship in Africa on that one experience, or on descriptions of worship taken from books by other scholars such as missiologists,²² whose objectives for conducting research are different from those of liturgists and practical theologians. What is needed in the field of Liturgical Studies today in Sub-Saharan Africa is thus long-term engagement in worship at grassroots level as liturgists who conduct the research 'for our own purposes'.²³ Thus the focus is not only on the ritual and worship that I read about in someone else's book (who is in most cases, when it comes to worship and liturgy, not a liturgist or even a practical theologian), but on descriptions of worship and ritual that are actually happening inside and outside churches today and that stems from engagement over a longer time than a once-off visit.

The border to be crossed in this regard is thus the threshold between the study or office of a researcher and the enacted rite, but this entails even and specifically more, namely long-term engagement. It can be helpful to here re-collect Clifford Geertz's example to illustrate the difference between a thin and a thick description. In a thin description a boy who is winking to a friend could be described as

20 Babbie, E. & J. Mouton. 2001. *The Practice of Social Research*. South African Edition. Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 289–291; Osmer *Practical Theology* (n. 3) 63; Thumma, S.L. 1998. "Methods for congregational study". In: Ammerman, N.T. et al. (eds.). *Studying Congregations. A New Handbook*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 272.

21 See in this regard Robert & Daneel, *Worship* (n. 6), 43–70, and Wepener, Barnard & Mbaya, *Worship* (n. 14) as two of only a handful examples that exist and that were written for Liturgical Studies publications, to wit *Christian worship worldwide* and the *Studia Liturgica* respectively.

22 See in this regard for example the work of Bengt Sundkler, *Bantu prophets in South Africa*, (Oxford: University Press, 1961).

23 Witvliet, J.D. 2007b. For our own purposes: the appropriation of the social sciences in liturgical studies. In P. Bradshaw and J. Melloh (eds.), *Foundations in Ritual Studies: A Reader for Students of Christian Worship* (London: SPCK), pp. 17–40.

“rapidly contracting his right eyelid”, but regarding the same observation of the winking boy a thick description will be closer to “practicing a burlesque of a friend faking a wink to deceive an innocent into thinking a conspiracy is in motion”.²⁴ From personal experience and with reference to the meals and the presents I have described above, a researcher who is willing to do this kind of research must in the first instance not be in a hurry. After seven years of doing research in this one particular church, I have learned that for a focus group of one hour, for example, I must set aside a weekend. People want to first just talk to you about family, work and current affairs. Then they want to worship with you and only then are they ‘ready’ to share in interviews and focus group discussions. And after such a sharing has occurred, during which they usually say ‘your questions are making us think deeply about our worship’, it is almost unthinkable to get into your motorcar and just drive away. It is then time for the meal and even deeper sharing, during which some of the most valuable information is obtained, which you would not have gained during the interviews and focus groups. And finally it is time for giving presents, which concludes the visit. I have already observed that the differences here are not a matter of practicalities, but are on a much deeper level and involve, for example, differing conceptions of time. Actual time is, to quote John Mbiti, “what is present and what is past. It moves ‘backward’ rather than ‘forward’; and people set their minds not on future things, but chiefly on what has taken place.”²⁵ And Jacob Olupona says that “Africans have refused to rush to the future! They allow it to come to them and it is then utilized. Their belief that no condition is permanent allows them to face life with patience, endurance, and perseverance.”²⁶ This African conception of time is also to be detected in these examples and can leave a researcher once again betwixt and between.

For researchers of worship in Africa I believe it is advisable that we should cross the threshold and go to where the liturgical action is in order to participate and to do so in an on-going capacity. But there are also other reasons, for example, to avoid the potential danger of reading Western worship patterns into a very different and unique context. I cannot write articles and books about worship in an African context if I have not myself seriously engaged with actual worship in an African context. And this means even more than just the crossing of this border, but doing so in a particular way. I want to argue that one singular visit to do liturgical research has little value and should be avoided. In any relationship, including the relationship between researcher and the worshipping

²⁴ Geertz, C. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., p. 10.

²⁵ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. Second Edition, (Gaborone: Heinemann, 2008 [1969]) 17.

²⁶ Olupona, J.K. “Foreword” (n. 15), xviii.

community, insufficient investment made regarding time often has unwanted consequences for both or at least one of the parties involved, and this also applies to researching liturgical rituals in a qualitative way.

It is most probably not the primary intention of the people who provide the meals and the gifts to visiting researchers to safeguard their members and traditions, but to a certain extent these meals and gifts do serve as a kind of protection against exploitation. In other words, researchers who have shared a meal will most probably think twice before just using the people's cultural knowledge in their descriptions and explanations of liturgical actions for personal gain by means of publications and conference presentations, and they will also think of how the research can benefit the local worshipping community. To quote anthropologist Mary Douglas on food and eating customs: "Drinks are for strangers, acquaintances, workmen, and family. Meals are for family, close friends, honoured guests. The grand operator of the system is the line between intimacy and distance. Those we know at meals we also know at drinks. The meal expresses close friendship. Those we only know at drinks we know less intimately (...) There are smaller thresholds and halfway-points".²⁷ The researcher is often an 'honoured guest', but by means of the sharing of drinks and food he or she becomes a friend of the worshipping community. Of course, this raises issues in qualitative research pertaining to intimacy and distance; however, those issues are most probably part of a larger positivistic legacy and in my view foreign to Africa. Once again what is needed is a spirituality of liminality which is nurtured in the sharing of food and drink that is often different to what you are used to. Here I can quote a sms from Rev. PW Dingani and his members that I received on 11 October 2012: "We just want to say that we miss you and it's been a long time since we have seen you. God bless".

A different view comes from Müller, who conducted research in an AIC in Southern Africa and interpreted someone saying to him "the Lord wants to bless you richly, but first you have to be baptized" as being confronted as participant-observer with only the either/or choice of membership or leaving; he says "A nation-state might demand the same from a long-term immigrant: Either accept citizenship with all its responsibilities or return to your home country". My argument in this article is different to Müller's, namely that the research advantage of being a research immigrant is an advantage; however, for it to be an advantage a spirituality of liminality needs to be cultivated.

²⁷ Douglas, M., 1971, "Deciphering a Meal", in C. Geertz (ed.), *Myth, Symbol and Culture*, pp. 61–81, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, p. 66.

The last example pertains to what I deem the most important reason why people in Africa go to church in general and worship in particular, and also as such why they will choose to go to a particular congregation over against another one. And that reason is, of course, healing.

The healing researcher

I begin this last section by quoting from an email I sent in November 2012 to some of the other researchers in the already mentioned NRF research project. It is a paragraph I typed one evening in my guest house in Durban after visiting various church leaders in order to conduct interviews on liturgy, ritual and worship over the course of a weekend.

“Hallo, I am in Durban to do interviews with church leaders. Yesterday I visited the Cardinal of the RCC²⁸ and today Mrs Richmond the Archbishop of the CCSA²⁹. She was recently in a bad car accident and is in bed at home. However, last night a member dreamt that a white man will be visiting her today and he sent the information regarding this dream/vision via sms to many members in the early hours of the morning, about 2:00 AM, also to the Archbishop and her daughters. Of course yes, as you could have guessed, this much anticipated white man is also according to this dream a healer and he is the one specifically sent to come and pray and lay on hands for Archbishop Richmond herself. What can I say... And I was of course afterwards thanked with a huge meal for the healing ministry that I performed for the archbishop today.”

Since that day in Durban I have had similar experiences in Pretoria in a Zion Christian Church (ZCC) service during which I received from members (prophets) numerous prophecies regarding my life ranging from potential lung problems I might have to a prophetic call that I should strive to help the poorest of the poor in the city of Pretoria, combined with several injunctions such as the drinking of holy water, holy coffee and tea, and even to do a pilgrimage. And on many occasions whilst conducting liturgical research in Mission Initiated Churches (MIC) with a Protestant background, was I invited to preach without any previous warning given to me in this regard. In none of these cases was I asked whether I would pray for the Archbishop, preach from the pulpit or whether I would like to hear the prophecy the prophet wants to share with me; on the contrary, it was expected of me and refusing was not really an option. Attending worship as a

²⁸ Roman Catholic Church.

²⁹ Corinthian Church of South Africa, AIC.

participant observer means commitment which in many cases will have consequences that a researcher of liturgical action in Sub-Saharan Africa must be prepared to face.

These last instances are probably examples pointing towards the most difficult borders that must be crossed by some researchers. To completely exclude any possibility of ritual healing from the outset inevitably implies a reductionist approach towards the ritual data, which will influence the conclusions drawn from the collected data. It can be helpful to refer to the work of the Dutch scholar Gerrie ter Haar³⁰ in this regard; she warns against superficial comparisons of, for example, Africa and Europe based on an evolutionary approach to the passage of time that lacks historical contextualisation and therefore she observes that “there are many educated Africans who are well versed in Western culture and science but may nevertheless believe in the existence of witchcraft powers.” South African theologian Allan Anderson also mentions that African theology has largely moved within the parameters of Western theology, but that the vacuum has been filled by a grassroots theology, a “theology from the underside”.³¹

In liturgical research in Sub-Saharan Africa a researcher must know that the borders between being a researcher of liturgy and ritual and a liturgist (worship leader) very quickly become more fluid and traditional demarcations of roles are challenged. A researcher can find him- or herself fairly quickly in a liminal space between the academy and the enacted liturgical practice and in order to learn from that experience, a spirituality of liminality is once again required.

The emic perspective in qualitative participatory liturgical research in a postcolonial context

The context that is being described in this article is a postcolonial multicultural context, but one in which the largest worshipping traditions remain voiceless in the academic discourses of Practical Theology and Liturgical Studies. When traditions such as those of the AICs or Neo-Pentecostal churches do in fact gain a voice, they are more often than not represented by scholars who do not come from those traditions, such as myself, and their worship may easily be described with pejorative terms such as ‘prosperity gospel’ and ‘syncretism’, something I try to

³⁰ Ter Haar, *God* (n. 15), 14.

³¹ Anderson, A. 2003. “African Initiated Churches of the Spirit and Pneumatology”. *Word & World* 23/2, 179.

avoid. This is also sometimes done by someone who has not engaged in the worship of these communities by means of prolonged engagement or any attempt to gain an emic or insider perspective,³² but rather to reinforce their existing etic perspective. This specific context regarding scholarship, on the one hand, and the reality of liturgy on a grassroots level in Sub-Saharan Africa, on the other, asks for a reiteration of the importance of the emic perspective in qualitative research as well as postcolonial theory. Both postcolonial theory and an emic perspective are concerned with whose voices are heard or whose are being seen or overlooked.³³ In my mind the concept of liminality is once again useful to understand what is needed and therefore I conclude with an argument for the need of a spirituality of liminality in order to do liturgical research from an emic perspective in a post-colonial context.

Conclusion: a spirituality of liminality for liturgical research from an emic perspective in a postcolonial context

Liturgical research in an African context means a continuous process of border crossing – a process that is forcing liturgists in Africa to seriously rethink Liturgical Studies in our own day, also in particular doing liturgical research in an African context. We still have a long way to go in this regard, but one fact that is becoming clearer is that traditional Liturgical Studies and liturgical research cannot encompass emerging reality regarding the worship practices of the global South, and in this regard specifically Sub-Saharan Africa, by conducting research business as usual. What are needed are epistemologies that not only drink from the wells of the West but also from the rich and deep wells of Africa,³⁴ and these sources to be incorporated go beyond just the written text of worship. However, in order to achieve this ideal new methodologies must also be explored, but for this to happen – if you have a background such as my own – it is in my view important to critically reflect on the personal experiences gained while conducting research and ask about one’s own potential shortcomings. This is what brings me to the

³² Babbie & Mouton, *Practice* (n. 20), 271.

³³ Sharp, Melinda McGarrah, 2012. “Globalization, Colonialism, and Postcolonialism”. In Miller-McLemore, B. *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*. Malden, MA/Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 423.

³⁴ Ellis, Stephen & Gerrie ter Haar, 2007. “Religion and politics: taking African epistemologies seriously.” *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 45/3, 385–401.

notion of a spirituality of liminality for conducting liturgical research from an emic perspective in a postcolonial context. And this is somewhat different from the argument advanced by Campbell-Reed and Scharen who as researchers see ethnography as practical theological work and they also attempt to make ethnography more theological: “to refashion ethnographic methods as practical theology and spiritual practice.”³⁵ As researchers in their ethnographic work they thus attempt this by means of fashioning their interviewing in a particular way. But as can be seen from the examples from my South African context, the stimulus for my research came firstly from the communities and worshippers, for whom such an attempt would be alien, seeing that such a dichotomy between what is (practical) theological and what is not does in fact not exist, but only comes into existence when forced upon them by researchers. The impulse for how the ethnographic work should be conducted thus comes strongly from the people themselves, which in turn calls for a spirituality of liminality on the side of the researcher.

I believe a researcher with this so-called research spirituality of liminality can be beneficial in this regard. A researcher who is betwixt and between, neither here nor there, to use Victor Turner’s language, is in a good space to engage in participatory observation of this kind in our context. Continuous reflexivity is imperative; an observation by Melinda Sharp is helpful, namely that “It means becoming hospitable to the kind of uncertainty that requires me to face my own misunderstanding.”³⁶

When missionaries and colonisers came from the West to Africa they used language such as the ‘dark continent’. Currently the empire is striking back and missionaries from Africa are to be found everywhere in the West. Unfortunately these missionaries from Africa are today employing the same rhetoric when speaking about, for example, Europe as ‘the dark continent’ and ‘the valley of dry bones’.³⁷ What I am currently experiencing as researcher in my own African context could to a certain extent also be helpful for those missionaries who are currently entering Europe and North America, namely to also strive towards a spirituality of liminality, although this will be now an openness to cultural and religious realities that they experience as extremely foreign, such as a dualistic worldview, denial of the existence of the devil and/or evil spirits, and a much less bodily form of worship in certain churches. But even more than the present-day missionaries to the West, I believe that liturgists from the West who are currently researching the worship of these emerging immigrant communities in the West

35 Campbell-Reed. & Scharen. *Ethnography* (n. 12) 255.

36 Sharp, *Globalization* (n. 33), 425.

37 Cf. Ter Haar, *God* (n. 14), 87–100.

will be excellent conversation partners to further explore the notion of a spirituality of liminality. Taking the reality of globalisation and world-wide immigration into account, the relevance of the concept of spirituality of liminality might thus in future prove to be potentially useful in more parts of the world than just Sub-Saharan Africa and other postcolonial contexts.

If there is perhaps a reader who is wondering what happened to the archbishop after my visit, when the dream/vision was shared and I received the request to act as a healer, I will end this article by quoting an sms I received after arriving back home in Pretoria some days later: “Mom is much better and doing well. She can now walk around in the house. Your prayer made a big change to her mentally and physically. God bless u Prof.” To be honest, this message also left me in some kind of state of liminality ... but this is perhaps exactly where I should remain for the time being, if I am to continue doing this kind of research. There are various hats that I can wear while continuing with this kind of research, such as my hat as a minister, as a professor of Practical Theology, as a researcher, or maybe more than one or all of them simultaneously. I am not quite sure what a good choice would be, but maybe I must give the (S)pirit(s) the opportunity to guide me in this regard.

Note: Large parts of this article were also used in the author’s inaugural lecture as Head of Department (Practical Theology) at the University of Pretoria in 2015.