

CHAPTER 4: AFRICAN VIEWS ON RECONCILIATION

This is salvation: entities in their proper places – an ancestor at the head of the clan of healers, the nature spirit back with nature, the ancestress back in her tree shrine, the afflicted person back in good relationships with all these as well as the community.

(Kwenda, 1999:8)

4.1 African Theology

Reconciliation according to African thought is quite a wide concept. One can ask: “Which Africa? Who is Africa? Does Africa have one concept of reconciliation?” I try to answer these questions further on. But it does seem as if the different actors and societies in Africa have some general ideas in common. In this section I examine the insights of African theologians as one source of African wisdom.

4.1.1 The need for African Theologies

Mbiti (1976:7-8) tells a distressing tale to illustrate how traditional theology is largely ignorant and “often embarrassingly impotent” in the face of human questions in the churches of Africa and other parts of the world:

He learned German, Greek, French, Latin, Hebrew, in addition to English, church history, systematics, homiletics, exegesis, and pastoralia, as one part of the requirements for his degree. The other part, the dissertation, he wrote on some obscure theologian of the Middle Ages. Finally, he got what he wanted: a Doctorate in Theology. It took him nine and a half years altogether, from the time he left his home until he passed his orals and set off to return. He was anxious to reach home as soon as possible, so he flew, and he was glad to pay for his excess baggage which, after all, consisted only of the Bible in the various languages he had learned, plus Bultmann, Barth, Bonhoeffer, Brunner, Buber, Cone, Küng, Moltmann, Niebuhr, Tillich, *Christianity Today*, *Time Magazine* ...

At home, relatives, neighbours, old friends, dancers, musicians, drums, dogs, cats, all gather to welcome him back. The fatted calves are killed; meat is roasted; girls giggle as they survey him surrounded by his excess baggage; young children have their imaginations rewarded – they had only heard about him but now they see him; he, of course, does not know them by name. He must tell about his experiences overseas, for everyone has come to eat, to rejoice, to listen to their hero who has studied so many northern languages, who has read so many theological books, who is the hope of their small but fast-growing church, the very incarnation of theological learning. People bear with him patiently as he struggles to speak his own language, as occasionally he seeks the help of an interpreter from English. They are used to sitting down and making time; nobody is in a hurry; speech is not a matter of life and death. Dancing, jubilation, eating, feasting – all these go on as if there were nothing else to do, because the man for whom everyone had waited finally returned.

Suddenly there is a shriek. Someone has fallen to the ground. It is his older sister, now a married woman with six children and still going strong. He rushes to her. People make room for him, and watch him. “Let’s take her to the hospital,” he calls urgently. They are stunned. He becomes quiet. They all look at him bending over her. Why doesn’t someone respond to his advice? Finally a schoolboy says, “Sir, the nearest hospital is 50 miles away, and there are few buses that go there.” Someone else says, “She is possessed. Hospitals will not cure her!” the chief says to him, “You have been studying theology overseas for ten years. Now help your sister. She is troubled by the spirit of her great aunt.” He looks around. Slowly he goes to get Bultmann, looks at the index, finds what he wants, reads again about spirit possession in the New Testament. Of course he gets the answer: Bultmann has demythologized it. He insists that his sister is not possessed. The people shout, “Help your sister; she is possessed!” He shouts back, “But Bultmann has demythologized demon possession.”

Christianity has become a universal religion thanks to the great missionary movement of the last 200 years, and the dedication of men and women from the older Christendom, plus the assistance of local converts. Many African theologians would add that the message of Christianity was not entirely new for Africa, and that African culture already resembled the worldview of the Bible. An Ashanti proverb explains that: “No one shows a child the Supreme Being”, meaning that everybody knows of God’s existence almost by instinct’, even children know Him (Bediako, 1995:97; Mbiti, 1969:29; Mbiti, 1998:140-142)

Mbiti (1998:142) himself asserts that:

The Bible is very much an African book, in which African Christians and theologians see themselves and their people reflected and in which they find a personal place of dignity and acceptance before God.

This is certainly true. Many Africans through the ages have found in Christianity and the Bible an experience of God. But as I have pointed out, most Christian concepts and myths were written for a Medieval Western context. So African Christians had to interpret the message of Christianity from their African worldview (Carr, 1976:162; Ndungane, 2003:101; Mbiti, 1998:151).

Another problem with Western theology was that it addresses questions that were irrelevant to African people. While Western theologians debated the Immaculate Conception and the virgin birth, this “philosophised” (Makhathini, 1973:14) Christianity didn’t mean much to African people. Africans required a theology that was contextual and liberating, that recognised indifference to diseases and poverty as sin and that religion was more all-embracing than a two hour Sunday (Makhathini, 1973:15-16; Meiring, 1975:115-119). In this sense African theologians aimed to produce a corrective to Western theology.

This gave rise to African Theology where “... nearly every Christian concept is open for re-examination, re-interpretation, re-consideration” (Mbiti, 1998:143).

4.1.2 Interviews with four African Theologians

4.1.2.1 John Mbiti

John Mbiti is a famous Kenyan academic and author on African religion and theology. Although he is retired, but he still teaches and ministers in a parish. He lives in Switzerland.

When I asked him in Pretoria in 2005, what reconciliation means in Africa, Professor Mbiti related how a husband and wife would reconcile after a separation, and emphasized the role of their relatives and neighbours in this process. He explained that community life is very important in Africa, and that an injury to one is an injury to all. That is why people would say “we have been killed” if one member of their community was killed. If this corporate community is thus injured, the whole corporate community must be reconciled and is therefore involved in the reconciliation between (seemingly) only two members of the community. For the same reason, the offender is not the only one held responsible for the injury and he or she will not be punished as if he or she acted alone. The whole community takes responsibility for the deed (Mbiti, 2005:1).

Mbiti commented on the importance of rituals for reconciliation. A cleansing ritual would for example be used to cleanse a broken relationship so that a fresh relationship could be built. These rituals remove both psychological and spiritual injuries. Mbiti informed me that West African people also make use of elaborate covenants to establish or re-establish their relationship. These covenants are taken extremely seriously (Mbiti, 2005:1).

On the question of reconciliation with God, Mbiti felt that it was St Paul who first came up with the idea that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself”. He argued that he did not believe that people needed to reconcile themselves with God. Jesus’ relations with people were not a kind of reconciliation between Jesus and the people – He met them directly and did not deal with them as sinners; He did not call for reconciliation between humans and God. The question of reconciling people with God did not arise. Mbiti explained that in the African traditional worldview people did not see themselves as sinners before God until they heard the missionaries tell them that. And in his European

congregation he does not speak of sin, as sin does not cross the lives of the people (Mbiti, 2005:2).

I also asked him whether I should speak of African religion or religions; the singular or the plural. He told me that he used to use the plural in order to emphasize the diversity and plurality of practices in Africa, but that these days he uses the singular more often. He said that there are some general features in all the variations of African religion (Mbiti, 2005:2).

4.1.2.2 Agrippa Khathide

Pastor Agrippa Khathide is a member of the Apostolic Faith Mission in South Africa, a Pentecostal church with a large following among in the African community. During my interview with him at the University of Pretoria in 2004, Pastor Khathide explained that he sees reconciliation as deliverance from evil: Christ defeated the devil once and for all. According to him, Christian theology and teaching should highlight this aspect of reconciliation and take account of the reality of the dangers of the spirit world (Khathide, 2004:1).

He explained that the traditional African idea of sin – the disturbance of the rhythmic cycle of life – is quite different from the biblical notion of inherited sin. In line with this, Africans see reconciliation as a consensual, community-determined restoration of this disturbance. He believed that the biblical view of sin and redemption should replace the African view of sin and reconciliation (Khathide, 2004:1-2).

Pastor Khathide represents the group of African theologians that see little continuity between African religion and Christianity. As such his church does not use traditional African symbols in their liturgy (Khathide, 2004:2).

Khathide's African theology is quite negative regarding the value of African religion, but takes the worldview of African people very seriously. Anderson (1998:407) explains that:

The African traditional world is filled with fearsome and unpredictable occurrences demanding a Christian answer. Hermeneutics in Africa must be relevant to the whole of Africa's existence, and proclaim biblical deliverance from sin, from sickness, and from the very real fear of evil that haunts many people. ... The Pentecostal-type churches in Africa are endeavouring to provide a solution to this compelling need.

4.1.2.3 Daniel Ngubane

Reverend Ngubane, a pastor in the Assemblies of God which is also a church in the Pentecostal tradition, differs significantly from Khathide. Since the 1980's, he has been very involved in reconciliation between black and white communities in the then tense Durban area of South Africa. I met him in Durban in 2004 after I heard that he felt strongly about the need for African reconciliation rituals.

He believes that Western Christian teachings and practices are not relevant for Africans or sensitive to their problems. As a result, African people often do not regard these Western notions as important. He recounted how many African leaders were quick to sign peace treaties, but then broke them even more quickly. He believes fervently that African reconciliation rituals should be explored in order to utilise reconciliation models of that can lead to true lasting reconciliation (Ngubane, 2004:1).

Ngubane explained that in African culture, when someone injures another person, he or she will symbolically wash the wound in a nearby river. By washing the wounds, the offender admits guilt, acknowledges responsibility for the injury, and binds him or herself to never do it again. This kind of oath, he says, is taken much more seriously than the signing of a document (Ngubane, 2004:1).

Ngubane (2004:1-2) listed a number of African reconciliation rituals that can possibly be used in a wider context. These include rituals of expulsion, new community formation and cleansing. He believes that it is very important that the truth come out, and in this connection describes the ritual of milking the palm (*ukusengelana ilala*):

When it is felt that someone has not spoken the whole truth, he/she will be given a blade of palm leaf. This he or she must rub while being interrogated. As it becomes slippery – it squeaks. This is taken to be an indication that he is lying, and must be interrogated again. It is thought that tense (guilty) fingers will make the leaf squeak, while less tense fingers will not.

(Ngubane, 2004:1)

4.1.2.4 Tinyiko Maluleke

Professor Maluleke is an influential African and Reformed theologian and academic at UNISA, who has published extensively on the subjects of African Traditional Religion as well as on Mission within the African context.

Professor Maluleke wrote a poem called “Lethal Loaded Gun” in which he warns that Christianity can be dangerous and life threatening:

Aids guns
land-mines diseases
malnutrition machetes ...
Africans are dying
in the midst of abundant life
Africans are crying

so everlasting life
could be nothing but a lie
Africans are wondering

Africans are dying
in which many find solace
yet it is no fun
when they hate and kill and die
in the name of religion
the loaded lethal gun

it kills only by accident
that is what they say
only they will die
who use as superficial dye
without the instruction book
that is what they say
yet the accidents occur
again and again
if you do not believe
consider South Africa here
Sudan and Rwanda there

In the name of Christ they prey
on all the millions who pray
its holy war some say
but how can war be holy
and the holy do such folly
Africa must be saved
some sing
in a big great sound
with much fun and pun
but the poor cannot run
from this thing they found
the lethal loaded gun

(Maluleke, 1998:324-325)

Maluleke calls for a Christian introspection in which Christians should probe "...the role, significance and effects of Christianity in Africa" (Maluleke, 1998:326). It is with this introspection in mind, that I asked him about reconciliation.

Maluleke stated that reconciliation with God is very important for African people: "... there is no sorrier state (for them) than to be not reconciled with their ancestors or God". This reconciliation takes place on at least four levels: with God, fellow humans, creation and

oneself. Professor Maluleke remarked that reconciliation with creation – the mountains, seas, land and animals – are often overlooked. The Xhosa cattle killings of 1867-1857 – when most Xhosas burned their crops and slaughtered their cattle in obedience to a vision – illustrated exactly how important it is for all levels to be reconciled, and that when there is conflict on one level, it easily taints the other levels as well (Maluleke, 2005:1; Ashforth, 1991:581).

Maluleke (2005:1; c f 1994:252) went on to explain that reconciliation means that all must be accounted for – the truth must be completely disclosed and all the pain must be vented. It does not necessarily mean that everything is solved, but rather that good and bad are recognized (and taken responsibility for).

For Maluleke, Jesus Christ brought about reconciliation by being similar to us. It was reconciliation through solidarity – Christ identified with our everyday experiences and thereby gave us hope and meaning (2005:1).

4.1.3 Ideas on Reconciliation in African Theology

African theologians developed their own Christology and understanding of reconciliation. Some saw reconciliation as liberation, or somewhat differently, as solidarity. This was due to the oppressive context in which they set out to create their theologies. Others understood reconciliation in terms of healing or ecology or as a critique of human political systems, or described Jesus as the Christus Victor, Joto Ancestor, Eldest Brother or first Ancestor (Bediako, 1995:85, 176; Kobia, 2003:190; Magoti, 1990:43, 45; Mugambi, 1989a:87, 120-121).

4.1.3.1 Liberation

The theme of liberation is a strong current in African theology. African Liberation theologians see Christ as the struggling God, the Liberator, being on the side of the poor and the oppressed; the one who frees people from their shackles (Mbiti, 1998:153). Reconciliation means that freedom and justice be done, as Canaan Banana (1976:156-157) movingly illustrates in his translation of the Lord's Prayer:

OUR FATHER WHO ART IN THE GHETTO,
DEGRADED IS YOUR NAME,
THY SERVITUDE ABOUND,
THY WILL IS MOCKED,
AS PIE IN THE SKY.

TEACH US TO DEMAND,
OUR SHARE OF GOLD,
FORGIVE US OUR DOCILITY,
AS WE DEMAND OUR SHARE OF JUSTICE.

LEAD US NOT INTO COMPLICITY,
DELIVER US FROM OUR FEARS.

FOR OURS IS THY SOVEREIGNTY,
THE POWER AND THE LIBERATION,
FOR EVER AND EVER, AMEN.

4.1.3.2 Solidarity

Related to the view of reconciliation as liberation, reconciliation is also seen as solidarity. The idea of God showing solidarity with people in their struggles, has led to touching images of Christ as, for example, a Black Woman or a disabled God (Johnson, 2002:205; Ruether, 2002:xv; Willis, 2002:223-224). Accordingly, God saved humankind by showing solidarity with them in their struggles. African and Black theology places a high premium on the fact that in becoming human in Jesus, God was not born in the sumptuous palaces

of kings, but that the almighty and transcendent God chose to empty the godhead in order to take on the nature of a slave (Maimela, 1998:118; Maluleke, 2005:1).

God came down from his throne and chose to be born of poor parents, to live and die as a poor and oppressed human being so as to give the oppressed Blacks new life and hope. In doing so, our Creator, in Jesus, chose to identify the divine being with human suffering and pain and let Him share in it so that God might win freedom and life in its fullness for the downtrodden.

(Maimela, 1998:118)

In Jesus Christ, God the Father suffered in solidarity with suffering humanity. In this view, reconciliation means the deliverance from suffering by knowing that God understands our suffering and ends it (Mbiti, 1998:154).

In his well-known poem “I am an African”, Gabriel Setiloane (1976:128-131) touches on many christological and soteriological themes. He writes that although African people always knew the one and only God (albeit by different names), the story of Jesus Christ took some time to reach them. Still, the nativity and teachings of Jesus were both refreshing and eluding. But the story of the cross and suffering of Jesus was irresistible.

This was God showing solidarity with the oppressed:

They call me African:
African indeed am I:
Rugged son of the soil of Africa,
Black as my father, and his before him;
As my mother and sisters and brothers, living and gone from this world.

They ask me what I believe ... my faith.
Some even think I have none
But live like the beasts of the field.

“What of God, the Creator
Revealed to mankind through the Jews of old,
The YAHWEH: I AM
Who has been and ever shall be?
Do you acknowledge Him?”

My fathers and theirs, many generations before, knew Him.
They bowed the knee to Him
By many names they knew Him,
And yet 'tis He the One and only God
They called Him:
UVELINGQAKI:
 The First One
 Who came ere ever anything appeared:
UNKULUNKULU:
 The BIG BIG ONE,
 So big indeed that no space could ever contain Him.
MODIMO:
 Because His abode is far up in the sky.
They also knew Him as MODIRI:
 For He has made all;
And LESA:
 The spirit without which the breath of man cannot be.

But, my fathers, from the mouths of their fathers, say
That this God of old shone
With a brightness so bright
It blinded them ... Therefore ...
He died himself, UVELINGQAKI,
That none should reach His presence ...
Unless they die (for pity flowed in His heart).
Only the fathers who are dead come into His presence.

Little Gods bearing up the prayers and supplications
Of their children to the GREAT GOD ...
"Tell us further you African:
 what of Jesus the Christ,
Born in Bethlehem:
 Son of Man and Son of God
Do you believe in Him?"

For ages He eluded us, this Jesus of Bethlehem, Son of Man:
Going first to Asia and to Europe, and the western sphere,
Some say He tried to come to us,
Sending His messengers of old ... But ...
They were cut off by the desert and the great mountains of Ethiopia!

Wanderers from behind those mountains have told
Strange tales to our fathers,
And they in turn to others.

Tales of the Man of Bethlehem
 who went about doing good!
The theme of His truth is now lost in the mouths of women
As they sissed their little children and themselves to sleep.

Later on, He came, this Son of Man:
Like a child delayed He came to us.

The White Man brought Him.
He was pale, and not the sunburnt Son of the Desert.
As a child He came.

A wee little babe wrapped in swaddling clothes.
Ah, if only He had been like little Moses, lying
Sun-scorched on the banks of the River of God
We would have recognized Him.
He eludes us still this Jesus, Son of Man.

His words. Ah, they taste so good
As sweet and refreshing as the sap of the palm
 raised and nourished on African soil
The Truths of His words are for all men, for all time.

And yet for us it is when he is on the cross,
This Jesus of Nazareth, with holed hands
 and open side, like a beast at a sacrifice:
When He is stripped naked like us,
Browned and sweating water and blood in the heat of the sun,
Yet silent,
That we cannot resist Him.

How like us He is, this Jesus of Nazareth,
Beaten, tortured, imprisoned, spat upon, truncheoned,
Denied by His own, and chased like a thief in the night.
Despised, and rejected like a dog that has fleas,
For NO REASON

No reason, but that He was Son of his Father,
OR ... Was there a reason?
There was indeed ...
As in that sheep or goat we offer in sacrifice,
Quiet and uncomplaining.
Its blood falling to the ground to cleanse it, as us:
And making peace between us and our fathers long passed away.
He is that Lamb!
His blood cleanses,
 not only us,
 not only the clan,
 not only the tribe,
 but all, all MANKIND:
 black and white and Brown and Red,
 all Mankind!

HO! ... Jesus, Lord, Son of Man and Son of God,
Make peace with your blood and sweat and suffering,
With God, UVELINGQAKI, UNKULUNKULU,
For the sins of Mankind, our fathers and us,
That standing in the same Sonship with all humankind and you,
Together with you, we can pray to Him above:
FATHER FORGIVE.

4.1.3.3 Community and Ecology

Christina Landman distinguishes African Woman's Theology from Feminist and Womanist theologies. African Woman's Theology addresses the specific situation and challenges of black women in Africa (Landman, 1998:137).

According to Pienaar (2003:52, 56, 57), African Woman's Theology emphasises the community, human relations and life, and has compassion with the victims of society. This is reflected in its community orientated methodology which is sourced from human stories rather than abstract or dogmatic principles (Ackermann, 1994:213, 218-219).

Its concern for the community includes people's relationship with the natural environment. These theologians seek solidarity with and healing of nature as an essential part of reconciliation (Landman, 1998:140, c f Daneel, 1993:311-332).

4.1.3.4 Healing

Other African theologians, especially those from the African Initiated Churches, see Jesus Christ as the ultimate Healer, the one who exorcises evil spirits, the one who protects against magic and sorcery and the one who enables childless women to bear offspring. Salvation is deliverance from the Evil One, rather than deliverance from God's anger at their sins. African women often see Jesus also as their friend, their companion (Hayes, 1998:175, 176; Khathide, 2004:1; Mbiti, 1998:154; Musopole, 1993:348; Ndungane, 2003:104).

4.1.4 African Theology and African Religion

The effort to develop and reformulate African Theology depends heavily upon African Religion which "... gives access to African lifestyles, myths and narratives, practices and rites, and the broad oral tradition" (Du Toit, 1998:390). African religion's worldview, i.e., its view of God, of nature and the ancestors, of community life, medicine and healing, all provide a lens through which traditional Christian doctrines are reinterpreted (Du Toit, 1998:390).

Most African theologians agree that African religion can and should influence Christianity. African religion can do more than simply provide images and symbols for the inculturation of the Christian message. African religion can make a contribution to the life of the church in terms of, for example, spirituality and respect towards nature and creation. "Our growing consensus is that African religion has said 'yes' to the gospel. The gospel has also said 'yes' to African religion" (Mbiti, 1998:151; Kgatla, 1995:129).

At the first conference of African theologians in Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1966, the African theologians formulated this belief as follows:

We believe that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Creator of heaven and earth, Lord of history, has been dealing with mankind at all times and in all parts of the world. It is with this conviction that we study the rich heritage of our African peoples, and we have evidence that they know of Him and worship Him. We recognise the radical quality of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ; and yet it is because of this revelation that we can discern what is truly of God in our pre-Christian heritage: this knowledge of God is not totally discontinuous with our people's previous traditional knowledge of Him.

(in Mbiti, 1998:151)

In the next section I will turn to African religion itself, as the African theologians do, in search of Africa's contribution to the study of reconciliation. But first a word on the African Initiated Churches.

4.1.5 The position of the African Initiated Churches

The African Initiated Churches, in terms of formulating a definition of reconciliation, seem to represent an in-between position. Some of these were initially formed by schism from white-controlled denominations, others came into being as a consequence of visions and revelations that came to their founders, while still others were the offspring of Zionist and Pentecostal missionaries from America in the first decade of the 20th century. The African Initiated Churches took the basic message and applied it to the African context (Hayes, 1998:176).

Without Western restrictions, they did so more thoroughly than mainline churches managed. The African Initiated Churches incorporated the African worldview, African problems, symbols and style, and in so doing, produced a more traditional African expression of Christianity. As Carr (1976:162) writes:

It is here where Africans find themselves able to celebrate unashamedly and gloriously the longed-for freedom – from many forms of slavery – that they have experienced through conversion to Jesus Christ. Here African theology comes to life in music and song, prayers and sacramental acts of healing and exorcism, art forms and architecture liturgy and dress, Church structures and Community life.

On the other hand, the theology of the African Initiated Churches is more than just a middle position theology. The African Initiated Churches have a unique soteriology that is not only an inculturated Western Christian belief, but one that stems from the African worldview and the existence of the spirit world: “ ... the most significant theological

development was in [the African Initiated Churches'] soteriology, where they shifted the emphasis away from guilt for individual sin to deliverance from evil" (Hays, 1998:176).

4.2 Traditional African Religion

4.2.1 An unexplored source

Popular modern spirituality is dominated by Western and Christian worldviews and religion. Additionally, the Eastern religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, etc) have become increasingly popular and part of the religious consciousness of our global-village world. In contrast, African philosophy and spirituality have not been recognised to the same extent. I believe that in the same way that the Eastern religions enriched the religious consciousness of the world with their emphasis on relativity and withdrawal, so too can Africa teach us something through its emphasis on community and harmony (Adeyemo, 1998:369-371; Lugira, 2001:46; Magesa, 1997:5, 288; Van Niekerk, 1992:81-82).

In the rest of this chapter, I want to explore the myths and rituals of reconciliation in African religion. Some myths were passed on through the oral wisdom of traditional healers, for example the legends of the inventive mythologist, Credo Mutwa, and may seem strange or perhaps somewhat romanticised. Others have a more national character and explain the founding of various nations or the acts of national heroes. Many rituals were described by anthropologists, and still others were reported by African Christians who tried to make sense of both their Christian faith and the world in which they grew up. Although my sources are varied and not of the same quality, I use them simply to give some idea of African views on reconciliation, and not to compare or evaluate these sources.

I believe that Africa has a lot to offer and should be taken seriously.

...we cannot with impunity and a clear conscience ignore or write off African experience before the advent of Christianity as irrelevant or distracting to the process of Christianisation. On the contrary, over the years I have developed a growing conviction of the need to journey a little deeper into this African primal forest (which Western man fears so much and has made us – its children – fear too!). It could, even as it has done for the archaeologists, bring us face-to-face with the spiritual (religious) ancestry of all mankind and help us to understand the forces in which we – all mankind – “live and move and have our being”

(Setiloane, 2000:13).

4.2.2 Which African Religion?

4.2.2.1 One Religion

There has been some debate in the past on whether all the different peoples of Africa have one religion or whether they all had different religions. There is enough reason to speak of African religions – there are about two thousand African people groups (tribes), and each has its own religious system. Still, most scholars agree that African religion is “one in its essence” although there are a variety of expressions of that one belief (Magesa, 1997:15-16; Mbiti, 1969:1-2, 12; 1998:141; 2005:2; Parrinder, 1962:10-11; Smart, 1989:298).

I will therefore use the singular form “religion” as is common practice, bearing in mind that there are considerable differences within African religious tradition (Bediako, 1995:97-99; Thorpe, 1991:4,103) and these differences should be acknowledged. An extreme example is the Bushmen or San whose religion is not truly representative of African religion overall: it lacks a belief in spirit mediators and a precise concept of evil. Still, I agree with Thorpe (1991:9) that “... from another perspective it is the most African of all

religions” and have influenced many other more typically African groups. Where possible, I will give an indication of the specific group or tribe in question.

4.2.2.2 Old and new

Related to the above, is the question of whether the African religion I describe is a traditional and pure religion, or a religion influenced by Christianity, Islam and other Western influences. And to what extent do African people still believe as they did centuries or decades ago?

This is a difficult question to answer. African people are not a homogenous group and every single African has probably been exposed to outside influences in different ways. Many adherents of traditional African religion are urbanised and well aware of other religious traditions and cultures, and are undoubtedly influenced by them. Others live more isolated and their version of African religion is less contaminated. I believe African religion is dynamic and varied, and I am aware that my attempt to pin it down will always be a bit artificial.

But perhaps the central theses and structure of African religion are more universal. Mutwa (1998:559) explains that:

Everything [an African] does, think, says, dreams of, hopes for, is moulded into one structure – his Great Belief. Things like disbelief, doubt, agnosticism, atheism, disobedience are entirely unknown, unfathomable, senseless, within the framework of the Great Belief.

There are some fundamental beliefs such as the connectedness of things and the importance of the community that informs all the different tribal variations of African

religion, and even the theology of the African Initiated Churches as well (Mutwa, 1998:559).

4.2.3 Importance of reconciliation in African Religion

Reconciliation is the heart of all religions. All religions strive to heal or restore a perceived brokenness between humans and God, between humans and the natural world, or between and among humans themselves. All religions formulate myths, which explain the present (broken) condition, and offer accompanying rituals for the purpose of rectifying this condition. As a typical religion, African religion is also focussed on reconciliation (Maluleke, 2005:1).

Abe is absolutely correct in saying that: “Salvation has been the ultimate concern of all religion ... Thus in all the Judaeo-Christian theology and the traditional religions of Africa, salvation of both the soul and the body is their ultimate goal pursued vigorously in every practical religious expression” (1996:3).

But among religions, African religion stands out in its practicality and humanness. Everything is about relationships, strengthening relationships, healing relationships. As such, there is a multitude of reconciliation rites in African religion and culture.

4.2.4 Vertical or horizontal reconciliation?

4.2.4.1 The two dimensions

Most Christian definitions of reconciliation articulate the conviction that the relationship between God and humans has been disrupted. Referring to the religious or spiritual dimension of human existence, the presupposition holds that the estrangement in the spiritual dimension has a thoroughgoing effect on everyday life, on mutual human relationships and on the attitude of human beings toward themselves. Thus, according to Christian doctrine, all humans live in estrangement from God – our source – the creator of heaven and earth. This conflict is reflected in our relationships: our relationship with God, ourselves, one another and the environment (Huber, 1990:43; Van der Kooi, 2002:105-106).

The reconciliation between human beings and God is often referred to as the vertical dimension of reconciliation and the reconciliation between humans as the horizontal dimension. Horizontal reconciliation can in turn take place between quarrelling individuals or conflicting groups.

4.2.4.2 Western Christianity's traditional vertical focus

Western Christianity has been and large segments of it continue to be more otherworldly inclined and focused more on the vertical dimension of reconciliation. There are of course many exceptions, such as the 19th century liberal theology, the Social Gospel Movement of the first half of the 20th century, the Life and Work Movement and the open, this-worldly stance of the participants in the Genevan Ecumenical movement. But still, according to

traditional Christian thought, all strife and brokenness stems from human disobedience to God. Similarly, the solution for conflict lies in first restoring human relationship with God. It thus makes sense that the focus of reconciliation should be vertical (Steyn, 2005:133).

This does not mean that Western Christianity does not take the horizontal dimension seriously. Reconciliation to fellow human beings is as important for Christians as their reconciliation to God, and is a central tenet in the teachings of Christ. But it always follows from the spiritual kind of reconciliation. Van der Kooi (2002:104) argues that the Christian concept of reconciliation is built on the presupposition that a “real and comprehensive restoration of mutually amicable human relations has its ground and motive in the reconciliation of God with humankind”. The healing of the relationship with God brings about human reconciliation on social, economic and political levels. This religious vertical focus, where found may be due to a very strong undertone of dualism that still permeates Western Christianity (Kistner, 1998:103).

In my treatment of Western Christian reconciliation models I accordingly paid mostly attention to the vertical dimension, as this informs Christian horizontal reconciliation. Because, God is, for instance, thought to require sincere confession before He forgives humans, this requirement also stands for reconciliation among humans.

4.2.4.3 African Religion’s horizontal focus

African religion, is much more this-worldly focussed, and views the affairs of humans as all-important. Instead of a dualistic worldview, African religion approaches the world holistically, and believes that all creatures in creation are linked. Their solution for distress then is to reconcile on a horizontal level, and to expect that the vertical dimension will

follow from that (Bediako, 1995:101; Ndungane, 2003:101; Nyirongo, 1997:61; Tutu, 1996:xvi-xvii; Van Niekerk, 1982:24).

Thorpe (1991:5) says that African religion is very much part of the society in which it is found. “It is thus oriented to this world and has a clear horizontal dimension”. But African religion is also permeated by an awareness of the spiritual, invisible dimension of life:

Trees, rivers, streams, rain are more than merely things to be utilised. They have a spiritual quality which unites them to human beings in a greater cosmic whole. The ancestors or living-dead continue to be a spiritual part of this greater cosmos even after they have ceased to exist as a physical part. The creator, and even creation itself, belong to this vertical or spiritual dimension of ATR.

(Thorpe, 1991:5)

Africans do refer to God when dealing with reconciliation. In a curious story (from Thorpe, 1991:18-19, also Becker, 1974:52) that deals with the human condition, God is, after all, the One who takes the initiative:

The Mantis [the divine trickster !Kaggen] made an Eland from his son-in-law /Kwammanga's shoe. /Kwammanga missed his shoe but neither he nor his wife had any idea what happened to it. Meanwhile Mantis collected honey and fed it to the Eland which he had made as it came out of the reeds to eat. Mantis's family wondered why he brought so little honey home for them, and finally they sent Ichneumon [his grandson] to hide beneath a kaross and see what happened to the honey. Watching, he saw the Eland come from the reeds and drink the water into which Mantis had put the honey. Mantis even smoothed the honey water onto the Eland's skin. Then Ichneumon jumped out from underneath the kaross. Quickly Mantis drove the Eland away, but Ichneumon confronted him with what he has seen. As they argued, Mantis denied the existence of the Eland. On his return, Ichneumon reported what he had seen.

Secretly Porcupine's family plotted together and went to the pool where Ichneumon had seen Mantis feed and stroke the Eland. /Kwammanga then put honey into the water and called the Eland by name, whereupon it came out of the reeds to drink. As it drank /Kwammanga shot it. It ran back into the reeds, where it lay down to die.

Meanwhile Mantis was looking for honey to feed his beloved Eland, but he could not find any. Feeling a strange sense of foreboding, he went to the water to call the Eland, but it did not come. He wept as he sought his Eland, following its spoor and then the drops of its blood. At last he saw it lying dead in the reeds. Weeping and

angry, he returned home. In the meantime /Kwammanga had commissioned meerkats to cut up the dead Eland. Mantis ran back to where Eland lay. When he saw the meerkats busy slaughtering his animal, he tried to stop them by shooting arrows, which however, missed their mark. Next he attacked them with a knobkerrie, but all to no avail. Finally, a meerkat snatched the knobkerrie from Mantis's hand and, after beating him, made him collect wood for a fire. While he was thus busy, Mantis saw Eland's gall bladder hanging on a tree. He pricked it open so that everything and everyone was covered in darkness. When he realised what he had done, he quickly removed his own shoe, which had red dust still clinging to it, and threw it into the sky where it became the moon.

Laurens van der Post (in Thorpe, 1991:20) interprets this myth in detail, and explains that the Mantis represents a loving, caring creator. And Mantis's sorrow over the loss of Eland, is the loss for the separation that exists between creator and creature. Thorpe explains that the creation of the moon may suggest the "inner spirit of the human soul which rises above the felt bitterness of an experienced moment to shine again, lighting the way no longer for oneself alone, but also for others" (1991:20). If the Mantis – the divine !Kaggen – represents the creator, as Van der Post believes, he is also the one who heals the brokenness and bitterness. The culprits – Porcupine, /Kwamma and the meerkats – do not do anything to reverse their murder. This myth seems to accept then that the Creator takes the initiative in repairing the human condition, and that reconciliation, thus, doesn't depend on human efforts.

It would seem that African religion presupposes that God is somewhere in the background when it comes to reconciliation, and that the initiative may even come from God. But, African religion being a practical religion, the focus falls squarely on the horizontal side of affairs, as it is thought to influence the vertical as well. In my treatment of African religion, I thus focus mostly on horizontal reconciliation.

4.2.4.4 Grounds for comparison

I conclude that the Western Christian vertical reconciliation models can be compared with African religion's horizontal models, without confusing the issue. Christian vertical reconciliation supposes the horizontal and African horizontal reconciliation, the vertical. The difference lies in the myths – which I do compare – rather than in the dimensions.

4.2.5 Some central ideas in African religion and philosophy

In order to understand African reconciliation rites and images, a number of central ideas must be clarified: the traditional African view of God, the world of the spirits, the ancestors, life force, sin, guilt and shame.

4.2.5.1 God

African religion teaches that God exists, and that this God created all things. God is eternal, all knowing, and ubiquitous. God is, frankly, beyond description. As Mutwa (1998:561) beautifully explains:

The Most Ultimate God, who is the God of the Gods of the Gods, is Everything in Everything. Each tree, each blade of grass and each stone that you see out there, and each one of the things that live, be they men or beasts, are all parts of God, just as each one of the hairs on your head and each flea in your hair and each drop of blood is part of you. The sun is part of God; the moon is part of God and each one of the stars is but an infinitesimal part of Him who Is, and yet is not, Him who Was, and yet was not, and Him who Will Be, and yet shall never be; because there never was a time when God was not and there never is a time when God can never be.

When African people consider God to be omniscient, they are conferring the highest possible position of honour on Him. Wisdom is very important in African societies, and if it

is said that God is omniscient, it admits that humans are limited while God is absolute and unlimited. Thus God is called “the Watcher of everything” (Barundi), “the Great eye” (Baganda) and the one whose “ears are long” (Ila). So too, is God omnipresent: His presence protects his people while He also sees what wrongdoers are up to. He is without beginning and without end: “God has nowhere or nowhen, that He comes to an end” (Ila). God is omnipotent – the “Almighty” who can do anything. His might is also seen in political terms as “He who roars so that all nations be struck with terror” (Zulu) and in his exercise of power over nature: “the One who makes the sun set” (Kiga). Power is thus viewed hierarchically in which God is at the top as the Omnipotent; beneath Him are the spirits and natural phenomena; and lower still are men who have comparatively little or no power at all (Eliade, 1958:44-45; Mbiti, 1969:31-32; Smart, 1989:300; Tutu, 1973:43).

God is not only transcendent, but also immanent. While many scholars label Africa’s idea of God as an uninvolved *deus otiosus* or a concealed *deus absconditus* (as many myths suggest), Africans do experience God as also immanent: “... He is so ‘far’ (transcendent) that men cannot reach Him; yet, He is so ‘near’ (immanent) that He comes close to men” (Mbiti, 1969:32). While God transcends all concepts of time and no one is beyond Him, He is so immanent that humans can make contact with Him through prayers, sacrifices and invocations. He is also near in the sense that He fills all creation, but then more in a panentheistic fashion, rather than a pantheistic manner. (Crafford, 1993: 167; Crafford, 1996:13; Eliade, 1958:47-49; Mbiti, 1969:32; Mutwa, 1998:559)

Although God is usually spoken of in anthropomorphic terms, it is believed that God is spirit, and a fathomless spirit at that. No human mind can measure Him and no intellect can comprehend or grasp Him. Thus, a Pygmy hymn describes Him (Mbiti, 1969:34-35):

In the beginning was God,
Today is God,
Tomorrow will be God.
Who can make an image of God?
He has no body.
He is as a word which comes out of your mouth.
That word! It is no more,
It is past, and still it lives!
So is God.

African people recognise God as one. According to some cosmologies, there are, besides Him, other divinities and spiritual beings some of which are closely associated with Him. These beings are generally the personification of God's activities, natural phenomena and objects, deified national heroes or spiritual beings created by God as such. In some cases, dual aspects of God are recognised (such as transcendence and immanence or good and evil), while the Shona and Ndebele even use a Trinitarian concept of God as Father, Mother and Son (Crafford, 1996:13-14; Mbiti, 1969:36; Mutwa. 1998:563; Smart, 1969:60).

God is seen as essentially good because of all the good things that he provides. However, some societies would consider calamities and misfortunes to be brought on them by God. Still, this will not cause them to see God as evil, but rather beyond human understanding. God is considered to be just and holy – “the pure King Who is without blemish” (Yoruba). There are no direct sayings that say that God is love; but then traditional African people do not really talk about love but rather show it through their actions. People assume that God loves them, and they experience it through His blessings. According to the Ila, God is not only good, but He is also “the compassionate one. God is merciful and does not stop doing good to people, no matter what they say about him. He shows his mercy to all people at all times” (Shuuya, 1973:49; also Crafford, 1996:13; Mbiti, 1969:37-38; Mutwa, 1998:563)

4.2.5.2 World of the Spirits

The spirits exist between God and humans. Broadly speaking, there are two categories of spiritual beings: those that were created as such and those who were once human beings. These can again be subdivided into four groups, namely the divinities, associates of God, ordinary spirits and the ancestors (Mbiti, 1969:75).

The **divinities** comprise personifications of God's activities and manifestations, of natural phenomena and objects, nature spirits, deified heroes and mythological figures. They are mostly thought to have been created by God as spirits. They are associated with Him, and often stand for his activities or manifestations either as personifications or as the spiritual beings in charge of major objects and phenomena in nature. Some of them are national heroes, who have been elevated and deified, but this is quite rare, and when it happens the heroes also become associated with some function or form of nature (Mbiti, 1969:75-76).

The Ashanti pantheon has major divinities that act as God's intermediaries and minor divinities that were created to protect individual human beings. Banyoro divinities are departmentalised according to people's activities, and include divinities of war, of harvest, of cattle and of the different clans. The very religious Yoruba have seven hundred divinities and an intricate pantheon to accommodate them all. Among them are *Orisa-nla* who is the supreme divinity, *Orunmila* the divinity of language, *Ogun* the owner of iron and steel, and *Sango* the manifestation of God's wrath, thunder and lightning (Parrinder, 1962:44-47; Mbiti, 1969:76).

These divinities are both transcendent, and closer to humans, as they are experienced in the environment daily as thunder and lightning, rivers and lakes, the sun and the moon (Mbiti, 1969:77).

The **associates of God** are mythological figures that explain the existence of customs, ideas and institutions. They include the female divinity (Ashanti) or the Inkosazana or “Queen of heaven” (Zulu), the mother of all peoples and the divine messenger who carries God’s gifts and punishment to the world and reports to him on human activities (Berglund, 1976:63-64; Mbiti, 1969:77-78; Parrinder, 1962:45; Sundkler, 1961:20).

The **spirits** are the common spiritual beings beneath the status of divinities and above the status of men. Although some believe that the spirits were created as a race by themselves, most African people see the spirits as what remains of human beings after they die. They are the ancestors of long ago, who are not remembered any more (Mbiti, 1969:79).

These spirits have no more family or personal ties to humans, and are thus feared as strangers, foreigners and outsiders. Still, the spirits are essentially neither good nor evil but can be one or the other. They have some physical power of humans, just as a dangerous lion might have; yet, in some ways humans are better off, and human specialists can manipulate and control the spirits as they wish. So people may fear the spirits and drive them away, but at times use them for human advantage, as they are closer to God (Mbiti, 1969:79-80).

As the spirits are invisible, ubiquitous and unpredictable, the safest thing is to keep away from them. If they appear too often humans will feel uncomfortable. They can possess

humans and cause many kinds of illness like madness and epilepsy. Yet, spirit possession is not always feared, and there are times when people induce it through special dancing and drumming. A possessed person becomes a medium that relays messages from the spirit-world to other humans (Mbiti, 1969:81-82).

The world of the spirits is very real to many Africans. John Mbiti (1969:86) reports that one of his pastor friends told him how as a schoolboy he once walked home with a friend:

They had to cross a stream, on the other side of which was a hill. As they approached this stream, they saw lights on the hill in front of them, where otherwise nobody lived. My friend asked his companion what that was, and he told him not to fear but that it was fire from the spirits. They had to go on the side of the hill, and my friend was getting frightened. His companion told him that he had seen such fires before, and that both of them had only to sing Christian hymns and there would be no danger to them. So they walked on singing, and as they went by the hill, the spirits began tossing stones at them. Some of the stones went rolling up to where the boys were walking, but did not hit them. As the young men were leaving this hill they saw a fire round which were the spirits themselves. Some of the spirits were striking others with whips and asking them, 'Why did you not hit those boys?', 'Why did you not hit them?' The two young men could hear some of the spirits crying from the beating which they received, but did not hear what reason they gave for not hitting the boys with stones.

4.2.5.3 Ancestors

Who are the ancestors? Ninian Smart (1969:58) quotes a beautiful poem to explain:

Those who are dead are never gone:
They are there in the thickening shadow.
The dead are not under the earth:
They are in the tree that rustles,
They are in the wood that groans,
They are in the water that runs,
They are in the water that sleeps,
They are in the hut, they are in the crowd,
The dead are not dead.

Those who are dead are never gone,
They are in the breast of a woman,

They are in the child who is wailing,
And in the firebrand that flames.
The dead are not under the earth:
They are in the fire that is dying,
They are in the grasses that weep,
They are in the whimpering rocks,
They are in the forest, they are in the house,
The dead are not dead.

The departed of up to five generations are not yet spirits and their process of dying is not yet complete, they are the ancestors or “living-dead” (Mbiti, 1969:25), although people who have in life injured the tribe may immediately become wandering spirits. The ancestors are still known by name, still part of their human families and people have personal memories of them. They return to their human families from time to time and symbolically share meals with them. They know and have an interest in what is going on in the family. When they appear (to the oldest member of the household) they are recognised, they may enquire after family affairs, warn of impending disasters or war, and rebuke the family members who have failed to follow their instructions. The ancestors’ interference is not always embraced: while the Shona eagerly welcome their ancestors, the Zulu deem the interference ancestors as disruptive and deal with them quickly as possible (Thorpe, 1991:45, 56-57; Crafford, 1996:14; Parrinder, 1962:58-60; Mbiti, 1969:83; Smart, 1969:58; c f Mbiti’s distinction between *Sasa* and *Zamani* in Mbiti, 1969:22-27).

Because they are still in a sense people, they are the best intermediaries between people and God. Not only are the ancestors bilingual as they speak the language of men and the language of God and the spirits, they also know the needs of humans having recently been human themselves. The Mende of Sierra Leone thus pray (in Tutu, 1996:126): “O good and innocent dead, hear us: Hear us, you guiding all-knowing ancestors, you are neither blind nor deaf to this life we live: you did yourselves once share it. Help us therefore for the sake of your devotion, and for our good.” People approach them often for

minor, everyday needs. They may not be able to perform miracles or extraordinary things to remedy the need, but humans experience a sense psychological relief when they pour out their hearts to their ancestors (Crafford, 1996:15; Mbiti, 1969:83-84; Parrinder, 1962:61; Thorpe, 1991:36; Smart, 1989:301; Tutu, 1996:xvi-xvii).

The ancestors represent the ideal community and serve as a model for their descendents of what their communities should be like. Imitating the ancestors is a kind of cure-all for bickering factions and guilt-ridden individuals (Tutu, 1996:xvi; Zulu, 1998:188). According to Zulu (1998:187) “The ancestors in African society serve as a model of perpetual peace and harmony to be emulated. Reconciliation means that the harmony (*ubuntu*) in the community is restored according to the norms of the ancestors”.

There is no such thing as ancestor worship since the ancestors are not worshipped as if they were gods. Instead, they are revered as members of the community having greater status and power, and may at times even be regarded as behaving arbitrarily and are argued with (Crafford, 1996:15).

4.2.5.4 Life force and *ubuntu*

According to African thought, a human being is an energy or a force – sometimes called ‘*seriti*’ (Tswana). A person is like a live electric wire, which is ever exuding force in all directions (Setiloane, 2000:24-25). In this force is God: “Above all this force is God, Spirit and Creator ... it is he who has force, power in himself. He gives existence, power of survival and increase to other forces” (Mulago, in Setiloane, 2000:25).

The “great belief”, is the belief in the existence of this life force. Because God created everything, the world itself is godly, and should be kept that way. In fact, God is to be found in creation, and religion, in turn, entails the perpetuation of this creation:

The fundamental element of African religious life and thought centres on the fact of creation. Created reality, including humanity, exists on account of the will of God. To continue to live peacefully, therefore, created reality must organise itself according to that will which God established for it from the very beginning. God's will for creation is preserved in the traditions of the people and is transmitted from generation to generation through the instructions of the elders and the mystical actions of the ancestors.

(Magesa, 1997:285)

This brings to the fore the importance of relationships. Relationships hold the key to both divining God's will and expressing that will. God wants relationships; the purpose of creation is relationships; the goal of one's life is relationships. Or, put differently, it all comes down to community, humanity, *ubuntu*.

Through the act of creation, God is related in an unbreakable way to the entire universe. At the centre of the universe is humanity, but it too is intrinsically and inseparably connected to all living and non-living creation by means of each creature's life force. Although God, spiritual beings, ancestors, humanity, living things and non-living things enjoy life forces with greater or lesser powers, all the forces are intertwined. Their purpose is ultimately humanity; they can act either to increase or to suppress the vital force of an individual person or of a community.

(Magesa, 1997:285)

The life force is the relationships. It is the key to God and all creation. In African religion it is important to recognise this life force, and to maintain it. Setiloane (2000:27) compares the recognition of this life force with conversion:

I venture to propose that in the human sphere, the awakening into consciousness of this dynamics of existence is what Christians have called conversion.... Biblical Christianity speaks about ‘becoming a new man in Christ’. From there on one “participates” in a more positive and creative manner in the community. But all this does not happen of one's own volition and doing.

Here Christianity and African experience are in agreement, namely, that it happens out of the initiative of an external Power (Force). The great “I” was calling the small “thou” into a relationship and communion. Therefore, it would appear that “conversion” is in African terms some kind of “possession”.

The interaction of one’s vital force with those of other people in the community does not terminate with death. Even after death the vital participation of the deceased is experienced in the community in general and in the clan circle in particular. The “ancestor cult” refers to this experience in the life of the people. The ancestors are experienced as persons and not deities or spirits. Yet, they share the divine essence, and the quality of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* – “numinousness” (Setiloane, 2000:25, 29).

4.2.5.5 Sin

The Western tendency to privatise religion and Anselm’s reconciliation model determined the Western Christian understanding of sin during much of Church history. I have shown that dominant Western theology saw sin as something that God punished us for, instead of something that God rescues us from. This understanding of sin led Western missionaries to try to induce a sense of guilt for sin in their hearers. Enlightenment missionaries often had trouble managing that. They complained that Africans had no sense of religion and no sense of sin. “In their frustration at their failure to induce this sense of guilt for sin, they called Africans incorrigible savages, and various other uncomplimentary names” (Maimela, 1985:65; Hayes, 1998:175).

Africans’ view of sin differs significantly from that of significant segments of Western Christianity. The Africans believe that God is the creator of everything including society. Society, according to their belief systems, is a moral entity since the Creator provided a moral code which directs individual behaviour patterns. However, this moral code can be

violated, and any infraction of it is regarded as sin, which earns the displeasure of God. Such sinful acts include immoral behaviour, breaking covenant, ritual mistakes, breaking of taboos, committing an abominable act, offence against God or man and pollution. Thus, while Christians often conceptualise the source of evil as the devil or sin, African religion tend to locate the source of evil firmly in the human world, in the disruptive ambitions and jealousies of people. Such people are witches or sorcerers. Sin creates imbalance in the relationship between God and man or between man and man. Such imbalance is usually attended by catastrophe not only to the offender but also to the whole community (Maimela, 1985:65; Mbiti, 2005:1; Ndwandwe, 2000:213; Thorpe, 1991:114; Turaki, 1999:141; Ubruhe, 1996:18).

African religion is thus a moral or ethical religion that dictates a certain way of living and relating, the purpose of this ethical consideration being life in its fullness. Africans quickly draw ethical conclusions about thoughts, words, and actions of human beings, or even of “natural” cosmological events, by asking questions such as: Does a particular act or happening promote life? If so, it is good, just, ethical, desirable, divine. Or, does it diminish life in any way? Then it is wrong, bad, unethical, unjust, or detestable (Magesa, 1997:77,285; Ndwandwe, 2000:213).

What traditional Christianity abstractly calls “sin” or “evil” is better expressed in African religion by the concept of “wrongdoing”, “badness” or “destruction of life”. Although the more abstract notions of sin exist within the African religious consciousness, African religion’s moral perspective is concrete and pragmatic. The African concept of sin is therefore conditional. Sin does not exist in an absolute sense but always within the community and creation. Sin depends on the context and community, and not only otherworldly norms (Magesa, 1997:161; Ndwandwe, 2000:213).

Reconciliation is then the restoration of life force whenever or wherever it is diminished. Whenever there is a breach of order in the universe as established by God through the ancestors, humanity must see to it that the harmony is restored. Thus reconciliation often involves immunising victims against witchcraft, alleviating the anger of ancestors and keeping them happy, or offering atoning sacrifices (Magesa, 1997:193; Maimela, 1985:69-70).

It is important to note that, given this view of sin, reconciliation aims to remedy a broken relationship and restore harmony, rather than to punish the guilty (Shenk, 1995:76). According to Zulu (1998:191), "... the most striking aspect (of African society) is the willingness to forgive and not to avenge, and there is no emphasis on punishment or on restitution but on making friends again". And even when God or ancestors seem to 'punish' humans, this is not their goal:

The ancestors as guardians of life and harmony may kill someone, but this is not usually the case. They are meant to protect life! They intervene mostly to warn human beings. When calamities are meted out, it is for the sole purpose to remind humans to respect their relationship with the creation and to preserve the universal order.

(Magesa, 1997:80-81)

4.2.5.6 Shame and guilt

Van der Walt (2004:2) distinguishes between a Western and an African conscience. He explains that a good conscience according to the West requires justice (obedience to norms) and a bad conscience is the result of guilt (a transgression of norms). A guilty conscience is restored through reparation and retribution. In Africa, a good conscience is the result of honour and acceptance of the community through compliance with its ideals.

It follows that a bad conscience results from one's failure to comply with the responsibilities of the community, in which case the offender experiences shame as a consequence of the exclusion from and rejection by from the community. A shamed conscience is healed through reconciliation and re-inclusion into society (Adeyemo, 1998:375).

In a communal culture – such as in African – Van der Walt (2004:12) argues that a transgression is never directly addressed because it may undermine a person's honour. The insult may be even worse than the transgression itself. The community thus address the wrong through indirect manners like gossip, stories, proverbs, parables, dramas and other symbolic actions. In Western individualist culture guilt is internalised. The individual knows that he/she transgressed and feel guilty about it, even though others may not know about it.

The difference then is that in individualist cultures the transgression of norms leads to a guilty conscience and a fear of being punished. In more communal cultures the failure to live up to the expectations of the community, leads to fear of being rejected and a feeling of shame (Van der Walt, 2004:12).

A guilty conscience is more easily restored than a shamed conscience. In the case of a guilty conscience, the guilty person is punished (by being fined or forced to compensate) and the guilt is resolved. In the case of a shamed conscience, both repentance and forgiveness is complicated (Van der Walt, 2004:13). Repentance and admission of guilt shames the guilty person even more, and is rather concealed as long as possible. If the transgression cannot be concealed any longer, the guilty person will use a mediator to admit guilt on his/her behalf and negotiate reconciliation. The question of forgiveness

further complicates matters. When a wronged person forgives a wrongdoer, he or she implies that the guilty party is bad. And for the transgressor to accept forgiveness is to admit lowliness (2004:14).

It seems that van der Walt may have a point. Instead of direct conflict, African people often try to avoid conflict and rather communicate subtly and indirectly. Van Niekerk (1992:76-77) relates that when some children were destroying his fruit trees, his first instinct was to scold them. But one of the black deacons called to the children to come back the next day. All the children immediately went home without any quarrel or argument. The children understood perfectly that they were not meant to come back again; they knew that he was sending them home.

Likewise, if a father-in-law wants his son-in-law to slaughter a goat, the son-in-law will never refuse. He will assure his father-in-law that he will seek out a nice fat goat. And every time his father-in-law asks after the goat, the son will reply that he still has not found one that is good enough. The father-in-law will understand that he is not getting a goat, but without any conflict (Van Niekerk, 1992:77).

Unfortunately, this indirect approach can also lead to mistrust. Nothing is as it seems; everything has a different, often contradictory, meaning, which can hinder relationships (Van Niekerk, 1992:77).

Still, Van der Walt may be generalising. An interesting exception is often found within African culture. When a diviner finds that some kind of illness or misfortune is the result of a spirit or ancestor being neglected, steps are immediately taken to rectify the situation: rituals are performed, family members cared for and wrongs set right (Thorpe, 1991:60-

61). This easy kind of reconciliation resembles Van der Walt's guilt culture more than the typical shame culture.

It also happens in the worst of cases when witchcraft is suspected. When the offending witch is sought and possible candidates (usually the descendants of convicted witches and anti-socials) interrogated, Shona suspects may be quick to confess. Since it is believed that a witch can do evil unwittingly, the accused are often unsure of themselves (and their innocence) and may confess to being a witch in the hope of being restored to the community through exorcism (Thorpe, 1991:64; Kgatla, 1995:127-128). It seems that evil may be objectified and dealt with quite speedily.

4.3 Reconciliation myths and rituals

4.3.1 Introduction

African knowledge of God is expressed in proverbs, short statements, songs, prayers, names, myths, stories and religious ceremonies. All these are easy to remember and pass on to other people, since there are no sacred writings in traditional societies. One should not, therefore, expect long dissertations about God.

(John Mbiti, 1969:29)

I will use these stories, myths and anecdotes to construct and classify African ideas on reconciliation.

My categorisation and classification will be artificial but it cannot be otherwise. I acknowledge the fact and present my categorisation as one possible way of arranging the myths and rituals. It corresponds with the artful and playful approach necessitated by a comparative study (as explained in chapter 2). Although my categories inevitably overlap,

I use the intention or myths behind the reconciliation rituals as my main distinguishing criterion. Some rituals intend to create community while others intend to propitiate or even expel.

The various myths or objectives behind the reconciliation rituals are not always obvious, as different performers of the ritual may have different intentions with what appears to be one and the same ritual. It is therefore more useful to try to classify the intentions (myths) rather than the rituals themselves. A case in point is rituals involving sacrifices. In African religion the concept of sacrifice is predominant and reconciliation ceremonies with this feature abound in African society. Scholars have differentiated between different kinds of sacrifice according to their purpose: Some sacrifices enhance the relationship between God and humans, while others atone for human wrongdoing. The sacrifices may be made to God himself, other divinities or spirits, the ancestors or any grouping of them. A sacrifice may also be intended for God by way of the ancestors. Sacrifices can ward off evil or confirm and strengthen society. It is quite obvious that these distinctions are not absolute. In essence, all sacrifice usually brings God and worshippers together in an intimate fashion (Schmidt, 1988:422-432; Smart, 1989:302; Ubruhe, 1996:16, 17).

A sacrifice, involving the slaughtering of an animal, its offering and the pouring out of its blood, immolation of some parts of the animal and the eating of other parts, can be intended as a propitiatory act, a gift, a cleansing ceremony, a way to establish communion with the ancestors and/or God or a reconstruction of community (Ubruhe, 1996:14-15; Abe, 1996:7).

4.3.2 Rituals intended to create community

Instead of the Cartesian dictum, “I think, therefore I am”, Africans say: “I belong, therefore I am”. An African is a being-in-community. This is the concept of *ubuntu* – I am because we are! African people discover their humanity in relationship with others (Adeyemo, 1998:374; Gerloff, 1998:49; Ndungane, 2003:102; Setiloane, 2000:21; Tutu, 1999:35).

Africa’s first response to evil is to restore the community. When a person has done something to harm the community, he or she will be confronted and made to understand how disruptive his or her actions are for the wellbeing of the community. The offending person’s dignity will then be restored and the community recreated (Ndwandwe, 2000:214; Crafford, 1993:167).

4.3.2.1 Community or *ubuntu* as reconciliation

In their myths about the ‘genesis’ of things, it is significant that Africans invariably teach that the first appearance of people was as a group, a company. In these myths, whether the first people came out of a bed of reeds or a hole in the ground, it is invariably a community of men, women, children and animals that appear. Gregariousness is an African characteristic that has been observed by students of all disciplines (Setiloane, 2000:20).

A Zulu myth explains how the community was God’s solution for brokenness:

... a mischievous young man was punished by iNkosi by being sent to earth through a hole in the sky. After the hole had been opened in the floor of the sky, iNkosi tied an intestine or umbilical cord around the young man’s waist and lowered him to earth. The young man then cut himself loose from the cord connecting him to the

sky by means of a reed. Later, when iNkosi checked on the lad through the same sky-opening, he found him wasting away from loneliness. Since iNkosi was himself the father of the boy, he decided to send the most beautiful young sky maiden to comfort him and be his wife. She too was lowered to earth by means of a cord and she found the youth by a banana plant. When the boy saw the girl, he realised from her great beauty that she had come from the lord-of-the-sky. He cut her cord as he had cut his own, whereupon iNkosi drew it back into heaven and closed the hole in the floor of the sky. Henceforth people could multiply on earth and were no longer lonely, seeking to return to heaven.

(Thorpe, 1991:37)

It is interesting that the problem of separation from God was solved by God himself, but in a surprising way. Instead of restoring the previous relationship, a new community was created which seemed to have satisfied all parties.

The community is the arena for human interaction. Tensions arise and must be dealt with, lest they erupt in acts of aggression and surface as sin. It follows that the community is also the arena where forgiveness and reconciliation can and must take place. The crucial requirement, always, is the maintenance of order and balance within the group; no one individual is permitted to disrupt the whole (Thorpe, 1991:110).

There are countless examples of these kinds of reconciliation rituals between individuals. Often the first option is simply to “make friends again”. Some examples from various parts of the continent are:

The clasp of hands with chyme (*mosoang*)

When two enemies want to reconcile, they will clasp their hands with chyme as a sign of reconciliation. Chyme is used because it has the same cooling effect as water. After this ceremony of reconciliation, all the village will eat together as witnesses (Tlhagale, s a:71).

Bodily injury

A perpetrator may also wash the real or symbolic wounds of his or her victim with water from a nearby river. By doing this he or she acknowledges responsibility and guilt for the offence, and binds him or herself never to do it again (Ngubane, 2004:1).

Speaking of good lost days

Enemies could be told to speak to one another of potential good days (parties or meetings) that were lost due to the animosity. They will soon realise how much their animosity is costing them and undoubtedly stop their quarrelling (Ngubane, 2004).

Peace tree

In West Africa, warring tribes will plant a peace tree in order to make a truce. This tree then becomes an actual meeting place where future conflicts can be resolved before they get out of hand (Ngubane, 2004).

Peace child

If factions are at loggerheads – a peace child may be another solution. A child conceived in this time may be seen as a peace child and be given to the leader of the opposing party. As long as this child is alive, there may be no war. Taking wives and marrying can also be ways of reconciliation (Ngubane, 2004).

In my interview with John Mbiti he related how the whole community would involve themselves in the marital problems of a husband and a wife. This is a way to look to the community for reconciliation. By confirming the community the problem is hopefully solved (Mbiti, 2005:1).

4.3.2.2 Sacrifices and offerings of reconstruction

This is salvation: entities in their proper places...

(Chirevo Kwenda, 1999:8).

In order to achieve reconciliation, sacrifices and offerings can be made to reconstruct a relationship between human beings, God, and creation. The actual elements of the sacrifice constitute a new community (Eliade, 1958:346; Magesa, 1997:201-202).

A Turkana (Kenya) sacrifice illustrates this reconstruction:

The act of giving or presenting is creative, for it constructs a tripartite relation between Akuj [God]... man and animal. In the quotidian affairs of life, these three "elements" occupy separate domains. When the animal is immolated, dissected, roasted, thrown to Akuj and the ancestors; and eaten by the men, as smoke and smell ascends to Akuj; then there is being constructed a new entity or super-entity of interrelationships with coolness and happiness. What used to be three separate entities are now transformed through ritual activity into substantial totality and not just a metaphorical likeness.

(Magesa, 1997:203)

Credo Mutwa describes an example of reconstruction of the community through an adoption ceremony, when he recalls the adoption of the two small princes, Zulu and Qwabe, by foster parents after their father died. The new parents were asked the "Seven Questions" which set the ceremony in motion:

...are you prepared to take these two children, Zulu and Qwabe, as your very own flesh and blood, your very own sons regardless of whether they grow up into brave men or cowards, into wise men or fools, into cruel men or kindly? ... [Do] you sincerely promise before the thrones of your Holy Ancestors to treat these children as your very own; to guide them as a father should; to chastise them and to teach them the laws and the customs of your tribe? ... [Do] you promise to protect these two children, and if necessary lay down your life for them? ... [Do] you promise to care for them in illness and ensure that they never lack food? ... [Do] you promise that when these children offend you, you will never under any circumstances reveal in the heat of your anger that you are not their father? ... [Do] you promise to love both children equally and never show favouritism to any one of them? ... [Lastly], do you promise to leave an equal share of all your worldly wealth to both these children on the day you die?

(Mutwa, 1998, 367-368)

After answering these seven questions affirmatively, the adoptive father, Mandela, cut himself with a ceremonial knife on the inside of his left thigh. With blood from this cut he smeared the two boys from head to foot, and after taking both blood bedecked children in his arms, he called his ancestors to witness "... that I am today making these two children my own flesh and blood..." (1998, 368).

Similarly, the adoptive mother, Celiwe, smeared blood from her left thigh on the boys, proclaiming her love and motherhood to them. Then she took the bile sacks from two slaughtered cows and emptied the contents over the heads of the two children, adding: "This bile from a spotless white cow symbolises the birth fluid which covers you, Oh my sons, on this day of your being brought forth by me, your mother" (1998, 369).

4.3.2.3 Sacrifices and offerings of communion

Closely related to the sacrifices and offerings of reconstruction, are the rituals intended as communion. Sacrifices may consist of libations of water, rum or beer, small quantities of food or the flesh of a sacrificed animal. When meat is burned, for example, it symbolises communion with the ancestors. The whole idea is that a communion is established

between two parties (one of which may be the ancestors) through eating and drinking together (Parrinder:1962:87-88; Tlhagale, s a:11).

Blood plays an important and interesting part in establishing this communion. It is believed that the blood of a sacrificial animal is a symbol of life. If it is offered to the ancestors, it represents the most precious gift one could offer. In accepting this life-giving symbol, the blood offered brings the ancestors back to life. Alternatively, blood can also represent the place where life and death meet. As a kind of frontier between life and death, it can be a pathway between human beings and God (Ndwandwe, 2000:211; Tlhagale, s a:24).

When sacrifices are offered to Zulu ancestors, the community joins in the feast and the ensuing communal meal unites the living with the dead (Thorpe, 1991:46). The very religious Yoruba (Nigeria) often make these kinds of sacrifices too. On some occasions the food is shared and it becomes a communal meal. At other times the sacrifices are meant for the deities alone and burnt (Thorpe, 1991:100).

This communion can also be established between humans: “When two (Tsonga) brothers in Mozambique have quarrelled and wish to make reconciliation they will say, ‘Let us eat out of the same spoon, drink out of the same cup, and be friends again’” (Parrinder, 1962:87).

4.3.2.4 Medicines

Reconciliation and community are also achieved through the use of medicines. While medicine-doctors must make sacrifices to the spirit on whom they depend, their medicines work in a more symbolic way. Roots or leaves or parts of animals or birds are boiled in

water or pulverised in fire to form the basic ingredients of medicine. All of these elements: plants, animals, water and fire – represent the major forces of nature. The vapour and smoke produced in boiling and pulverising these medicines symbolise air. In applying them to the human body, the link between nature and humanity is established in a very intense way. This linkage is also realised through the use of charms and amulets (Magesa, 1997:209-211).

4.3.3 Rituals intended to propitiate and transfer guilt

In cases of serious offences, blood must be spilt in order to effect reconciliation (Ndwandwe, 2000:215). These rituals are intended to acknowledge the severity of the offence and deal with it appropriately.

4.3.3.1 Sacrifices and offerings of propitiation

Some sacrifices are not intended to reconstruct a relationship or to be shared as a communion, but instead are made as propitiatory offerings to turn away the anger of the spirits (or God). Nature spirits can likewise be placated through sacrifices (Magesa, 1997:206; Parrinder, 1962:88). The “Fisherman’s Prayer” from the Lobi of Cote d’Ivoire is a beautiful example:

O river, I beg leave to take fish from thee, as my ancestors did before me. The antelope leaps and its young learns not to climb. In such a manner the sons of men do as their fathers did. O river, rise up, engulf your sharp-toothed monsters, and permit our young men to enter the water and enjoy themselves with the fish without being harmed.

If there is acceptance from you, then show it by accepting this baby chick. If not, if you cannot control the monsters, if one of them should harm our sons, then show it by refusing to accept this baby chick.

So, too, are the Zulu ancestors appeased by sacrifices in cases of misfortune. The animal is offered up to the ancestors, ritually killed, skinned and the best pieces are placed in the back of the hut for the ancestors to lick. The Yoruba also give gifts to the gods that includes food, money, ornaments, animals, fowl or vegetables (Thorpe, 1991:46, 100). These kinds of sacrifices seem to satisfy the ancestors or God's demand for attention or acknowledgement.

Junod (1927:396) quotes a prayer that accompanies a propitiatory sacrifice in order to heal a sick child, which shows how the "gods" – it is not clear whether "gods" refers to spirits or ancestors – are irritatedly bought off:

You, our gods, and you so and so, here is our mhamba (offering)! Bless this child, and make him live and grow; make him rich, so that when we visit him, he may be able to kill an ox for us ... [You] are useless, you gods; you only give us trouble! For, although we give you offerings, you do not listen to us! We are deprived of everything! You, so and so (naming the god, to whom the offering must be addressed in accordance with the decree pronounced by the bones, i. e., the god who was angry, and who induced the other gods to come and do harm to the village, by making the child ill), you are full of hatred! You do not enrich us! All those who succeed, do so by the help of their gods! – Now we have made you this gift! Call your ancestors so and so; call also the gods of this sick boy's father, because his father's people did not steal his mother: these people of such and such a clan, came in the daylight (to lobola the mother). So come here to the altar! Eat and distribute amongst yourselves our ox ... [according] to your wisdom.

4.3.3.2 Scapegoats as objects of punishment

Scapegoats are often used in African religion. The myths behind the use of scapegoats vary: in this case the guilt (or affliction) is transferred to the scapegoat to serve as an object of punishment. Scapegoats may be birds or animals, humans and even communities.

When the immortal hero Lumukanda unwittingly took one of his daughters as a wife, and so committed a heinous sin, it had to be rectified in an elaborate four-part ceremony. In the second part a scapegoat was used to: “Go straight to hell and take all our sins with you ... and leave us in peace and happiness” (Mutwa, 1998, 444).

A number of fowls were torn to pieces and smeared on the offenders – symbolising the sin they committed. It was then washed off, and the dirty water was poured over the goat. The carcasses of the mutilated fowls were stuffed in grass baskets and tied to the back of the goat. And finally the goat was pushed into a white-hot fire pit (1998:442-444).

Cases of human sacrifice abound in African religion and culture. A victim for human sacrifice as a scapegoat was usually paraded through the street of the town or city of the sovereign who was performing the sacrifice for the well-being of his government and people. To ensure that he carried away the misfortune, death and whatever guilt they might be involved in, individuals rushed out of their houses laying their hands upon him and thus transferring their sins, trouble, guilt and death to him. Then the victim was led to a grove and finally decapitated. These human victims were in most cases forcibly procured from other towns and villages and offered to God without willingly consenting to perform their supreme sacrifice (Ubruhe, 1996:18-19).

Some of Africa’s national heroes became that by being scapegoats:

Queen Iden

Akannuzama, the rightful heir to the Benin throne, relinquished it to his son, Idova, on account of his senility. Idova was, therefore, crowned as Oba Ewuakpe (circa 1700 AD) but the people rebelled against him almost immediately. They refused to attend his palace meetings, to provide him food and supply of labour for the maintenance of the royal buildings. Oba Ewuakpe and his wife, Iden, consequently lived in abject poverty; borrowing money from his subjects for subsistence.

He almost resigned himself to his unpropitious state when an oracle admonished him to offer a human sacrifice to the gods, and to scatter about in the tower of the palace some newly emptied calabashes of palm oil and pads for carrying loads on the head. Iden, Ewuakpe's only wife, urged him to adhere to the advice of the oracle and willingly offered herself as the victim for the sacrifice. She was buried alive near the Oba market. Iden, however, warned Ewuakpe not to allow dirt to remain on the grave and that anyone who trod on the spot should be killed. (Apparently, this custom was kept alive until 1897 when the British Government conquered the city).

The following morning, Oba Ewuakpe's fortune experienced appreciable improvement when the chiefs who rebelled against him presented many valuable and precious gifts to him. They thereafter acknowledged his Obaship (Ubruhe, 1996:19).

Moremi and the Edi festival

In the days past, there was constant warfare between the Ife-Ife (Nigeria) and the Igbo (Nigeria) people in which the Ife-Ife people were incessantly routed and enslaved. The

Igbo people became a serious menace to the Ife-Ife. Moremi, a very beautiful woman, became worried about the apparently insurmountable problem facing her people – the Ife-Ife. Moremi therefore made a vow to the goddess of the River Esimirin that if she could be assisted to discover the strength of the Igbo people so they could be conquered by her people, she would offer her only son to the goddess.

In one of such wars, Moremi was taken captive but immediately became a cynosure because of her beauty. The paramount ruler of the Igbo married her and she became a queen. From this vantage point, Moremi, through her ingenuity and adroitness, discovered the secret of Igbo strength. Later, Moremi escaped to the Ife-Ife and revealed the secret to her people. In their subsequent raids of the Ife-Ife, the Igbo people were routed and enslaved. Ultimately, Moremi became a heroine.

When the period for the votive sacrifice came, Moremi could not substitute another thing, animal or person for her only son. Since she had no option, Olurogbo, Moremi's only son, was offered as sacrifice to the river goddess. She became a double heroine among her people. The people of the Ife-Ife instituted an annual festival designated *Edi* festival, commemorating the heroic act of Moremi (Ubruhe, 1996:19-20).

The *Edi* cleansing festival was crowned on the seventh day by a human scapegoat called *Tele*, through which the sins of the inhabitants were carried away by means of a type of life-for-life substitution sacrifice. *Tele* was usually an Ife slave. He was offered to bear the people's sins, misfortunes, diseases and death into the traditional grove. They ritually identified themselves with him as their sacrificial victim (Abe, 1996:7).

Eleguru

Eleguru was a diviner-priest who later became the “Saviour” of the Ijebu-Ode people. He voluntarily offered himself as a propitiatory sacrificial victim of scapegoatism to redeem the Ijebu-Ode people from the constant disastrous deluge of the lagoon which swept away numerous men and woman of the land and their properties (Abe, 1996:7).

The tradition narrates how the Ijebu-Ode people were constantly menaced by the *Osa* (lagoon) that overflowed its banks and caused incalculable destruction of lives and property. The deluge became a source of anxiety among the people. In their attempt to stem the threat of the disastrous deluge, the people consulted the Ifa Oracle. The diviner-priest divined that a human victim was needed as sacrifice. To the utter surprise of everybody, Eleguru, who was the diviner on the eventful day, presented himself as the priest as well as the victim to be offered (Ubruhe, 1996:20).

On the appointed day, Eleguru came prepared to perform the sacrifice and to die. He spread a mat on the lagoon, placed all his divination paraphernalia on the mat and sat on it. It gradually moved away into the lagoon as he uttered some incantations. Eleguru paid the supreme sacrifice by sinking into the lagoon, and his death marked the termination of the threat from the lagoon (Ubruhe, 1996:20).

The case of Eleguru was unique. Unlike in the case of Tele, there was no need for occasional repetition or annual re-enactment of his sacrifice. His sacrifice was once and final for all purposes and times in connection with the salvation of the people from the lagoon deluge (Abe, 1996:7).

4.3.4 Rituals intended to expel or accept

When an offender is unrepentant, or the evil beyond human control, Africans may resort to the use of rituals of expulsion. This is usually not the first option but rather a last resort.

Otherwise, the perceived evil could simply be accepted or accommodated into the community (Ndwandwe, 2000:215).

4.3.4.1 Prayer and petition

One way of obtaining reconciliation is through prayer. Prayers are usually made in this case to expel an evil beyond human control. Although prayer can be said to be the commonest form of worship in African Religion, a prayer for reconciliation in particular emphasises more the dependence of the living on the ancestors and on God (Magesa, 1997:195-196).

According to Magesa (1997:196):

... prayer says that there comes a time when order and harmony in human life and in the world depend on powers greater than the human power. This is especially so when humanity has done wrong or harbours anti-life elements within it. Prayer places the individual or the community in the hands of greater invisible and mystical powers and intends to overcome or to assuage their displeasure.

Prayers are uninhibited, forthright and honest, and sometimes even include an insult or scolding. The petitioners pray for fulfilment of practical needs in accordance with a full life and protection from affliction (Junod, 1927:422; Magesa, 1997:198:200).

The following Meru (Kenya) prayer for life highlights the theology and basic expectations of an African prayer (Magesa, 1997:198-200):

Kirinyaga (God), owner of all things,
I pray to Thee, give me what I need,
because I am suffering, and also my children,
and all the things that are in this country of mine.
I beg Thee, the good one, for life,
healthy people with no disease.
May they bear healthy children.
And also to women who suffer
because they are barren, open the way
by which they may see children.
Give goats, cattle, food, honey,
If we dig a well, may it be at a spot where water is.
If we take water to wash our shoulders, may we be refreshed.
Nyongmo, give us blessing!
Mawu (God), give us blessing!
May the town be blest!
May the religious officials be blest!
May the priests be blest!
May the mouthpieces of the divinities be blest!
May we be filled going and coming.
May we not drop our head-pads except at the big pot.
May our fruitful women be like gourds
And may they bring forth and sit down.
May misfortunes jump over us.
If today anyone takes up a stick or a stone
against this our blessing, do we bless him?
May Wednesday and Sunday kill him.
May we flog him.
Hail, let happiness come!
Is our voice one?
Hail, let happiness come!

Prayer may also petition God to deal with an afflicting spirit. The Kono (Sierra Leone)
implore God in their prayers to do just that:

Therefore, I ask you to hold all evil from us.
Make it blind; make it lame; carry it to the spirit in the mountain.
Put it in a deep pit; place a stone upon it;
let the good wind from the north and the south
and from the rising to the setting sun blow upon it.
Let it be so for you are able to do this.

(Magesa, 1997:207)

While many Africans regard God too highly to trouble him with everyday problems – and
rather speak to the ancestors as intermediaries who have sympathy with the troubles of

the living – others make extensive use of prayer. The Shona (Zimbabwe) employ a number of priests, priestesses and even an oracle in their prayers. In community crises an official delegation can be sent from a village to ask the guidance of the “Voice” – the oracle whose instructions usually corroborate the traditional teaching and practices (Thorpe, 1991: 36, 54-55, 56).

The Yoruba (Nigeria) pray daily. The family head starts his day at the family shrine, greeting the family gods, making libations to them and asking their guidance. So too can ordinary devotees pray for physical and spiritual blessings at any time (Thorpe, 1991:100).

Some scapegoats are not intended to appease God or the ancestors or to take guilt upon themselves, but rather to petition. They carry the prayers of the community to God in times of dire need. Ubruhe (1996:17) explains:

Essentially human beings were sacrificed to deities with either of two motives – to appease them or to carry the petitions of the community to the deities. In the first case humans were sacrificed during national crises like death of the youth, an epidemic, and times of severe famine or a scourge of locusts. These calamities were, in most cases, believed to emanate from an infringement of the deity/ties taboo(s). In the second case, the scapegoat or carrier was viewed as the representative of the people who carried their petitions to the supernatural powers.

4.3.4.2 Rituals of expulsion

Evil spirits or suffering can also be expelled. This can be done through sacrificing to the offending spirit at the edge of the village, or even better in the forest, far away from the community. If the sacrificial food is moreover offered with the left hand, it signifies that the spirit is despicable and unwanted (Magesa, 1997:205).

But evil spirits can also simply be chased away. The Gikuyu (Kenya) wage a symbolic battle against the spirits:

The entire village rushes out with clubs and sticks and starts to beat down the bushes of both sides of the paths that lead to the stream in the attempt to drive the evil spirits down the stream. At the stream, the war horn is sounded again and the people throw their sticks into the stream, and shout victoriously simultaneously: "Evil spirits and your illness we have crushed you. We now sink you in the river. Let the water drive you far away from us. You will go forever and never return again".

(Magesa, 1997:205)

Bushmen see sickness and evil to be the result of small arrows sent by a foreign shaman or by God, therefore they may shriek and hurl insults at the spirits of the dead or at God who is causing the illness, insisting that he take back the evil he has sent and that he should not be so greedy as to want to take this sick person away from the group (Thorpe, 1991:24-25).

Sometimes a healer or Shaman, who may be more adept at expulsion, will willingly accept an affliction so as to expel it later. A Bushman shaman will usually receive the affliction of a sick person into his own body during a dance, and then try to expel it by sneezing it out, or alternatively, by expelling it through his upper back. He may make animal-like noises during this trance, as a result of the pain caused by the illness-causing object (Thorpe, 1991:24).

The idea of expulsion is also evident in the Taita reconciliation rite. According to Taita religious thought, God, the ancestors, spirits, humans and even animals must be treated according to their rights and with proper respect. Failure to do this causes "anger" in the hearts of the offended persons or elements of the universe. The only way to restore the

relationship is to cast out the anger. This can be enacted in a number of ways, from blowing water out of their mouths to simply speaking their minds (Magesa, 1997:234-236).

The Zulu see anger as the greatest source of evil because it can cause persons to become involved in sorcery and witchcraft. People are encouraged to bring their anger to the surface and to confess their ill feelings at community gatherings (Berglund, 1976:328; Thorpe, 1991:46). Many rituals aim to do just that. Among them are:

Ukuthelalana amanzi (Zulu, “to pour over water”)

When kinsmen are at loggerheads, a third party is called in to mediate. He or she invites them to cool the heat of anger or hatred. The divided parties would be seated opposite each other. Water mixed with ash and medicine would be given to each person to wash his hands. Each would then be given a chance to air his complaints or concerns. The mediator summarises the statements of each person and asks them whether they are willing to forgive and forget. Each then takes a mouthful of water mixed with ash and spits it over his left shoulder. Thereafter, the two drink beer from the same calabash. This is the communion of purification. The symbolic cooling effect of water points to a spiritual disposition of reconciliation (Tlhagale, s a:70-71; Ndwandwe, 2000:214-215)

The rite of “tsu” (Tsonga)

An herb called *mudahomu* is poured into a broken shell of a fruit. This shell is also used for drinking water. The divided brothers sit on the bare ground in the village square. The offender sips the medicine and spits it out making the sound of “tsu” and says: This is our imprecation. We have pronounced it because our hearts were sore. Today it must come

to an end. It is right that we make peace. The other repeats the same rite and says: I was angry but let us make peace and eat from the same spoon and drink of the same pot and become friends again. He breaks the shell and then they drink beer together (Junod, 1927:399; Tlhagale, s a:71-72).

The rite of *tsu* can entail the spitting out of saliva, charcoal, a piece of termite nest, a thorn, etc, according to the severity of the dispute and the parties involved (Junod, 1927:391-393). A headman who wishes to quell the quarrels in his village may utter the *tsu* while spitting out a piece of charcoal and address the quarrelsomeness by saying: “*Akhwari!* I.e. Smoothly! You, so and so. What you want is this. *Abupsayi!* I.e. Gently! This is fire! This is the mouth of the lion! Let what troubles me come to an end! (Junod, 1927:391)”

Ukubhodlelana (Zulu, “to burp together”, releasing the air that is blocking you)

Two enemies will talk together, eat, and more importantly, drink together; then burp – releasing pent up anger. Afterwards, they will discuss hidden agendas and plots, and clear the air (Ngubane, 2004:1).

It is interesting how important honesty is in this ritual. According to the Taita, the success of their whole reconciliation ritual depends on speaking your mind and making sure that there is no hidden anger still in your heart. According to Ngubane (2004:1), Africans need a full disclosure to forgive and apology must be personal. One way of insuring that the truth is told, is the Zulu milking of the palm as described earlier (Magesa, 1997:235).

4.3.4.3 Acceptance

Sometimes an opposite ploy is followed. Evil spirits are accepted and brought into the community. Especially when the evil spirits are thought to be the ghosts of people who have died who could not become ancestors or who are not properly recognised as such. Through sacrifices and offerings, the erection of special ancestor huts and by seeing to it that neglected obligations are carried out, the ghosts are not destroyed but enabled to enter into an enduring relationship with the living (Magesa, 1997: 205-206).

The Shona readily accept foreign spirits or *mashavi* into their community. When such a spirit troubles the community, they are welcomed into the village and new cults are formed to include these spirits into the village rituals (Thorpe, 1991:57).

***Chihamba* cult**

Another elaborate example is the *Chihamba* cult. A disqualified and therefore protesting ancestor captures an ancestress (the 'mode of *Chihamba*') who in turn catches or afflicts her family members. In an elaborate ritual, the protesting ancestor uses the ancestress as a surrogate to produce a new clan for him, while the afflicted member of her family is initiated into the newly established clan. The ancestress is then freed from the protesting ancestor and the protesting ancestor gains a new family and ancestorhood (Kwenda, 1999:1-4).

Kwenda (1999, 5-8) describes the ritual:

Family members consult a diviner when one of their number falls sick. They are told that the patient has been "caught" by the spirit of an ancestress in the "mode of

Chihamba". In order to be healed, the patient must be initiated into the cult of the afflicting agent, which is an alliance of the spirit of the said ancestress and a male nature spirit called *Kavula*, which means lightning. The healing ritual takes place partly in the village and partly at a shrine in the bush, where a white image of *Kavula* is erected. Officiating at the ritual are doctors (usually male) and female senior adepts. After the preliminaries, the candidates for initiation (patients) are introduced to *Kavula*.

They must be able to identify him by his other names, such as *Chihamba*, *Samasenga*, *Samasoli*. Then the initiates symbolically kill *Kavula* by striking his head with ritual rattles. A red cock is sacrificed. Then the initiates are symbolically killed as a sacrifice to *Kavula*. Later they discover that *Kavula* has resurrected. They receive secret *Chihamba* names and are paired of with new *Chihamba* friends. Back in the villages a shrine, called *Kantonga*, is built for each candidate. It consists of a bundle of a wide collection of medicines and a white cassava root. Around it some seeds (maize, beads, etc.) are planted. A white hen is sacrificed there. Then lines are drawn with cassava meal from the *Kantonga* to the tree shrines in the village.

Over the whole period during which the crops are growing, the initiated candidate washes continually with medicinally treated water. When the crops mature and die, *Kavula* is said to have left and taken to the air, thus marking the end of the ordeal, although there is a fear that the spirit might come back again.

When an ancestor or ancestress is in the "mode of *Chihamba*", it means that the spirit of the ancestress (in this case) is carrying out the wishes of another spirit – often under duress. The ancestress is in fact a victim who ends up in an undesirable alliance with parasite spirits.

The rituals are performed to rectify all the confusion and social disorder. The ancestress is freed from the afflicting and nature spirits when the white hen is sacrificed and she is lead out of the *Kantonga* shrines alone, along the white lines of cassava meal, to her tree shrine in the village, leaving her former captors in the *Kantonga* shrine where the alien spirit is recruited into as new family and the nature spirit is released through the crops back into nature. The red cock is sacrificed to facilitate this last part of the separation.

The symbolism of birth is also unmistakable. Legitimate ancestorship is mimicked to create a new clan. The ancestress has the ambiguous role of *Chihamba's* consort, and symbolically has to deliver children for the angered spirit, setting it on the road to ancestorhood of a surrogate nature (Kwenda, 1999:8-9).

The solution traditional African doctors prescribe is creating a fictive family or clan for the protesting spirit (ancestor), complete with a name and other kinship paraphernalia. A

Chihamba clan, with *Chihamba* names and *Chihamba* experience (affliction) and *Chihamba* expertise (healing) is brought into being. It is this part of the ritual that gives meaning and coherence to all the other parts. From its symbolic patterns we note that it hinges on symbolic deaths and rebirths. All parties die to unmanageable forms of existence (abusive alliances and relationships). They are symbolically made available for reconstitution as manageable and mutually supportive forms of life (Kwenda, 1999:9).

4.3.4.4 Cleansing

A popular way of expelling evil or guilt is simply cleansing it. This can be done through fire or sacrifice.

The *Edi* festival (described in the legend of Eleguru) starts off with a ritual cleansing whereby a symbolic fire brand was made and lighted torches waved over adherents' heads to ward off all their human miseries and death. They would also pray to the divinities to grant them long life in union with God (Abe, 1996:7).

In the past, walking over a grave was a source of defilement. Purification was achieved by the ritual singeing of the feet of the ritually defiled person in a flame (Tlhagale, s a: 72-73)

Ngubane (2004:1) recalled that when a thieving boy stole from a family, the boys from the family chased him away and killed him. The family members then told the boys that they must now cleanse the household. This was done through a communal meal in which the guilt was transferred to a goat. When blood is shed, a sacrifice needs to be made (blood for blood) in order to cleanse both the place and the perpetrator. The person who provides the sacrificial animal accepts responsibility for the crime.

A beautiful example of cleansing is the old Zulu custom of the “washing of the spears” (*ukuhlanjwa kwemikhonto* or *inhlambuluko*), dating back to the time of Shaka Zulu when there was a ritual cleansing ceremony after war or killing. It was a ritual cleansing of the spears to remove the urge to kill (Hay, 1998:136).

Before the battle or war the *nyanga* (or herbalist) would prepare a concoction of medicine or herbs, called *intelezi*, to remove the fear to go to war. There was the belief in the African world view that after war the warriors needed to be cleansed in order to stop their urge to continue to kill. The effects of the *intelezi* needed to be removed before the warrior could return to the village.

(Hay, 1998:136)

4.3.5 Rituals with a mixture of intentions

A number of reconciliation rituals do not fit into the above categories, and contains either unique elements, or a combination of intentions.

4.3.5.1 Rituals of rebellion

Rituals of rebellion seem contradictory, as these rites are in fact rituals of integration and reconciliation. These include ritual transvestism and asexuality (in funeral rites and divination rituals), ritual killing of the new chief (as done in installation rites), ritual hostility between social groups (as happens between the escorting bands of bride and groom or between joking groups), and the ritual use of obscene language (in joking relationships) (Magesa, 1997:238-240).

Magesa (1997:238) explains:

In normal circumstances, what is different must not be needlessly confused. The male and female sex or the intensity and weakness of the life force in a ruler, for example, must be clearly distinguished in daily life for the sake of order. However, sometimes the difference needs to be temporarily blurred through ritual to underline its importance when the ritual is over.

Parrinder (1962:85-86) reports on similar rites in Ghana, Togo and Nigeria. During the annual purification rites (which Parrinder compares to the Roman Saturnalia) the people act and speak licentiously, insulting the king, shouting sexual phrases at passers by and running around naked. After the festival, order is restored and the symbols of the gods are scrubbed and cleaned at the river and returned to their shrines.

The reason for this kind of rite was explained by an old priest:

Our forbears ordained a time, once a year, when every man and women, free man and slave, should have freedom to speak out just what was in his head, to tell their neighbours just what they thought of them and of their actions, and not only their neighbours, but also the king or chief. When a man has spoken freely thus, he will feel his *sunsum* (soul) cool and quieted.

(In Parrinder, 1962:86)

According to Mircea Eliade (1958:359) these rituals bring back the mythical chaos that existed before the creation, in order to repeat the creation:

... for a time man goes back to the amorphous, nocturnal state of chaos that he may be reborn, more vigorous than ever in his daylight self. ... [Man] hopes, by identifying himself with formless, pre-cosmic existence, to return to himself restored and regenerated, in a word, "a new man".

4.3.5.2 Dance

Dance plays an important part in reconciliation rituals. Dancing can be used therapeutically to ward off destructive forces during illness and death, and it integrates the sick person into the health of the whole society, as the society shares its health with the sick

person. Dance is also an expression of rejecting anger and embracing communion and also communion with the ancestors (Magesa:1997:239; Thlagale, s a:11; Turaki, 1999:184).

Thorpe (1991:24-25) reports on one such a dance among the Bushmen:

While the dance is in progress, a sick person may be laid to one side and gradually the dancers form a circle around the patient. The men take part of their bodily strength in the form of perspiration from their armpits and press it over the sick person's body. The Shaman then receives the foreign object causing the illness into his own body, either when the patient sneezes or by the action of sniffing or sucking. Finally the healer sneezes the pathogenic object out through his nostrils, thus causing his nose to bleed.

Sometimes the patient dies, but always the power of *n/um* (supernatural power) which is intensified and released by the occasion restores the health and wholeness of the San unit. The singing, the fire, the dancing and the trance all work together to activate *n/um*, especially in and through the person of the shaman.

Thus, dance enables African people to minimise tension within a closed community (Thorpe, 1991:117).

It is clear that there are many rituals of reconciliation with fascinating myths or models behind them. My list is an exploration and in no way complete. But this selection offers enough interesting material to be investigated further. In the next chapter these possibilities will be weighed.