

## CHAPTER FIVE

### AFRICAN SPIRITUALITY

#### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter will describe African Spirituality in detail and identify important aspects, particularly those which play a role in African churches and social groupings today. A question that must be asked at the outset is whether there is such a thing as African Spirituality. Courlander (1996:2) warns against a generalised use of terms such as “African society” and “African experience”, which tend to combine all the peoples of the vast continent of Africa into one, and ignore the differences of culture, belief and practise. In the same way, we must be careful of a generalised use of “African theology” and surely also of “African Spirituality.” However, there are a number of ideas that are the same or similar throughout Africa, such as the prevalent belief in the power of the ancestors and practises of ancestor veneration. Therefore, in a limited sense, one can identify a form of spirituality which is uniquely African, as one can identify a general trend in African culture and African theology.

For practical reasons, this study has concentrated largely but not exclusively on the traditions of the peoples of Southern Africa. By this means, it is hoped that the study<sup>1</sup> will be more directly applicable to the churches in South and Southern Africa. However, it is noteworthy that many traditions are common to the southern Bantu speaking peoples as well as peoples of Central Africa, testifying to their common origin centuries ago (Courlander 1996:399).

O’Brien Wicker (2000:198) describes the essential characteristics of African spirituality as adaptability, flexibility, tolerance and openness. It is these characteristics which have enabled African traditions to co-exist alongside the dominant world religions of Christianity and Islam, and in many cases to form a syncretistic and eclectic religious system, drawing on elements from many sources.

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<sup>1</sup> Where possible, the same headings have been used for Chapters Four and Five, so as to facilitate easy comparison between Celtic and African Spiritualities. However, where this structure seemed too contrived and not to mesh with the essential aspects of African Spirituality, it has been changed. Thus, for example, both forms of spirituality could be examined under the topic, View of the Material World. However, Spiritual Disciplines seemed to fit better with Celtic than with African Spirituality.

It is also important to note at the outset that African spirituality is similar to other forms of spirituality, in that it is not a static system of values, beliefs and behaviours, but a dynamic, changing way of life. This is often ignored by those who call for a return to an 'African past' which perhaps no longer exists, or practices which have lost their meaning and significance for contemporary Africans.

African culture is in flux, and so are African values. In fact, Africans, as well as any community of people, are daily involved in the task of living in and building a culture (Wirsty 1995:35).

All cultures grow and change with those who live by them. The majority of cultures interact with other cultures, and exchange influences across the culture barrier. The same is true of forms of spirituality, interaction and interchange is not a mark of weakness, but of growth.

This chapter begins with an examination of the meaning of the term 'African Spirituality'. A discussion of major component ideas of African Spirituality follows, including The African View of the Material World, The African View of Work and Education and the relationship between African Spirituality and power. Interpersonal relations are discussed with a particular focus on relationships between the genders. This is followed by a discussion of the role of mediators from the spirit world and the importance of oral literature in African Spirituality.

## **5.2 What is African Spirituality?**

In order to be authentically African, Christianity has to meet the needs of Africans in their present situation. Some of these needs are common to all human beings, while others are specifically related to problems of poverty and uncertainty which many Africans face on a daily basis. Penoukou lists the felt needs of Africans as follows:

- To eat when hungry
- To drink when thirsty
- To be cared for in sickness
- To save for the future
- To fight drought and bad weather of all kinds
- Freely to choose one's political leader and regime
- To succeed in life and society without being threatened or threatening others with poison or malevolent forces
- To be delivered from fears and delusions
- Not to be condemned to mimicking the errors of other civilisations

To be enriched by these civilisations' wealth without being enslaved by any services they might render to their siblings  
To enrich other siblings without being plundered by them  
To utter and celebrate God with all that God has created in the divine image, in the traditions of the Ancestors (1995: 47).

The African Spirituality reflected in this poem is practical, pragmatic and rooted in the here and now. It is concerned with immediate needs, and immediate dangers, whether they are the simple need for food, drink and shelter or more complex needs such as political freedom and the need for respect and acceptance.

The Church in Africa has expressed the need to liberate Christianity from Western dominance, in its teaching, in structures and power base and in developing forms of worship and communication which are appropriate to Africans, and enable them to make the gospel message their own. The study of African spirituality in its own right is a recent phenomenon. Western scholars, such as Sir James Frazier, had had a fascination with African religions, either from the scientific point of view, as a phenomenon to be studied, or from a missionary point of view. Both approaches assumed that African religious beliefs were necessarily false, the scientists, because they automatically discounted the supernatural and the missionaries, because they claimed absolute truth for their religious doctrine, and denied that African tradition had any value.

It is only in the late twentieth century, with the rediscovery of oral communication and oral literature, that African religious thinkers have been allowed to express their beliefs and world views on their own terms. Examples of these leaders in African theology and spirituality would be Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Charles Nyamiti, Kenneth Kaunda, Manas Buthelezi, Julius Nyerere and many others. A parallel development has been the ability of many Africans to write about traditional beliefs and practises in world languages, allowing their knowledge to be disseminated widely across the academic world (Nasr 1996: 35).

The change from a modern to post-modern philosophical milieu has also benefited African art, literature and philosophy. Indigenous African culture is no longer considered 'primitive' and therefore not worthy of serious study. Western scholars are beginning to study African art and thought on its own merits. Thus, the compilers of the World

Spirituality series<sup>2</sup> have included a volume on African Spirituality, along with other forms of spirituality from different parts of the world, and from different religious traditions.

A certain amount of confusion has arisen due to the tendency of Western scholars and missionaries to emphasise aspects of traditional African belief which conflict with the Judaeo-Christian world view, rather than those which accord with it. Thus, instead of wondering at the traditional African concept of God, Western thinkers have emphasised fetishes, magic arts, the power of the spirits, and especially the ancestors (Oosthuizen 2000:279). While Oosthuizen tends to under-emphasise the exotic (by Western standards), in his efforts to reconcile scholars from mainline denominations to the African Initiated Churches, he gives a timely reminder that we should seek aspects of African culture which can and should be integrated into church life and practice.

The central characteristic of African Christianity is that it is experience-based. The focus is not on abstract thought and logic, but on human experience, including experience of the divine. This is a feature of a culture and philosophical background which rests on oral rather than written forms of communication. In such an environment, symbolic actions and rituals become an important component of oral literature.

In the predominantly illiterate and relatively technologically simple societies of Africa where religion is more danced out than thought out, heavy intellectual theology wears thin. Such rationalization and theologizing as there are come after experience (Wakefield 1983:6).

Having said that, we must also acknowledge that virtually every African church community has been influenced by its missionary origins, or by other European and North American cultural influences, so that sometimes active resistance to Africanisation is encountered, especially within the mission-initiated churches. This has particularly been the case among African Christians who were educated in Mission schools, and went on to assume leadership roles in their denominations.

However, traditional influences remain, and in recent decades, many churches have made conscious efforts to reintroduce African cultural elements into Christian worship. For example, many churches include African drums and marimbas in their worship, sometimes

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<sup>2</sup> The World Spirituality Series is currently being produced by Crossroad Publishing, London (SCM Press).

in combination with an organ. Traditional songs, poems and dances have also been integrated with traditional worship styles of Western origin. It is therefore important to attempt to describe African influences in theology and worship, as has been done for Celtic Spirituality.

### **5.3 The African View of the Material and the Spiritual**

Africans are similar to the ancient Celts and the ancient Hebrews, in seeing no dualism between material and spiritual realities. The African and Celtic world views are more consistent with the world view behind the biblical writings than most Western approaches are. This is particularly true of Western society since the Enlightenment, and the resulting water-tight divisions between sacred and secular, public and private life and values. In the African world view, 'all life is religion'(Farrington 1998:16).

Tutu (1985:160) recognises that pre-Christian Africans were receptive to the Christian gospel because the biblical message resonated with aspects of their own world view, some aspects of which were not recognised by the missionaries. With hindsight, the church today is beginning to recognise this.

Christianity did not precede the working of God and the Holy Spirit among Africans. We have always been a deeply religious people. This was so long before the advent of Christianity and the African world view is at many points more consistent with the biblical world view than that emanating from the West (Tutu 1985:160).

For many Africans, the world and all that is in it naturally points to a creator, and reflects his nature and power.

According to African peoples, man lives in a religious universe, so that natural phenomena and objects are intimately associated with God. They not only originate from Him but also bear witness to Him (Adeyemo 1979:21).

All African peoples have a recognition of a Supreme Being, the Creator, who is nonetheless not readily accessible to ordinary persons, but must be approached through mediators (Kabasele 1995:122). These mediators are either the ancestors, lesser gods or human diviners. This will be discussed in more detail later (cf. 5.8). The African belief in one Creator God on the one hand, and lesser gods on the other hand, raises the question of whether African Traditional Religion should be termed monotheistic or polytheistic. It is a matter of perspective, whether one lays emphasis on the Supreme Being or on the many

mediators needed to reach him<sup>3</sup>. In practice, most of the rituals and day to day religious practices centre on the ancestors, who are believed to have more impact on daily life. However, the Creator is highly respected, and Africans have a great reverence for him.

Prayers are sometimes offered to the Supreme Being, but this is rare. For instance, there are level places on certain mountain tops in Zululand where places exist for prayer (*izigupo*), particularly in times of drought (Thorpe 1994: 36). Certain specialised religious practitioners are believed to have a direct connection to the Supreme Being. Thus, in the Zulu tradition, there are males known as 'heaven herds' (*zinyanga zezulu, abelusi bezulu*) who are believed to have the power to divert lightning and other destructive weather features. There are also rainmakers, who may be either male or female (Thorpe 1994: 37).

In the majority of African traditions, the Supreme Being, who is the creator, may only be approached through lesser deities. In some traditions, there is an incredible number of such deities, covering every aspect of daily life, and giving people the means to manipulate forces of nature and other forces by supernatural means. "It is as if human beings were trying to attain everything beyond their immediate powers not by means of 'lay' technology, but rather through religious know-how" (Zahan 2000:7).

Traditional Africans have a three tier view of the world, similar to that of the ancient Hebrews, consisting of the sky, the earth, which includes land and water, and the area under the earth, which is the abode of the ancestors (Kalu 2000:56). Different spirits are believed to inhabit all three regions. Kalu sees the pouring of libations into the ground as evidence that the ancestors live underground. It is logical to associate the underground world with the ancestors, since the dead are normally buried in the earth.

An interesting feature of Zulu traditional religion is the role played by the female deity *Nomkubulwana*. She is either portrayed as a maiden or as a mother earth figure, associated with agriculture, spring rains and fertility. The worship of *Nomkubulwana* is particularly practised by young girls, and appears to be completely separate from ancestor veneration (Thorpe 1994: 37). *Nomkubulwana* is approached for help particularly in times of drought.

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<sup>3</sup> In the religion of some African peoples, the idea of a feminine aspect to the divine, e.g. *Nomkubulwana* in

Since the coming of Western Christian missionaries to Africa, Africans have developed a dual cultural heritage – their own traditions, and the Western-imposed beliefs which have been super-imposed on them over the past two centuries. Therefore, they are affected by the dual problems of alienation from their cultural heritage, and the transition from a modern to a post modern mind set.

Faced with a cultural revolution that is causing a spiritual upheaval of unparalleled magnitude, Christianity is in the process of extracting itself from one culture and putting down roots in another. African Christians are aware that they are Africans....Postmodern Western Christians are aware that they are postmodern people. All love and cherish a cultural heritage which they will not, and cannot deny (Johnston 1995:29-30).

Buthelezi says that, for Africans, salvation is to be identified with wholeness. This is connected to the holism with which most African peoples approach both life and religion. 'Far from being a department of life, religion *was* life.' (Buthelezi 1987:95). Thus, in traditional societies, one did not find separate buildings dedicated to worship. Instead, religious rites were conducted in homes, or in communal gatherings. Ordinary activities, such as keeping cattle, growing crops or raising children, had religious significance. In many rural African societies, the cattle kraal belonging to a family homestead becomes the centre of family rituals, such as weddings or burials.

Africans generally, and traditional healers in particular, have a holistic approach to health and illness. In the African view, Western medicine is seen as treating symptoms, but not dealing with the root causes of the problem, which may be spiritual, social or economic as well as physical. Good health, according to Thorpe is understood as 'all that concerns the person, including the perception of a harmonious, co-ordinated universe'(Thorpe 1994: 111). Personal well being is also dependent on the well being of one's family and community, and seen less individualistically than in the West. It is interesting that even people who have been most influenced by urbanisation and Western culture, will still consult a traditional healer when they feel the situation warrants it.

The reality of the spirit world and its ability to influence the lives of the living is assumed throughout Africa. There is "the concept of a total world made up of the seen and the unseen, of forces that for all their invisibility are none the less real and which must be

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the Zulu tradition.

coped with through rituals and magico-religious means” (Courlander 1996:2-3). To neglect one’s ritual and religious responsibilities is therefore not only impious but could be positively dangerous to a person’s well being and that of his or her family. A major problem is therefore created when the (Westernised) church denies the reality of this spirit world, which is an obvious reality to the majority of Africans (Wirsiy 1995:71). Where church leaders speak of African traditions and traditional beliefs as if they are ‘of the past’ and ‘primitive’, this encourages Africans to live separate lives, that is, to have church identities and everyday identities, where accepted precautions are taken against the wrath of the spirits.

The African traditional world view includes the recognition of certain places as being sacred, or as recognised meeting places between humans and God or spiritual powers. This has obvious parallels with Old Testament practices, and this is an area still to be creatively exploited in reaching out to African people, and in producing an authentic African theology and spirituality:

The Hebrew scriptures contain examples of sacred space, place and time. Mountains, desert spots, and Jerusalem were sacralised as places where God and humans encountered each other. Such pilgrimage centres resonate with African notions of sacred groves, sacred mountains, rocks, towns, and shrines (Obeng 2000:374).

Tutu (1985:161) thus emphasises that an encounter with God must have practical results in our approach to the issues we face in our every day lives and contexts. This is a logical outcome of the idea that the spiritual and material aspects of life form a united whole.

This is not a new idea. It is rooted in Christian incarnational theology:

When God intervened in our human affairs, he came not as disembodied spirit, but as a human person, flesh of our flesh and bone of our bones. He communicates his life, divine, holy and utterly spiritual through mundane, secular things such as bread and wine, water and oil (Tutu 1985:162).

The close inter-connection between material beings and objects and the spirit world is reflected in a number of African creation myths. It is interesting that snakes feature in many African creation myths, but in a far more positive light than the snake in Genesis. Thus, the *Fon of Dahomey*<sup>4</sup> believe that a great python wound itself around the earth, and holds it together. If the great snake gets tired of holding up the earth one day, the earth will

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<sup>4</sup> A people found in West Africa

sink into the waters below. The *Dogon* of *Mali* and *Upper Volta*<sup>5</sup> believe that the creator *Amma* made the sun and moon like round pots, threw lumps of clay into space which became the stars and then threw a lump of clay which lay flat and became the earth (Ions 1997:26).

The *Yoruba* recognise approximately 400 lesser gods or *Orishas*, one of whom, *Obatala*, was commissioned by the High God *Olodumare* to carry out the work of creation. He is favoured by peasants, and considered second in command to *Olodumare*. However, he is also blamed for birth defects, as he is considered to form children in the womb. The deity *Oduduwa* is sometimes considered male and sometimes female. As a female, she is considered the wife of *Obatala* (Thorpe 1994:92).

All of life is seen as a unity and a community of inter-related and interacting forces: “the stars, moon, sun, weather and animal life were relevant forces of life; the dead also have their part to play” (Farrington 1998:16). The majority of African peoples have a strong sense of evil forces, and a series of superstitious practices to ward off evil, including avoiding certain taboos of speech or behaviour and amulets worn for protection (Farrington 1998:17).

Western observers find it strange that the majority of African peoples do not build specific buildings for religious purposes, or erect shrines. They will have places which are sacred to a spirit, for example, a cross road, a river, a rock formation, or a tree, but they will not build something on the spot (Zahan 2000:15). This emphasises the wholeness of life, and the lack of division between sacred and secular in the African world view.

Many African peoples value water highly, especially for its role in sustaining life and scarceness in time of drought. For this reason, many sacred places are associated with water – streams, pools, wells, etc. In fact, Zahan (2000:15) believes that African sacred places are deeply associated with the earth, and can be classified in terms of the four basic elements: earth, air, fire and water. Thus, “mountains, caves, rocks, and stones” may be sacred earth symbols. The practise of pouring a libation of millet flour and water, or of the

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<sup>5</sup> A people of West Africa

blood of a white chicken, on the four corners of a field, to ensure fertility, is widespread (Zahan 2000:17).

Temples associated with the air would be sacred groves or trees. Trees may be seen as intermediaries between human beings and the spirit world. If a tree is to be felled, offerings must first be made to appease the tree spirits. Hearths in homes are considered sacred places, obviously associated with fire, as are forges. The fire place where a family's food is cooked is the centre of the home, and is often associated with the ancestral spirits of that family. Volcanoes are also sacred places, and often the centre of a fire cult (Zahan 2000:19).

It is also believed that human beings have the power to manipulate the forces of nature by ritual means. For instance, among the Zulu people, a dark skinned beast is sacrificed when a community is seeking rain. The colour may be analogous to dark rain clouds (Thorpe 1994:48). Harvest festivals also play an important role in African spirituality, and they continue to be important for African Christians. For instance, a number of urban churches in central Johannesburg celebrate a Nigerian harvest festival, in which the Nigerian community offers a substantial amount of money to the church, as well as a considerable quantity of vegetables and a pair of live chickens, or a goat. The vegetables and animals are then auctioned to raise money for the church. This is a common way of raising church funds in Nigeria, and has been transplanted easily to Johannesburg. Large harvest festival celebrations are held annually in at least three churches: St. Aidan's, Yeoville; St Mary's Anglican Cathedral; and the Cathedral of Christ the King (Roman Catholic)<sup>6</sup>.

Another interesting aspect of the African world view, on which African Spirituality depends, is the belief that all things are in some sense alive and have rights. This does not only include animals and humans, but even things which the Western world view sees as inanimate, such as rocks, mountains or the earth itself (McDaniel 1990:85). Africans respect natural objects such as trees, rocks, rivers, etc. largely because of an animist belief that spirits inhabit them. This leads to a desire to live in harmony with nature, motivated by respect for the spirit powers.

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<sup>6</sup> The present writer participated in a harvest thanksgiving at St. Aidan's, Yeoville in October 2002, at which she was presented with a live chicken.

Heaps of stones have significance for many African peoples, as a memorial. The Xhosa people would pick up a stone, spit upon it and place it upon a pile, known as *isivivane*. As they did so, they would say “Look upon me, God (*Thixo*) of our people. I ask strength of you, you God who created us in the earth. Look upon us. Give us to eat.” (Smith 1950:99-100). Of course, the ancient Hebrews also attached importance to memorial piles of stones, for example, Joshua 4:1-9.

The ownership of cattle is prominent in the traditions of all Southern African peoples. Cattle are a measure of wealth, but also a sign of human interaction with nature and the forces of nature. Cattle remain central to every aspect of rural Southern African life:

Complicated rules of law regulated the worth of cattle, their ownership, their use as currency in the payment of lobola, or bride price and the penalties for misbehaviour. The importance of cattle remains a conspicuous element in the myths, legends and traditions of the clans and tribes (Courlander 1996:399).

The Zulu tradition honours *Nomkulbulwana*, a female deity, equivalent to Mother Earth. This is apparently unique among African peoples, although a minority scholarly opinion says that the worship of *Nomkulbulwana* is the truest representation of traditional Zulu religion, and other beliefs have been so influenced by Western Christianity as to be unrecognisable (Thorpe 1994:106).

African spirituality emphasises the communal aspect of Christian life and worship, which is a valuable corrective to Western individualist tendencies (Wakefield 1983: 6). The Western church would benefit by developing more communal structures, and stronger inter-personal relationships, so that people are welcomed and made to feel valued. Although the communal aspect of African life has been weakened by the anonymity of urban life and the loss of many extended family structures, Africans still value inter-personal relationships and communities highly. This is one of the great strengths which African peoples have brought into the world-wide church.

The African view of the material world is also a corrective to Western materialism. African appreciate and enjoy material things without becoming enslaved to the desire for more possessions. Again, this trait has been weakened through the impact of Western consumerism and the mass media. However, African Spirituality teaches a healthy attitude to material things.

#### **5.4 The African View of Work and Education**

To a large extent, education is seen as necessary in order to survive in a modern world dominated by Western values. However, many Africans desire to uphold traditional, less formal forms of education as well, including initiation of both girls and boys before entering adulthood. In many traditions, the education of children includes learning songs, such as counting songs among the Venda people. "Through rhymes, songs and lullabies, children were in a very subtle way imbued with the people's way of life and world view" (Milubi 1997:35).

The training of traditional healers is a form of long-term oral based education, which may take several years. It includes being apprenticed to an older practitioner of traditional healing methods, and learning from that person the necessary skills, whether it be knowledge of herbs or healing methods and rituals.

The sacred-secular dichotomy has infiltrated the education system, and this has resulted in confusion among Africans, especially where the church attempts to reverse this trend.

When we speak to Christians about their responsibilities in the world and about assuming responsibility for the organisation of the world, invariably, they are astonished and react as if the Church were interfering in politics. There is a real problem here (Zoa 1980: 77-78).

There is plainly a need for the church to demonstrate the reality of God's concern for all of creation, and the relevance of the gospel message to contemporary issues. Unless the church is seen to be concerned with the needs of people in the here and now, it will soon cease to be a factor in their lives.

The Protestant teaching that each individual has direct access to God has, to some extent backfired, especially when it comes to the African Initiated Churches. Often, people with little education and no formal theological training assume leadership positions in these churches. This custom has the positive value of allowing any church member to participate and contribute to the worship. The down side is that often the teaching is unreliable or even inaccurate.

In this connection it is interesting that, until recently, sects of this nature have very rarely arisen from Roman Catholic or Anglo-Catholic circles, 'where individualism is secondary,

and ritualism answers the emotional needs of iconic sacramental societies such as are in Africa' (Wakefield 1983:6). The more spontaneous approach to worship and especially preaching is not unique to the African Initiated Churches, but has been adopted by many societies and less formal worship groups within the mission initiated churches.

### **5.5 African Spirituality and Power**

Evil is generally not understood as an abstract power, but in relation to people and their experiences. Evil is generally understood as being something outside a person which inflicts damage on people, their communities or their property. Evil is presumed to be the result of hostile forces, which have power to influence people's lives and circumstances. These forces may be manipulated by malicious individuals, to cause harm to their enemies. Evil can be avoided only by performing the correct magico-religious act, which will give the victim control over the malicious spirit or force.

The non-Christian African feels insecure and frustrated, but he has a ready-made formula for dealing with his difficulties, be they sudden death, or sterility or bad success. He presumes witchcraft or a spirit, cultic, ancestral or demonic, and performs the appropriate religious rites which restores his self-confidence, and all is well again (Sawyer 1980: 67).

Sawyer uses the strange, paradoxical phrase 'bad success', but apparently means nothing more than 'bad luck' or 'lack of success'.

In African tradition, spiritual disciplines are intended more to ward off the power of evil than to develop self-discipline in the individual (Okorochoa 1987:131). Thus sin is defined as 'that which produces evil as its consequence' (Adeyemo 1979:52) rather than the transgressing of an objective standard of conduct. African cultures tend to be shame rather than guilt dominated. Wrong action is defined in terms of the reaction of others, not the transgressing of an inner standard or scruple.

There is a strong emphasis on power in much of African thought, especially power over disease, disaster and evil spirits. For Africans, spirituality must be something that will empower them in every aspect of their lives – spiritual, social, economic - and give them the means to live as they wish to. Thus, Thorpe describes religion for African peoples as a way of "coping with the mysterious realities in their immediate environment – natural forces, ancestral spirits and powers felt to be functioning through the social institutions of the tribe or community" ( Thorpe 1994:107). All of these powers or forces may enhance

the quality of life of people or diminish this life force. They therefore need to be harnessed or placated in order to achieve harmony and peace in communities. The human channels for communication with unseen powers are the diviners and traditional healers, who are seen as existing liminally at the cusp of the material and unseen worlds.

African tradition assumed peace between people, growing out of interdependence of members of a social grouping, rather than explicitly expressing the desire for this peace. Witchcraft and dissension are condemned because they shatter the peace within a community, as well as damaging the quality of life of its members. Life, safety, health and general well-being are highly valued in African tradition, and these concepts are identified with peace, peace within a community and in the life of an individual.

Violence and dissension erupts only where the health and well-being of one group conflicts with that of another. Today, more than ever before, it is necessary for us to learn from the example of our peace-loving forbears, and to seek peace by compromise and consensus, rather than by force. When evil, disruption of life, or trouble to an individual or a community occurs, it is necessary to call on an expert to divine the cause and prescribe a remedy. Usually, the same person acts as a diviner and traditional healer. Remedies may include a sacrifice or a ritual, or medicines to be taken (Thorpe 1994:116). It may even be true that people seek help from those who, they believe, are able to cause evil and disease.

In addition to ancestral spirits, many rural, African communities acknowledge 'nature' or 'bush' spirits, who have power over the fertility of the soil, the weather and disease, 'tutelary deities of space, of particular localities; they are often identified with streams, sacred groves, or rocks' (MacGaffey 2000:243). These spirits may be malevolent, but are more often generous to those who venerate them. They are particularly approached with pleas and sacrifices in times of trouble, such as the ever-present droughts and floods, which characterise Africa. These spirits are respected principally as a means for obtaining power over the capriciousness of nature and protection from malicious supernatural powers.

The desire for power over physical, social and spiritual forces is greatly strengthened by the experience of poverty and powerlessness, including socio-political powerlessness, which is prevalent all over Africa (Buthelezi 1991:98). Life force is seen as a commodity needed in order to stay alive, and in order to enjoy life in peace. It can be strengthened by

means of prayers, sacrifices, wisdom and proper conduct (Thorpe 1994:112) and it can also be diminished through witchcraft.

Anything which disrupts the life of an individual or a group is evil, and must be avoided, or if unavoidable, the cause must be rooted out and destroyed. Witches are therefore those people who “have special, unnatural powers to harm others and ... they use these powers in perverted ways that contradict the values or norms of society” (Bourdillon 2000: 176). African tradition understands socially disruptive forces as originating from human jealousy and ambition. The persons with such evil intentions are called witches and sorcerers. Spirit beings are often seen as the cause of an illness, although this is not true in every case. In practice, if a traditional healer is consulted, he or she will usually direct the patient to seek help against malevolent spirit powers.

Witchcraft is often posited as an explanation for the unexplainable. It is sometimes easy to see a link between immoral or selfish behaviour and an individual’s misfortune. For example, someone who breaks sexual taboos may contract Aids or venereal diseases, and the connection between the action and its consequences is obvious. At other times, it is not so easy to make this connection, and in such circumstances, it is easy to believe that an individual or family who suffers ill health, accident or other mishap, has been the victim of malevolent witches (Bourdillon 2000: 180).

The fear of accusations of witchcraft has undoubtedly been an inhibiting factor in the desire of people to pursue excellence. Most African value systems encourage young people, for instance, not to seek to be better than their peers, but to be their equal. The positive side is that the sense of community and the incentive to help others progress is strong. The negative side is that a gifted individual may be afraid to develop his or her abilities, for fear of being considered a witch by others who are jealous of success. In a number of cases, those accused of witchcraft, and summarily executed by their communities, were successful shop owners in poor, rural communities.

Secrecy may also be associated with witchcraft, and may be seen as a threat to others who do not share the secret. As a result of the secrecy and mystery surrounding witchcraft, a series of unpleasant factors and actions are attributed to witches, which are difficult to contradict or verify:

Witches are typically associated with death and are often presumed to desecrate graves, to eat human flesh, and to kill people either for fun or to further their own powers. Witches reject kinship loyalties... Often witches are believed to be sexually deviant: incest is commonly associated with witchcraft, and in some societies people assume that witches have some kind of sexual relationship with their spirits or animal familiars. Witches are often believed to work in groups or covens, which meet at night to conspire in their wicked plans, and to carry out their strange rituals. These rituals are assumed to include dancing naked, disturbing graves, eating human flesh, and other activities that flout the values of society. Witches are believed to delight in evil for its own sake (Bourdillon 2000:176-177).

Thus, there is a tendency to label any unacceptable practices or things which are not understood by the community as dangerous and associated with witchcraft. It is never in the interests of a community to approve incest, for example. If it is known to be practised within a community and recognised as a dangerous and harmful practise, but community members find it difficult to express their loathing for the act and those who perpetrate it, incest may come to be seen as a necessary part of witchcraft, or at least may be commonly associated with witches.

If a person dies prematurely or without leaving offspring, this is usually attributed to witchcraft. Interestingly, a person who dies of unnatural causes in this way is considered dangerous, and is more likely to become an evil spirit, rather than an ancestor who brings blessing and protection to his descendants and their community (Thorpe 1994:39). This could be understood as the community transferring feelings of guilt or anger onto the spirit of the deceased, who can then be blamed for accidents or misfortune to members of the community.

African traditional belief assumes that all people have the right to a normal life, which is defined as including growing to adulthood, marriage, bearing of children, ageing and death, after which they become ancestors and are remembered by their living descendants (Thorpe 1994:115). This is a motivation for having large families, as many more descendants will remember their progenitors. Ancestor veneration is generally regarded as the central practice of African traditional religion, as the ancestors are invoked more often than any other gods or spirits.

The community aspect is always present. Incorporation into the community begins before birth and continues after death:

A person's parents may be required to participate in practices and rituals pertaining to courtship and marriage which contribute to the inclusion of their as yet unborn children into the community. Additional rites and rituals may be performed to sustain children's life force during their growing years. Finally, at puberty, they gain full membership of society by undergoing an initiation ritual ...This life in community extends beyond death. Death is seen merely as a further stage of life, in which a person no longer participates physically but becomes a spiritual participant as an ancestor (Thorpe 1994:113).

Ancestors are largely assumed to continue a similar lifestyle to that which they enjoyed during life and to continue in the same social position. In addition, they are often offered foods which they enjoyed while alive (Westerlund 2000:164). Ancestors are not assumed to have become morally good after death, nor do good people occupy a separate space from bad people. That is, in traditional African thought, there is no concept of heaven or hell. Ancestors may thus wield power for good (giving children, ensuring a good harvest, increase in wealth) or evil (causing drought, flood, famine, plague, natural disasters) in the lives of their descendants, and need to be placated so that they do not cause harm, and particularly illness.

A certain amount of unpredictability is a characteristic of all ancestors. Like living humans, spirits of ancestors are not good *or* bad but good *and* bad. As ambivalent beings, they may be contented agents of blessings as well as discontented agents of misfortune (Westerlund 2000:167).

Ancestors generally are the previous three to four generations, and are remembered by their families, and other members of their communities. Other spirits who play a role in the lives of the living are long-dead heroes, many of whom probably never lived, and nature spirits, associated with natural phenomena in the area, such as streams, rocks, mountains and forests (MacGaffey 2000:239). All these spiritual beings or forces may act benevolently or malevolently and must be handled with appropriate care and reverence.

Power, goodness and health are linked together, and evil is understood primarily as powerlessness (Adeyemo 1979:33). Therefore, healing is the overcoming of evil powers acting on a person's body or mind. It is interesting that people will often seek help from the very people who are believed to cause the misfortune in the first place. Thus, power is respected, and to be used. The idea of overcoming bad spiritual powers with the power of good is absent or limited, and it is generally believed that the same powerful force may act for good or evil in different circumstances and for different people.

The priority given to power among African peoples may lead to abuse, as when jealousies within a household result in accusations of witchcraft. This is not unique to Africans, but is prominent especially where people are economically deprived and living in over-crowded conditions where competition for available resources is intense (cf Section 5.6).

### **5.6 Relations between people**

African spirituality must address the actual needs of people and the daily realities and situations that they face. A church group which preaches love as an abstract concept, but does nothing to demonstrate love for those in physical need, has no relevance to the lives of contemporary Africans. There is no place in the African context for a spirituality that is not incarnated in present-day life:

...Africa is crying for a Christian spirituality which has form, which is incarnated; which acts and so offers tangible results in terms, that is, of bringing about peace, justice and reconciliation among men just as Jesus came to do (Magesa 1980:74).

African spirituality has both an individual and a corporate dimension. It is not true that Africans know only collective norms and responsibilities, as some writers have claimed (Bujo 1990:99). The individual is held responsible by his or her community for his or her actions which affect the community. An individual cannot enjoy quality life apart from harmony with others in his or her community, 'life is something communal and can only be manifested properly and adequately in a network of interdependencies between persons and community' (Thorpe 1994:112). This community would include not only a person's extended family, but also the ancestors, God and nature.

A Xhosa proverb *Umuntu Ngomuntu Ngabantu* has become a well-known maxim, translated into English as 'a person is a person only through other people' (Jordaan and Jordaan 2000: 5). Africans have a highly developed sense of kinship, not only with other human beings but also with animals, plants and inanimate objects. "Individuals cannot possibly exist on their own. They exist by virtue of other people, including the dead and the unborn. Thus the individual exists only in a spirit of communality and unity" (Jordaan and Jordaan 2000:5).

However, Africans operating within traditional structures may not have the same freedom of individual action that Westerners assume to be their right. A different set of standards

operates, which has both advantages and disadvantages *vis a' vis* the values of the West. On the one hand, Westerners lack the deep experience of community which Africans enjoy. On the other hand, clearly not all individuals in traditional African society enjoy freedom of decision, freedom of speech and other rights assumed to be universal today.

Individual freedom cannot be denied, but the communal ties may be so strong that an individual may need extreme courage to assert him or herself within the clan community (Bujo 1990:101).

Therefore, any ethical standards must be agreed upon and upheld by the community and any theologising must begin with people's actual, temporal needs (Magesa 1980:75).

However, claiming on this basis that moral standards are only corporate and not individual is unwarranted (Adeyemo 1979:103). To some extent, even the individualistic West depends on cultural consensus to establish or change its norms and values. Thus advertising, for example, seeks both to reflect community values, and to change them.

African societies are characterised by generally rigid social groups, mostly constructed according to age and gender. Initiation rituals allow young men and women into the lowest grouping of their societies. They will usually remain in a group with people of the same age and sex, for the rest of their lives, and will hunt and perform other communal activities together. Some of these groupings are so exclusive that they resemble secret societies. Entrance to a new level may be accompanied by further initiation rituals. The highest rank to be attained is that of 'elder' or community leader, which may be a feature of age, but also of knowledge, skill, wealth or family connections (MacGaffey 2000:241).

The structure of most African societies, therefore, is characterised by a fairly rigid series of hierarchies, and therefore Africans do not have any problem with accepting hierarchical structures within churches. When a new African Initiated Church is formed, hierarchical structures are quickly created, so that every male member of the church has a title and position, and every member knows his or her relationship to all others. Africans also often have difficulty accepting other church members as their equals, especially where differences of age are involved.

Social cohesion and community is highly valued among Africans. It is generally understood that the witch or sorcerer seeks to bring disharmony and division, while it is the

task of the traditional healer to bring about unity and wholeness, in the individual and in the community. There are also cases where an individual is labelled a witch simply because he or she does not subscribe to the community's norms and values, and thus is perceived to be destroying harmony in the community.

The power to curse and bless is often associated with the elders of the community, and is part of their power to maintain social cohesion. However, generally elders will only use their power to curse in extreme situations, for the good of the community. The use of powers to curse and bless outside of the structures of society is associated with witchcraft and considered unambiguously evil (Westerlund 2000:169).

Often accusations of witchcraft reflect social tensions, especially where people are forced either to live close together, in urban conditions, or live in poor rural communities where social cohesion and co-operation are essential for survival. Thus, economic deprivation may also fuel belief in, and accusations of, witchcraft. Many unfortunate instances have been recorded in recent years, of members of poor, rural communities condemning a person for witchcraft and carrying out a summary execution.

Inter-personal relationships in African societies are therefore clearly defined and designed to make for cohesive social groupings, where every member of a social group has a place. Typical African social structures have been developed in rural communities, and sometimes do not transfer well into an urban or Westernised modern lifestyle. Contemporary churches should build on the African sense of community and of making each member feel a part of the church community with a role to play.

### ***5.6.1 Gender Relations***

Nyamiti lists the following qualities which are applied to the concepts male and female in African thought: 'Manhood often symbolises intelligence, wisdom, power and authority; whereas femininity is a frequent symbol for life, fecundity, tenderness, compassion, meticulous care, devotion, receptivity and beauty' (1991:64). He therefore has a very positive view of the two genders, and sees both sets of qualities reflected in the traditional understanding of God. In a very real sense, for Africans, God is both mother and father. Many peoples do not regard God as being either male or female.

Dube (2002:113) says that for the *Batswana* people, the High God *Modimo* was understood as neither male nor female. The ancestors, who act as intermediaries between the living and *Modimo* are also considered neither male nor female. The human intermediaries were *Sangoma* and *Wosana* (spirit mediums) and *Ngaka* (diviner/herbalist). All these roles could be filled by men or women. The Western missionaries outlawed these offices, and in so doing restricted women from fulfilling leadership roles in the church or society. It is interesting that many leaders in the African Initiated Churches are women, who are seen as regaining their lost religious leadership functions (Dube 2002:214).

Both the Zulu and the Shona peoples include in their pantheon a female figure, representing the female aspects of God's nature. However, in both cases, this figure is not a major feature in the national cult, and often her worship is primarily carried out by young girls or women. Nevertheless it is true that many African peoples have a view of God which encompasses male and female aspects or personalities. Thus, for example, the Zulu people picture God as three-fold: *Unkulunkulu* (the Great, Great One), *Nomkhubulwane* (the "Mother Earth" figure) and *Umvengangi*, the male aspect of God (Theko 2000).

Therefore, from early times, African peoples have known male and female principles within God. In many African societies, there is an awareness of the complementary roles of men and women in continuing and developing social norms and values. 'The female side of the universe is not only complementary to the male, but also pivotal to man, for his procreation, reincarnation and continued existence within the circular flow of time' (Jell-Bahlsen 2000:48). This implies a respect for women primarily as mothers and maintainers of the status quo. However, this has not led to an egalitarian view of inter-gender relations and functions in the majority of African societies, where the majority of women are relegated to positions of lower status than the men of their social group.

Thus, Kunambi (1980: 151) says that in practice women have not been free to be leaders and decision makers in the family and in society at large. She does not confine this problem to Africa, but says that it is certainly true of Africa. Interestingly, African men tend to believe that the rights of women are respected in traditional African societies. Not all African women agree with this idea, and in many cases, they are restricted by cultural and social norms from speaking out, especially if this would bring shame to their husbands or their families.

Many African communities are aware of the need to appease powerful spiritual forces by carrying out necessary rituals. Therefore, “chiefs, clan heads, and family heads are basically traditional religionists or nominal Christians” (Wirsty 1995:79). When a person is to be chosen for a position of leadership, the family or clan members will ensure that they choose someone who is able to carry out these rituals. Therefore, in some parts of Africa, it is rare to find a Christian in a position of leadership in a traditional community. It has also been suggested that this leads African men to distance themselves from Christianity, resulting in a large majority of women in the churches.

Jell-Bahlsen (2000:41) records the case of extraordinary individuals among the Igbo people, who are creative, innovative and do not live according to societal norms and values. These would include women who are successful in business and other enterprises outside the home. Nonconformists obtain a measure of acceptance in society by dedicating themselves to the Lake goddess, known as *Uhammiri* or *Ogbuide*. The cult of the water goddess ‘embodies female control over the crossroads between the ordinary and the extraordinary, between spirits and humans, between life and death’ (Jell-Bahlsen 2000:48).

Women have prominent roles in dances, whether for ritual purposes or entertainment, in many African societies, for example among the *Asante* of Ghana. Dance is a prominent part of African life, and is used to communicate non-verbally, either with the living or with the spirit world, to express joy, sorrow, anger, hostility or friendship (Obeng 2000:380). All dances in Africa, with the exception of those performed by men’s secret societies, involve women participants.

To a certain extent, career women in a Christian milieu may find acceptance among their peers by joining a church group or religious society, such as the Mothers’ Union. Women may also choose to avoid being restricted to the roles of wife and mother by entering a convent, and interestingly, there are a number of recent cases of young African women making this choice. Thus, the Community of the Holy Name in Rosettenville, Johannesburg, has begun building a convent in 2001, and the sisters have already welcomed postulants from Soweto.

Women are primarily those who run homes, but in many cases today, they are also bread winners. Thus, Nasimiyyu-Wasike (1995:76) claims that many African women work sixteen to eighteen hours a day, to provide for the needs of their families – food, clothing, shelter, education and medical needs. These women are doubly oppressed, by the widespread condition of poverty in Africa and by the domination and demands of men, within cultural structures and within the churches. A woman is valued chiefly for her ability to bear and raise children, and therefore a childless woman is often ostracised and becomes the victim of mocking or discrimination.

Elderly women have greater status in many African cultures. They are especially respected for their role as storytellers and custodians of oral tradition “Others may also tell stories, but it is the grandmother who is the respected and revered transmitter of ancient tales and legends” (Courlander 1996:404). Perhaps older (post-menopausal) women are less of a threat to men than their younger counterparts. Many of these older women would also be widows, and therefore have no husband to upstage or challenge for power and authority.

Religious positions of power and authority tend to be occupied by men, except where women become leaders of a cult which functions independently of the male-dominated religion (Zahan 2000:19). Men function as leaders of any religious structures and practices which involve sacrifice (Zahan 2000:20). This is explained as follows: masculinity gives the power to take life, whereas femininity is associated with giving life. Therefore only a male may kill the sacrificial victim.

There is a need to liberate and empower women to take their rightful place in the church as well as in society. To a large extent it is still true that women are restricted in the structures of the church, and the church is poorer for this.

There is no doubt that women occupied an inferior position in African traditional society, but so, too, did they in the structures of the Christian Church...the Church has shared in the movement to educate and emancipate women in Africa, but there has been no parallel development in the social and ecclesial structures themselves (Shorter 1980:30).

Shorter is writing from a Roman Catholic perspective, but it is interesting to note that, even in those churches where women have been admitted to the ordained ministry, many women

still feel restricted by church structures, and that their gifts are not appreciated or fully utilized in the church.

### **5.7 African Christology**

There have been many different attempts to present Christ in a way acceptable to African thought. For example, some missionaries presented Christ as a chief. However, Sawyer suggests that it is more appropriate to present him as older brother, the 'first-born among many brethren who with him together form the church' (Sawyer 1980: 66-67).

A major problem causing misunderstanding in Africa is that African culture exalts the father in a family, who is obviously more important than his sons. Therefore, many Africans have difficulty in accepting a traditional and biblical Christology, that is, in seeing Christ as one with God the Father. The hierarchical structures inherent in many traditional churches also reinforce the view of Christ as the top of the hierarchy, just below God the Father. We need to see God as totally other, not simply the highest being in a hierarchy. This has led to theological distortion. While it is true that some African theologians lean towards Arianism, it is not true to say that all African Christians are Arians. Many have joined the struggle to express biblical Christology in a way that is acceptable to African cultures and world views.

Many African theologians have rightly emphasised the way in which Africa was prepared for the coming of Christianity by traditional African religion. Africans are religious people, and have always had an awareness of God the Creator, and therefore readily accepted the Christian gospel. However, if Africans have always believed in God, why was it necessary for Christ to come? His role as mediator and redeemer is called into question. This dilemma has led to major problems in formulating a Christology for Africa (Wirsty 1995:3). Another consideration among African theologians is the relationship of Christ to the ancestors. Therefore, for many in Africa, Christ must either be portrayed as an ancestor, or as the liberator of the oppressed and marginalised (Wirsty 1995:5).

Nyamiti (1995:4) upholds the concept of *Christus Victor*, as an image of Christ acceptable to African believers. This image includes the resurrected Christ, and the miracle worker, the conqueror of evil spirits, diseases and death, and the guarantee of immortality. As such, he fulfils the major desires and aspirations of the African world view. As Nyamiti

emphasises, while it is important to ask who Christ is for the African today, the answer to this question must take into account the Christ revealed in the Bible, which depends on Trinitarian theology for its meaning and its relevance to contemporary issues.

According to Scripture, Christ is, by definition, the only-begotten of the Father, who was sent by this same Father to save us in the power of the divine Spirit. To ignore or disregard any of these facts is to falsify the true picture of Jesus' personality and the consequent relevance he bears towards us (Nyamiti 1995:15).

The incarnation of Christ, understood as his sharing in human life and experience, and entering into community with people, is a very relevant concept for Africans. However, it is clear that African theologians tend to emphasise the humanity of Christ rather than his divinity. The incarnation is understood primarily in terms of Christ sharing in ordinary human life and especially human suffering and experience of exploitation and dehumanisation.

Incarnation is the highest fulfilment of personality as understood by the African. For the African, to achieve personality is to become truly human and, in a sense, authentically Black; hence, the incarnate Logos is the Black Person par excellence. There is therefore, no genuine blackness or negritude outside him (Nyamiti 1995:5).

The African approach to incarnational theology would emphasise major Christian doctrines which demonstrate Christ's experiencing community, and sharing human experience, such as the Trinity, the paschal mystery, Pentecost, the second coming and ecclesiology. Theologians have also attempted to relate the Christ event to the pivotal event in a young African boy's life, the experience of initiation. Thus, it is stated that Christ was initiated into his culture by birth and circumcision, receiving his name and being presented at the temple. He was further separated from his family and given instruction in the temple at the age of twelve. Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet at the Last Supper is seen as initiating them into service, and teaching them by example (Nyamiti 1995:9).

There is also an importance given to the death of Christ, in African Christian thought, which differs from Western theology. In the West, the cross is seen as a necessary prelude to the resurrection. In Africa, however, the cross is celebrated as Christ's identification with human beings in the experience of suffering and death, and as the means by which he passes through death and conquers its power.

Clearly, Africans must develop their own picture of Christ which meets uniquely African needs and aspirations. An imported Christology will no longer suffice for Africans in the twenty-first century:

The Jesus who deals with Africans and their existential situation in a real and dynamic way will be extremely comprehensible to the African people. Africans are not interested in suffering through their problems now while waiting for the bliss of heaven. This is the type of Christianity evangelistic Missionary Christianity to a large extent communicated to the African people. Africans want a leader who shows them the way to liberation now – liberation from oppression, disease, hunger, fear, and death. This type of Jesus is the one presented in the Gospels. Africans identify very much with him. He is the prophet who exhorts them to a better and more hopeful living. He is a priest who mediates between them and the external powers of the living God. He is the King who leads his people to victory over the overwhelming threats of life. (Waruta 1995:62).

Africans need to be presented with a Christ to whom they can relate, who meets their needs, and is meaningful to them in the existential situation in which they find themselves. This is a great challenge to the contemporary world-wide church, which has been slow in recognising the need for a relevant Christology.

### **5.8 The Concept of Mediators**

Most African peoples have a group of intermediaries between human beings and the high God. He is thought to be too important to approach directly, and parallels have been drawn to important figures in traditional cultures, such as kings, who would only be approached through an official, as a mark of respect (Adeyemo 1979:37). In practice, however, this has led to God becoming unimportant or absent from everyday rituals and religious beliefs, and a concentration on the mediators.

These mediators may be ancestral spirits, or nature spirits, or lesser gods, depending on the particular culture. There is also usually a human intermediary through whom the ancestors or the spirits speak. In Southern Africa, the ancestors tend to be the recent dead, those still familiar to the present generation, particularly deceased parents and grandparents. The ancestors are believed to be particularly concerned with the behaviour of the living and with ensuring that the local folk traditions are maintained by future generations. In order to qualify for ancestor status, a person must either have left many descendants or achieved great fame. Sometimes an ancestor is more an abstraction than a real historical person ‘a projection of the identity of the group whose unity he represents’ (MacGaffey 2000:239).

The ancestors are the supernatural beings with whom the living communicate most often, and therefore, in practice, traditional African religion focussed on the ancestors, not on belief in the Supreme Being, who was hardly ever worshipped, and who was approached rarely, only through mediators. The most common term for the ancestors in Southern Africa is the Tswana and Sotho term *muzimu* (*muzhimo, molimo, umlimmo, edimo, bodimo*) (Smith 1950:117). In most African traditions, a person's authority depends on age. As people grow older, they get closer to the time when they will join the spirit world and become ancestors. Ancestors have greater power and authority than their living descendants (Thorpe 1994:114).

In many cases, the ancestors of a group have more power, authority and influence than living members of that group. Even the elders often appeal to their forthcoming ancestorhood to bolster their authoritative status in the community:

While the living are concerned with the life here and now, that is, with all the struggles and temptations on earth; the ancestors, who are free from the struggles of physical life, are concerned with keeping the family on the right track'. This means keeping the family within the traditions of the culture, and within any stipulations and rules that they laid down for their families while they were still alive (Wirsty 1995: 43).

Death of an old person, particularly a grandfather, is considered natural, a normal passage into ancestorhood. In fact, death is the gateway to completion or maturity. We pass through the womb into earthly life, and then through death into 'ontological completion beyond death' (Penoukou 1995:31). However, death and burial alone do not guarantee becoming an ancestor. Additional rituals have to be performed. For instance, the Zulu people perform a ritual called *ukubuyisela idlozi* (*Bringing home the ancestor*) approximately a year after the death. This involves the slaughter of a beast at the grave site, and prayers to the ancestors, asking them to allow the deceased to go back home to rest. The family members put some earth from the top of the grave in a bottle, which they take home with them. They then believe that the deceased member is with them, watching over them as an ancestor (Anderson 2000:214).

Contrary to popular assumptions by those outside the African tradition, "not all dead people automatically attain the status of ancestor and ... death is not always a requirement for it" (Zahan 2000:11). An elderly man is commonly regarded as an ancestor by his

grandchildren, and someone who has died prematurely will not be considered an ancestor. “The ancestor is someone who has reached a great age and who, during his lifetime, has acquired a vast experience of life, human beings and things” (Zahan 2000:11). It is sometimes assumed that only old men become ancestors. Ancestors tend to be predominantly male (MacGaffey 2000:239), but a woman may become an ancestor, provided she has fulfilled the necessary conditions. These conditions are listed below:

An ancestor must have lived a morally worthy life and must have died a good death. This means that the person was not killed by lightning or a falling and was not killed by a strange disease such as smallpox or leprosy. ... An ancestor must have received a second or third burial to smooth the sojourn through the spirit world to reincarnation. Obviously, those who died bad deaths or did not get fitting burials do not reincarnate and, indeed, turn into malevolent spirits which hound their progeny for failing to bury them properly (Kalu 2000:57-58).

The ancestors occupy a different dimension from the living. “Unlike the society of the living, ... that of the dead is exempt from contradictions, tensions and oppositions. The world of the ancestors is one that is free of antithesis and violence because it resides in a slow time” (Zahan 2000:11). However, this does not mean that the ancestral society never undergoes change. It is constantly being replenished and kept in touch with the world of the living by the ‘newly dead’. On the other end of the scale, those who have been dead for several generations lose their usefulness, and disappear from the collective memory of their people. The life of the ancestors is always discussed from the point of view of the living. They are concerned with the effects which the ancestors have on them, rather than the conditions in which the ancestors exist.

In many African traditions, there is also a belief in reincarnation. In some form, an ancestor may return in a new born descendant. “The back-and-forth movement of ancestors constitutes, in itself, a certain dynamism; it is clothed with another, more subtle this time, which consists in the acquisition, by those who go back to this world, of cultural enrichment achieved by the welcoming committee since their departure from this world” (Zahan 2000:12). Thus, African tradition can harmonise dependence on and admiration for the past with a desire for progress and future development.

The practice of libations is also common throughout Africa. Three substances are used: water, flour mixed with water and beer or palm wine. Water is considered a sign of care

and affection. Water mixed with flour is designed to awaken ancestors and cause them to take action, and beer or wine is a stimulant, and therefore a sharper call to action. The final recourse of the living seeking to influence the dead is blood sacrifice, often of a white chicken or a goat (Zahan 2000:13).

It is important to distinguish the concept of ‘ancestral spirit’ from the traditional Western concept of the human soul. In no sense is the *muzimu* considered a part of the living person. A person becomes a *muzimu* after death. Where a distinction is made in a language between a person – ‘he or she’ and a thing – ‘it’, the ancestral spirit is classified as a thing (Smith 1950:118). In the Sotho language, the usual plural of *muzimu* is *medimo*, which is also translated ‘gods’, and may refer to the dead collectively or to demi-gods, including the ancestral spirits (Smith 1950:118). Demi-gods would include *Cosa*, the god of destinies and *Nape*, the god of divination, and lesser gods associated with initiation ceremonies – *Tintibane* (in whose name oaths are taken), *Thobege-a-phachwa*, the one-legged demi-god and *Thanakana*. The collective term for the spirits of the departed is *balimo* and they have a chief, *Dimo* or *Dimodimo* who is seen as opposed to God, and goes about undoing God’s work (Smith 1950:118).

The ancestors are remembered for approximately four generations among common people, and may be remembered and venerated for considerably longer among royalty. As time goes on, people who have been dead longer are forgotten, and no longer considered among the immediate ancestors of a community, with power to influence the lives of the living (Thorpe 1994:38). In some traditions, it is believed that those long dead become part of a collective rather than an individual existence, prior to being reincarnated in one of their descendants.

The ancestors and other unseen spirits are considered as much a part of the world as the material realities that surround Africans. The belief in ancestors as mediators is particularly influential in Central and Southern Africa where “The goodwill of the ancestors is vital to the well-being of the living, and the dead are therefore supplicated and placated by an unending series of individual acts and prescribed rituals” (Courlander 1996:3). The ancestors are recently departed, who therefore know the living and their needs, but because they are ‘matured beyond mere earthly existence’ (Thorpe 1994:115), they are closer to

God, and able to mediate between their descendants and God. The living have an ambivalent attitude to the ancestors. They are sometimes loved and sometimes feared.

The ancestors are responsible ensuring that their descendants remain faithful to traditional beliefs and practises, and loyal to their clan and family. This, of course, is in the best interests of the ancestors, as, if the family disintegrates, soon there will be no-one to remember them and bring them offerings and supplications. Therefore, if a member of the family no longer upholds the family traditions, and does not fulfil his obligations, such as attending funerals, sacrifices and other family celebrations, the ancestors may be expected to act, often by bringing misfortune onto the individual, or the family as a whole (Wirsty 1995: 47). In extreme cases, the rest of the family may petition the ancestors to bring back a stray member, even if this means risking misfortune.

The living are very conscious of their responsibilities towards the ancestors, who must be supplied with good things, and continually remembered, so that they do not suffer the wrath of the ancestors.

The term 'ancestor' is used, loosely enough, to refer to spirits of historical, remembered, or purely hypothetical forbears, usually male (even in societies with matrilineal groups). In general, they are severe authority figures and will visit afflictions on their descendants if they feel neglected in the matter of palm wine, tobacco or other good things they enjoyed in life (MacGaffey 2000:239).

The term *idlozi* is sometimes used among Zulu speakers to refer to a living elderly person, as well as to a person who has died. Ancestors often appear in dreams, when they are called *ithongo*. The word *abaphanzi* is also used as a general term for ancestors, referring to those who live under the earth. An ancestor who appoints a person to be a diviner by hitting him on the shoulder is called *umhlabathi*. This word is derived from the Zulu word for shoulder, *uhlabo* (Thorpe 1994:40).

Three places in the traditional Zulu home are associated especially with the presence of the ancestors. These are the hearth, the doorway and the *unsamo*, a dark place at the back of the hut, where snakes, believed to be associated with the ancestors, are frequently found. Offerings of sacrificial meat are placed in the *unsamo* for the ancestors. Cooking pots are also left unscraped on the hearth, for the *amadlozi* to eat. There are also three areas of the cattle kraal considered sacred to the *amadlozi*. These are the gateway, the pit in the centre where grain is stored and the far interior (Thorpe 1994:41).

The consciousness of the presence of the dead with the living and contact between living and dead is not unique to Africa, but is common to many primal cultures. Streit has stated that 'for mythic man, the dead were invisible people living among them' (1984:26). Therefore, in many pre-industrial societies, we find that the presence and activity of the dead in the lives of the living is a widely accepted assumption. It is particularly the influence of ancestors and those who had been known to the particular community in life, which is welcomed.

Thus for the Zulu people 'acceptable spirit possession is primarily by ancestral spirits for purposes of healing and divination' (Thorpe 1994:105). Activities of alien spirits are generally frowned upon, and not acknowledged in the traditional belief system. In contrast, the Shona welcome possession from both familiar and alien spirits. However, unwelcome possession, by a spirit which intends evil, does also occur.

There are also human mediators, who facilitate communication between the living and the living dead or ancestors. A person who is chosen as a human mediator, in Zulu called *inyanga* or *isangoma*, may begin brooding (*ukufukumela*), and undergo a personality change. The person may then become a diviner. A symbol for this change of status is white clay smeared on the face. A person in this condition abstains from washing and the use of cosmetics, from cutting hair and one or more nails, and may tie a gall bladder onto his or her head (Thorpe 1994:41).

Diviners are called by the ancestors, often by means of an illness, which may involve body pains, trances and twitching, as well as strange dreams. Generally, the ancestors plague their chosen instrument until he or she accepts appointment as a diviner. A diviner may be a man or a woman, and among the Zulu, the majority are women. The new diviner is generally apprenticed to an experienced diviner, who gives instruction and teaches by example and shared experience. At the end of a one to two year training period, there is an initiation ceremony, including animal sacrifices.

A prophet may also be called a seer, revealer of secrets, possessor of a spirit, or simply a man of God (Waruta 1995:57). Prophets are understood as communicators with the people, in contrast with the diviner as normally understood, who is responsible for being a channel through which the supernatural communicates. Unlike the diviner, the prophet's role is not

restricted to the religious aspect of life, in so far as this exists as a separate division of life in Africa. The prophet may speak to socio-political issues. Therefore, the prophet is often the one responsible for bringing about change in a traditional African society. The African Initiated Churches all trace their origin to a prophetic figure who arose in the midst of the people, and led them into a new form of religious expression.

In some cases, the African prophet fomented political rebellion, as well as founding a new religious movement. The aim of these movements is “the quest for spiritual/physical liberation from external domination” (Waruta 1995:58). Thus, this can easily be applied to either the political or the religious sphere of life, and frequently has relevance to both.

Some figures may be considered both priests and prophets, although the two roles are quite distinct. The priest is ‘the medium through which the life-giving power of God comes to man’ (Waruta 1995:59). The priest is considered a master of traditional wisdom, and conducts or plays a role in ceremonies and community rituals. Generally, the priest is more concerned with institutions and roles than the prophet, who operates largely outside community structures.

The head of a lineage, or senior kinsman of a family group is also regarded as a mediator who communicates with the ancestors (Thorpe 1994:45). This is so because he is considered the closest to the ancestors, by reason of his age and having known many of the recently dead during their lives. He is in charge of arranging sacrifices, and informing all who should be present. He is also an officiant at cultic events. A king or tribal chief performs these duties on behalf of the whole nation, and is considered a special link to the ancestors of his people.

Waruta (1995:53) suggests that Christ should be presented as the ultimate mediator between God and humankind. In African tradition, there were three categories of human mediators – ‘the prophet, the priest and the sacred king ruler, chief-elder or the accepted potentate’. Therefore, he believes that the traditional Christian picture of Christ as prophet, priest and king is extremely appropriate to Africa, and can be used with great effectiveness.

## 5.9 Art and Literature

Africans have a distinctive form of visual art, many varied musical skills and a wealth of, predominantly oral, literature. Much of this has only recently been recognised as art by Western scholars, but recently appreciation for African dance, music, poetry and drama has become wide-spread across the world. In many European countries, shops selling African artefacts and works of art are found, and generally trade very successfully. We have also witnessed the success of African dance and music in the West, for instance, the play *African Footprint* was a great success in London and New York in the year 2000.

Westerners often fail to appreciate much of the symbolism of African art, especially symbolism expressed by the use of colour. Thus white is associated with the dead and the invisible world, as well as with ‘inner tranquility, wisdom and innocence’ (MacGaffey 2000:233). Black, in contrast, represents the visible world, as well as witchcraft, and ‘the unruly, organic processes of sorcery, procreation and war’ (MacGaffey 2000:233). Red, the third major colour found in African art works, is associated with danger, transition and liminality. It is interesting to compare African and Western symbolism associated with colour. Some ideas apply to both cultures, such as white for innocence, red for danger, but others are completely different, such as black for procreation in African tradition!

Many African peoples produce images of ancestral spirits, especially masks made of wood or clay, which are often held to be inhabited by the spirit of an ancestor. In many groups, the masks associated with deceased kings or chiefs are held in reverence, and in some instances, prayers are offered and sacrifices made before them.

The church has been hesitant about using indigenous African art and literature in its proclamation and worship. New ways must be discovered of tapping these hidden resources, in order to enrich the life of the church and make it more effective in an African context. Indigenous African musical instruments, such as African drums and marimbas, are increasingly being used in a number of churches, but this, too, has been a source of controversy, particularly among older people who are long-standing church members.

African oral literature encompasses diverse genres. Among them, Milubi (1997:5) lists myths (stories to explain mysteries in human experience), legends (story with historical core, surrounded by fantasy), fables (moralistic tales), folk tales (stories for entertainment),

riddles, proverbs and praise poetry. While each region and each cultural grouping may have a unique store of folk tales and proverbs, many are so widespread as to be considered generally African, and a distinctive African style of oral literature may be recognised:

...the oral tradition of Africa reflects ideas, themes, suppositions and truths that are widely shared, at the same time that it reveals creations unique to, and particularized by, a tribe, village or region. A tribe may be united with a mainstream of African traditions and yet have legends of its own heroes, kings and demigods, its own conflicts and migrations, and its unique ancient origins. ... The process of creating literature goes on side by side with the process of preserving what is generalised and old (Courlander 1996:3).

This is true of all literary creations. What is produced today must build on the past, as well as linking with contemporary needs and interests. However, writing undoubtedly makes innovation easier. Where a group of people must rely on oral literature for communication, for historical records and for entertainment, the role of past contributions is far more important than where records can be discovered from books and other written sources.

Oral communication may include localised material as well as traditions from further afield, sometimes adapted to meet local needs.

Peoples of Eastern and Southern Africa share a tradition of heroic tales told in the form of epic poems, including songs. Some of these epics recount tales of real life heroes, others are more legendary than historical. Many are concerned with a prince who is cast out of his privileged position, and perhaps from his people as a whole, and, by heroic deeds and magic, reclaims his rightful position as king.

After frightful ordeals, and perhaps a series of confrontations with creatures of the bush, magical forces, monsters, witches and evil men, the hero returns home victorious to receive recognition and achieve his proper place ... among the people (Courlander 1996:400).

Animals play an important role in all African cultures, whether domesticated or wild animals hunted for meat. Africans have a healthy respect for wild predators and these often feature prominently in their traditional tales, as well as in visual art. Snakes, especially the python, play an important role in African art, and are symbols of "creation, procreation and death" (Jell-Bahlsen 2000:40).

The established churches have not made use of the rich source of African oral literature. As mentioned before, Western scholarship has only recently begun to recognise and

explore this wealth of literature. Unfortunately, this is one of many examples where the church, instead of leading the field, follows in the wake of academic and cultural discoveries. The African Initiated Churches, however, have fully utilised African folklore and tradition in their worship, and clearly teach traditional African morality, which has a strong humanistic orientation. “African moral thinking needs to be elucidated and clearly contrasted with the misconceptions that exist in modern westernised society concerning the inherent value of morality for a healthy African society” (Oosthuizen 2000:280).

Contemporary Africans must learn from their indigenous traditions, drawing out insights which may help not only Africa, but the world, to face current problems, such as loss of identity in an urban situation, dehumanisation and alienation from family and community. These problems are prominent in Africa, but are found throughout the world, especially in rapidly changing cultures and communities.

In the same way as European peoples have rediscovered Celtic spirituality and are attempting to get back to their cultural roots, many modern Africans have instituted a revival of African culture, which can never be separated from religious ideas and practices. The arts of story-telling, recitation, dance, mime and the dramatic representations of spirit-mediums, which were all part of the oral literature of ancient Africa, have flowered in the written works of modern Africans, expressing themselves for the most part in English and French (Shorter 1980:3). There is a movement in contemporary Western countries which seeks out artistic and philosophical contributions of non-Western cultures, including African, South American, indigenous North Americans, Oceanic cultures and Asians. This has brought African art and culture to the fore as never before, among art lovers and scholars in the West.

All African art and literature can be said to have religious overtones, as a result of the fact that religious values permeate every aspect of African life and culture: “It forms the themes of songs, makes topics for minstrelry, finds vehicles in myths, folktales, proverbs and sayings and is the basis of their philosophy. In all things, the African peoples are very religious” (Adeyemo 1979:92). This forms a sharp contrast with the secularised cultures of the West, where religion and religious belief has been marginalised and privatised. In many Western societies, it is considered bad taste to bring religion into a conversation, or

even a work of art, although this is changing to some extent with the growth of the New Age Movement, resulting in a greater respect being paid to the spiritual.

One very interesting form of oral literature, which is widespread among African peoples, is praise poetry, performed publicly by a praise singer<sup>7</sup>. The subject of a praise poem could be an individual, a clan or tribe, or the totem animal associated with that clan or tribe (Milubi 1997:44). By praising a person, a tribe or clan, or an animal, the speaker is believed to enhance the life force of the subject of the poem.

As mentioned above, Africans also have a distinctive form of dancing, which is practised at almost all communal events, regardless of the mood of the gathering. Dancing is considered an expression of emotion, whether happy or sad.

Africans dance to celebrate every imaginable situation – joy, grief, love, hate, to bring prosperity or to avert calamity. In addition, singing and joyful conversation enable African people to minimise tensions within a closed community (Thorpe 1994:117).

The established churches have been slow to encourage dancing in their worship services, although in recent years, spontaneous singing and dancing has been included during otherwise formal services. Dancing is now an accepted part of services in predominantly black churches and is often included in large diocesan gatherings, such as ordination services.

### **5.10 Other Key Concepts in African Spirituality**

There are many other ideas which are common to most African world views and could be considered key concepts. I will briefly discuss the following: the need for immediate *application of faith to life*; the concept of *power*, including the idea of direct cause and effect, natural or supernatural; the role of *dreams*; and *life or life force vs death*.

According to Okorochoa,(1987) Africans have an implicit need for a *practical and immediate faith*, which can be seen to be applicable to daily life, which is clearly defined and can be demonstrated to meet present needs and mesh with present realities. However,

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<sup>7</sup> An interesting feature of the new South Africa has been the presence of a praise singer at all important events, where the praises of the President are sung, for example, at the opening of parliament each year.

it is surely true that the first need in Africa is for a visible demonstration of a faith-driven life-style, showing the truth of the gospel, rather than simply verbal proclamation.

... the fastest growing churches in African today are those which are not only community-oriented in their social outlook but also fundamentalist in theology and belief. The African understanding of commitment to religion and faith has no room for equivocation. Religion and values must be clear-cut, pragmatic and efficacious in the face of every contingency (Okorochoa 1987:33).

A major problem with such fundamentalist approaches is that they tend to be simplistic. There must be easy, direct answers to every problem. They have no mechanisms for dealing with complex issues such as Aids prevention. They also tend to be judgmental towards people who do not follow their strict moral codes, and see illness or material loss as a direct result of sin, and as punishment from God or the ancestors.

African spirituality is strongly concerned with *power*, whether it is physical or political power, or spiritual power. There is an understanding that all power is essentially the same. Power is something which enables human beings to make a difference in their own lives and the lives of others. It is often assumed that the lives and values of Africans are controlled by material concerns. However this is a misunderstanding. Africans see the material and spiritual worlds as one, and do not differentiate between physical and spiritual concerns. Therefore, we cannot say that whole African peoples converted to Christianity as a result of economic factors alone. "Religion is the *key* to African conversion... socio-economic factors are only catalytic. The people converted to Christianity in search of salvation, in search of power" (Okorochoa 1987:5).

Linked to the *quest for power* is the desire for a quality of life in which needs are fulfilled, and potential is realised. Okorochoa describes the value which the *Igbo* people place on life as follows:

... a life which includes not only the provision of all that makes for abundant life, but one which is constantly enhanced by the supply of a certain power which makes life a desirable option and living a dynamic adventure (Okorochoa 1987:161).

*Death* is believed to be caused by outside forces, often by a human agent by means of *witchcraft* (Adeyemo 1979:66). It is not related to sin, as in the biblical tradition, but sin is primarily seen as an action which brings about evil, so in this sense, death and disease are direct results of sinful actions. According to Thorpe (1994:46), women are more often

accused of witchcraft than men. There are often parallels to the situation in medieval and early modern Europe where men felt a woman to be a threat and disposed of her by means of accusations of witchcraft. Accusations of witchcraft are often found in over-crowded family situations, where there is tension between in-laws. A young bride, who is resented by jealous in-laws, as an outsider now sharing in the family wealth, may be accused of witchcraft in an attempt to destroy her.

In African tradition, a convicted witch must be destroyed, in order to preserve the community from further harm. This often means a death sentence. The *isangoma* is responsible for determining who the witch is, and declaring what must be done in order to restore the community once more to health and wholeness.

As mentioned above, African life and thought is also shaped to a large extent by their consciousness of the presence of the living dead, the *ancestral spirits* and the nearness of the spirit world. The dead and the unborn are seen as parts of the community and of the continuum of life. Kaunda (1980:45) describes the African world view as follows: "We are who we are because of our attitudes to the mysteries of depth in life; symbolised by birth and death, harvest and famine, ancestors and the unborn".

*Rituals* are performed in African families and communities to mark every major rite of passage in a life: birth, puberty, marriage and death (Thorpe 1994:47). This serves to unite the community and the family, but also to reinforce the connection to the ancestors. As the rites of passage tend to be family occasions, reference to the ancestors is an expected part of the required ritual.

*Dreams* are given a deep mystical meaning. It is widely believed that God speaks to us through dreams, despite the Westernising influence which has often despised and devalued the role of dreams. Many Africans who believe that God has called them to the ordained ministry will still say that a dream has played an important role in the call experience (Mbiti 1997).

Africans have a different approach to *time* from that which is dominant in Western, technology oriented societies. The African concept of time is experience based. Time is measured by important events, not by accurate measurements on a clock. Therefore, the

popular expression 'African time' points to the fact that punctuality is not a priority or a virtue in the minds of most Africans. They are concerned with the value of the event, and quite unconcerned if it starts thirty minutes late because an important person has not yet arrived.

Time is not determined by a series of successive moments, but is related to observable natural phenomena that determine and express objective time. The principal markers of this cyclical world-view and history are the sun, the moon, and the stars, climatic and seasonal changes, animal and human conditions, and plants. These become reference points because of their rhythmic, repetitive and cyclical patterns. Time is located within experience, that is, in historical events (Danfulani 2000:89).

Traditional Africans are aware of the passing of time in that they observe the seasons of the year, and also that they remember important events, such as the crowning of a king or the birth of a child. Danfulani (2000:89) writes that Africans conceive time in terms of pairs of opposites, such as day and night, morning and evening, east and west. This is related to other pairs of opposites: spirit and human, sacred and profane, mortal and immortal. These pairs of opposites are linked through ritual, which enables humans and spirit powers to communicate with one another.

It is important to understand aspects of the traditional African world view which are forgotten or suppressed today. One example would be the view of time as cyclical; another would be the importance of dreams and of ritual. If these ideas are ignored, there is likely to be a breakdown in communication and understanding between Africans and non-Africans. Once again, the centrality of power in African Spirituality is seen. Power and experiences of powerlessness are important ideas in African thought, as well as the desire for personal power in daily struggles against destructive forces, whether they are spiritual, economic, natural or personal.

### **5.11 Conclusion**

The Christian Church today needs to come to a renewed understanding of African thought and behaviour. The gospel will be more readily accepted if its immediate relevance to everyday needs and concerns is stressed. As African thought is dominated by life-enhancing power, and the fear of death-bringing power, the church needs to take this seriously and proclaim Christ as the ultimate life giver, and conqueror of the forces of evil, death and destruction. The church needs to formulate a sensitive and biblically sound

approach to the question of ancestor veneration, and the relationship of living believers to their deceased relatives. In addition, knowing the importance given to dreams and visions in Africa, Christians must learn to be more open to hearing God speak through these media.

As the world wide church seeks to integrate authentic spiritual experience with official church teaching, the African approach to Christology, to communication and to religious expression should inform the rest of the world. The holistic African approach to the material world and spiritual reality should help Western Christians to overcome a false dualism which is foreign to Scripture as well as to human experience in the twenty-first century . The African consciousness of inter-dependence of human beings, and of the value of wisdom and experience is also a lesson which could be learned by the world wide church.