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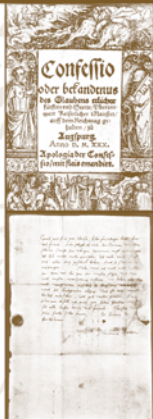


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Ancestors, Spirits and Healing in Africa and Asia: A Challenge to the Church



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Ancestors, Spirits and Healing in Africa and Asia: A Challenge to the Church

LWF Studies, 2005

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edited by

Ingo Wulfhorst

on behalf of

*The Lutheran World Federation
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Introduction

Ingo Wulfhorst

How do Christians relate to ancestors, spirits and healing? For some Christians this is a cutting edge and often polemical question. Most missionaries used to condemn all elements of Indigenous religions as being Satanic, demonic or, at the very least, as “backward,” “primitive,” “irrational” and “uncivilized.” Even today, many Christians and churches continue to hold this position while others are looking for alternatives. Should Christians, based on an intolerant, narrow-minded teaching of the Christian faith, continue to be defensive and condemn other religious experiences? This attitude has contributed to a worldwide rise in fundamentalism and fanaticism.

First generation Lutherans in Asia accepted the call to sever all ties to their ancestors, spirits and other elements of their culture and former religious identity. But, according to one Lutheran pastor,¹ many second generation Lutherans are reclaiming their Indigenous identity. Some Lutherans are Christians during the day, but Africans at night, was the consensus of participants at the Africa seminar.² On Sundays, Lutherans go to church, but at night some participate in rituals of African Religion. Should we ignore this reality? Is dialogue an alternative?

Pursuing dialogue

For Christians, dialogue is nothing new. Jesus Christ was in dialogue with people of other faiths and also with God. Since the Christian faith is dialogical *par excellence*,³ there is no reason to avoid dialogue with one's own heritage and with those who are today practicing African Religion and Indigenous religions. Dialogue is more than merely polite conversation. It is, first of all, the struggle to understand ourselves and each other as, guided by the Holy Spirit, we listen to what God has to say to us. In September 2004, practitioners of African Religion, Indigenous Asian and African Lutheran scholars and church representatives were invited to seminars in Africa and Asia to discuss how to understand the relationship to ancestors, spirits and healing and how to relate this to the Christian faith. More and more Christian theolo-

gians in Africa and Asia are dealing with the issue of how best to express and live out the Christian faith in their respective cultures and religious contexts, specifically with regard to ancestors and spirits.

Participants at both seminars agreed that, unfortunately, many Lutheran congregations continue to avoid addressing this question and that there is little openness for dialogue. During the African seminar, one pastor stated that people receive little or no assistance in the congregations and that they are torn between the demands of the extended family to participate in traditional African rituals and the official “no” of the mainline churches. Another participant felt encouraged to share her personal story related to ancestors and healing.

This is the first time that I am sharing my stories about ancestors with someone. I learned in my Lutheran church that I should reject any relationship to my ancestors and not to speak about this topic. But I have been struggling with this question during my whole life. Sometimes I am so anxious that I cannot sleep and even get sick. Now I felt the freedom to speak out. I am feeling a wonderful healing and my Christian faith has been deepened.

As participants embarked on a dialogue about ancestors, spirits and healing, they shared daily experiences related to family and community. They can no longer be silenced by prohibitions. As Asian theologian, Solomon Rajah, states,

Christians who feel related to their ancestors and/or are looking for healing through Indigenous spiritualities are not overly concerned with doctrinal reasoning, but rather with the practical side of their beliefs.

He observed that in India, in accordance with traditional tribal culture and religion, Christians, in particular those struggling for their livelihood in the face of increasing social marginalization and poverty, are looking to the invisible world for solutions to their suffering. In times of crisis, affluent Lutherans worldwide are turning to Indigenous spiritualities and new spiritualistic movements for help because they do not find answers within their churches. Churches are reminded to give more attention to counseling by pastors as well as lay people and of the need to pursue social transformation both of which are central to the church’s ministry.

Some of the papers presented at both seminars in Africa and Asia are included in this book as the study documents that came out of the seminars. It is hoped that Indigenous people will find Indigenous ways of dialoguing in their different contexts.

In the beginning the African seminar was highly conflictual, with representatives of African Religion categorically rejecting the term “dialogue” which they believe to be very Western. They were suspicious that it was a new strategy of the West to recolonize and to convert all people in the South to Christianity and the Western way of life. They openly acknowledged that they were still waiting for the church officially to apologize for its “war” against African Religion. Nevertheless, following the open dialogue that took place during the seminar, Nokuzola Mndende, a fully-fledged *igqirha* (called by the ancestors to be a healer) and professor at the University of Fort Hare, South Africa, declared her willingness to pursue this dialogue. She insisted that African Religion is a religion in its own right and recommended that Christians should come to representatives of African Religion in order to discuss among themselves how to be African Christians. She welcomed the open exchange that had taken place and indicated her willingness to continue this dialogue, even if it is convened by the “Western,” Geneva based Lutheran World Federation.

Mndende’s essay, the first in this book, is very challenging. She reminds us of the difficulty of listening to practitioners of African Religion in such a way that they are fully understood. The problem begins with the translation of Indigenous terms into English. She questions the use of prejudiced Western missionary language, used by some academics, which is misleading and even offensive to practitioners of African Religion. An example of this is the assertion that ancestors can be equated with evil spirits and that practitioners of African Religion worship ancestors, not God. The participants agreed to use the term, “veneration of the ancestors,” while being fully aware that this proposal is still not quite right.

Is there some interaction between African Religion and Christian healers in South Africa? This question is answered positively by Isabel Apawo Phiri, a Presbyterian, deeply rooted in her African identity and professor of African theology at the School of Theology and Religion, University of KwaZulu, Natal, South Africa. She reported the results of her academic research on the healing of traumas resulting from apartheid as experienced by the *sangomas* (traditional women healers in South Africa). There is very little available in writing on traditional religious leaders contributing to the healing of traumas. Phiri’s essay is based on interviews and story telling thus giving a voice to the voiceless. In stories of the *sangomas*, always related to the ancestors, the interface between African Religion and Christianity becomes clear.

In South Africa, the ancestors are the central focus of the practitioners of African Religion. Asriel S.T. Myatafadi, a Lutheran bishop in Nigeria, informs us that in West

Africa, besides ancestors, nature spirits play a central role in African Religion. This came as a surprise to the South African practitioners of African Religion. Having grown up in a family of practitioners of African Religion among the Bwatiye people in northeastern Nigeria, Myatafadi has embraced the Christian faith.

For an increasing number of Lutherans in Asia the relationship to spirits, ancestors and healing is crucial. While most of the tribes in northeast India have been Christianized, the belief in ancestors and spirits continues to be very much alive, concludes Limatula Longkumer, professor of religious education at Eastern Theological College, Assam, India.

The relationship of ancestors and spirits to illness and healing among the Rungus people of Borneo is the topic of an essay by Marunsai Bin Dawai, general secretary of the Protestant Church Sabah, Malaysia. His essay is based on his own experiences and conversations with his mother-in-law, who was a *bobolizan* (the equivalent to an African traditional healer) before she converted to Christianity.

Solomon Rajah, professor at the Seminary Theology Malaysia, Seremban, West Malaysia, tries to build a bridge between the understanding of sacrifices to ancestors and spirits and the Lutheran doctrine of justification through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Relating the Christian faith to ancestors is the focus of the extensive research carried out by African theologian Sylvester B. Kahakwa, professor for systematic theology at Tumaini University, Tanzania. He presents his and others' approaches to understanding Christianity from an African ancestral perspective, and urges that theology be tested to discern whether or not it fits its respective context. This would ensure that an African christological model describes Jesus Christ in a way that touches the African heart and way of life without giving a false image of Jesus.

The question concerning the fear of the avenging ancestors is treated by Reinhard Veller, a local pastor and professor at United Theological College, Harare, Zimbabwe. Based on his experience, he proposes a specific Christian ritual in the case of avenging ancestors. This model, inspired by Christianity as well as being culturally based, seeks healing.

Pukumah H. Yakubu, professor at Bronnum Lutheran Seminary, Yola, Nigeria, deals with the healing ministry in the Lutheran church in Nigeria. In his essay he recounts his personal experience with members of the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria who have received the gift of healing from God. He challenges the churches to recognize people with such gifts and to use the Bible as a "standard" for healing.

Like Reinhard Veller, Monica Melanchthon, professor at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Chennai, India, was challenged by her students to face the question of spirits and healing through biblical research. Many students from mainline churches believe in spirits and, in moments of distress, approach traditional and Pentecostal healers. Her academic research gives a solid basis for Bible studies and dialogue.

Dialogue raises the question of the exclusiveness and inclusiveness of the gospel of Christ. Wilfred J. Samuel, professor at Sabah Theological Seminary, Malaysia, reflects this in light of the many Asian spiritualities deeply rooted in nature. Samuel reminds us that Martin Luther adopted an inclusive view of the gospel, namely that God is the Creator and Preserver of all nature. The commandment to love God has to be translated into the commandment to love God's whole creation. Love of all creation will draw away from an egocentric spirituality and ecclesiology and toward learning from different spiritualities and a deepening of the Christian faith.

This and many other challenges are reflected in the Asian and African study documents. It is our hope that as these study documents are discussed, local contextual answers are found to theological and practical challenges arising from the cultural and religious heritage of ancestors, spirits and healing. To seek a Christian cosmology which tries to meet spiritual and bodily needs is the task of the priesthood of all believers. Lutherans are not "lay" persons but, as baptized in the body of Jesus Christ, called to be priests contributing with their heritage, experiences and profession (*Beruf*) to holistic healing within the community. Studies should increasingly occur in regional and local training courses in order to find an appropriate interpretation, clarification and answers in light of the Bible and the dialogue with representatives of alternative medicine, physicians and psychologists within the community. This need not lead to sectarianism. By together seeking answers appropriate to specific local contexts we are exercising the priesthood of all believers.

Some theologians have developed models of a theology of ancestors and a few congregations have specific ceremonies/rites to bid farewell to the departed, to remember and pay respect to the ancestors, and to honor without worshipping them. These rites should be widely shared and discussed regionally and globally among the Lutheran communion. What does it mean today for Lutherans that Christians are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (Heb 11:1–12:2)?

Lutheran churches are encouraged to develop specific rituals in the face of avenging ancestors and other fears. Sharing such fear is the beginning of a

healing process. Praying in community, including admitting guilt and negotiating payment to the family of the victims (according to the culture in Africa, Asia and other regions), being assured of forgiveness, and consequently cleansed, should be the central elements of such rites.

Concrete acts of solidarity will relieve and heal, sometimes in forms other than expected. Solidarity means more than charity-oriented diakonia (the service of the priesthood of all believers in a world of suffering and conflicts). In light of the coming of the Kingdom of God, with all its consequences, solidarity leads to a prophetic diakonia which uncovers the root causes of poverty, injustice and illness, and proclaims the transforming and liberating power of the gospel in prophetic words and deeds. Such implications and other challenges will be discussed globally by representatives of the follow-up working groups of the LWF seminars on ancestors, spirits and healing in Africa and Asia, on spiritualism in Europe,⁴ and spiritualism and Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian Religions in Latin America⁵ at an international consultation in 2006. The outcome will be published under the title *Spiritualism as a Global Challenge to the Church: Theses and Guidelines*.

Notes

¹ At the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) seminar, "In Dialogue with Indigenous People in Asia on Ancestors, Spirits and Healing," Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, 15–19 September 2004.

² LWF seminar, "Ancestors, Spirits and Healing in African Religion: Challenges to the Lutheran Ministry," Johannesburg, South Africa, 27–30 September 2004.

³ See *Mission in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment. An LWF Contribution to the Understanding of Practice of Mission* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2004), pp. 40–42; *For the Healing of the World, Assembly Study Book*, The Lutheran World Federation Tenth Assembly, Winnipeg, Canada, 2003 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2002), pp. 159–169.

⁴ The outcome of this seminar is published in Ingo Wulffhorst (ed.), *Spiritualism: A Challenge to the Churches in Europe*, LWF Studies 02/2004 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2004).

⁵ Ingo Wulffhorst (ed.), *Espiritualismo/Espiritismo: Desafios para a Igreja na América Latina*, FLM Estudos 01/2004 (Geneva/São Leopoldo: The Lutheran World Federation/Editora Sinodal, 2004).

Ancestors and Healing in African Religion: A South African Context

Nokuzola Mndende

Introduction

I am writing from the perspective of a believer in and practitioner of African Religion. I am not a Christian. Christianity constitutes one but not the only way to God; there are many ways and African Religion is one of them. South Africa is a multi-religious society. South Africans believe in religious freedom and there is freedom of worship.

Whenever Christians speak about African Religion they generally use the plural form, African Religions. All other religions are used in the singular. No religion is monolithic but people look at the common features. We never hear people talking about Christianities, Islams, Hinduisms etc. We cannot, for example, talk about Zulu Religion or Xhosa Religion—African Religion is one. While there are differences in some of the customs and objects used to perform rituals, the underlying principle remains the same. In Christianity there are also many denominations, bound by one belief (in Christ). The use of the plural when it comes to African Religion is the product of missionary evangelization.

Another problem in the study of African Religion is the use of Western, academic rather than Indigenous terminology. Research and study of African societies have given rise to conceptual problems as well as problems related to terminology. Inevitably, translating terms and concepts from one language into another leads to misconceptions and carries the danger of offering limited or distorted definitions of religious beliefs and practices. The concepts used in literature pertaining to the study of African Religion are academically dysfunctional because many scholars, faced with linguistic limitations, tend to avoid explicit definitions of concepts and terms, and assume that they can be generalized and have no scientific validity. Language is the medium through which culture and people are conveyed. Therefore, by examining a language one can learn more about the

people who speak that language. Some African Christian scholars deliberately classify ancestors with evil spirits of unknown origin. Because of their lack of knowledge about their African roots and in order to satisfy their church masters they viciously attack ancestors to the extent that they even give false testimony. This is a shame, as the world needs to learn more about African Religion. In South Africa, fortunately, many Africans still claim to belong to African Religion without being diviners or herbalists. They practice it as a belief system.

Many Christians use the missionary tactic of associating what we genuinely believe to be a religion with an outdated culture, which they regard as having a spiritual vacuum. This distortion assumes that the only way to know God is through the Judeo Christian Bible as if God [...self] were Christian. The reason I have put the dots before "self" is because God is genderless and, in African Religion, God is perceived as the spirit who is neither male nor female. If I were using my language I would use "U-Qamata" (God) "U" (is), a term which is gender neutral. This distortion confuses African Christians who believe in their roots. At the same time, they are misled. They are misinformed that beyond the grave they will one day be answerable to Christ. African Christians are often told that the ancestors are demons. This can result in an identity crisis; they either condemn ancestors in order to satisfy their superiors or pretend to be Christians during the day and secretly practice African Religion at night. Priests, of various denominations, have told me that they distinguish between their profession (priesthood) and being African. As they believe to have been born into African Religion they see nothing wrong in practicing African rituals for their ancestors.

My topic will be the place of ancestors and healing in African spirituality. In order to avoid generalizations the essay will concentrate on the amaXhosa (or Cape Nguni) practices of South Africa. The basic structure of these practices is the clan as the foundation of the teaching and practice of African Religion.

Although much has been written about healing in African Religion, the concept has been narrowly defined to mean the use of natural medicines by what some scholars refer to as traditional healers. In this essay, we will not deal with the medical side of the healing process but, instead, focus on the healing related to ancestors.

Healing related to ancestors

Health, sickness and healing are very important and sensitive fields. Most black South Africans use both Western and Indigenous African methods of healing.

Unfortunately, Indigenous African health institutions were never recognized by previous governments. On the contrary, they were demonized, given inferior status and forced to transform if they wanted to be recognized. Research was done and documented from an outside perspective and terminologies had to be borrowed from outside in order for the research to be accepted as being scientific.

Western standards were used as a yardstick. The interpretation of health, sickness and healing from the researcher's or observer's perspective differs from the one of the researched or observed, since Western tradition looks at the individual whereas the African approach is holistic. Although the perception of feelings of health, sickness and being healed starts from an individual feeling it may not necessarily involve an individual *per se*, but the effects of other associated factors such as the relationship between an individual and other members of the community, including the ancestors. Although this field continues to be demonized by some, the government is committed to respecting and treating everyone equally and has had to acknowledge all healing processes in South Africa. People must first understand the role played by ancestors in society. Ancestors are the departed members of society who play an intermediary role between the living and the Creator. It is our duty to try to comprehend the different approaches to understanding health, sickness and healing. Sicknesses caused by the suppression of the spiritual remain to be researched. A physical problem may, for example, be the result of the suppression of the spiritual. An individual may suffer from a physical problem which could simply be caused by the need for a certain ritual, such as *imbeleko*, birth ritual, *intwaso*, a call to divination, or even an unperformed *imfukamo*, ritual seclusion in divination. It is insufficient that these are studied in Western scientific terms only, as these mostly distort them into psychological and sociological problems. Once studied from that angle an individual may resort to performing rituals secretly for fear of being humiliated; this could cause further problems.

Clan and ancestors

Before probing deeper into healing in African spirituality, it is important to be aware of the religious spectrum in African Religion. In African Religion, the clan is the basic structure. Since clanship includes paternal and maternal blood relatives, ritual performances include the participation of *abatshana* (an inclusive term for nephews and nieces). The clan performs all rituals and there is a

formal way of conducting these practices by different members of the clan. The spirits of those who have departed link the world of those who are alive with the world of the spirit. They play the vital role of intermediaries.

The elderly

In African Religion, elderly people, both men and women, are the leaders. Owing to their wisdom and life experience, they are able to see when harmony has been disturbed and the ancestors are displeased. The elderly are the advisors of the community. Generally there is no gender differentiation as that depends on the roles played in particular rituals. Each elderly person has a role to play which is sometimes determined by the person's birthright, age and gender.

Position based on birthright

Some spiritual activities are to be performed by special people such as the *inkulu*, firstborn male, or the *umafungwashe*, firstborn female in a clan. Depending on the type of society, patriarchal or matriarchal, the paternal or maternal aunts have special roles to play in the ritual performances. These people, because of their birthright and the role they play in the ritual performance, are classified as healers. Nonetheless, they are never mentioned in research on African Indigenous healing. Only diviners and herbalists are mentioned, but these people play a very important role in the healing of individuals in African Religion. To mention a few, the *udadobawo*, paternal aunt, plays a crucial role in the health of the brothers' children in her clan, and the *inkulu*, firstborn male, plays a major role in the healing of his clan members. The sacred *assegai* for slaughtering sacrificial animals is always used by the firstborn male of the clan. All these play a vital role in healing in African Religion. The danger here is that Western scholars define these methods as "non-rational" and "nonscientific" or "preliterate" yet many people across the world still believe in the power of ancestors as being the binding factor in families.

Sickness/healing and ancestors

When we speak of healing, we also speak of sickness. Sickness does not only mean having pains or the malfunctioning of cells in the body. The concept is

usually more complex. It refers to an imbalance within the human being, the clan and also within the community that needs healing. The malfunctioning of the body cells or an infection in the body requires a person to seek medication.

Another type of sickness could be a person's unusual behavior which has different causes. The elderly are able to differentiate whether the sickness is caused by a physical dysfunction of the body cells or whether a ritual needs to be performed. If the cause of the illness is an unperformed ritual, the only cure will be the performance of a particular ritual by the rightful person using the right methods.

It is also important to realize that while there are different types of sickness they are not completely distinct; the causes overlap. Not performing a ritual can result in physical symptoms or a malfunctioning of the body. The causes of sickness are intertwined, as are the symptoms. In these cases the elderly play a crucial role as they can distinguish whether a certain sickness, because of its symptoms, requires medication or a ritual.

Igqirha (*diviner*) and ixhwele (*medicine man/herbalist*).

The term traditional healer will be avoided; it is one that has certain racial connotations since it is always associated with healers of a certain race. In Africa this would always be black people. In Durban, for instance, many Indians belonging to different religions use natural medicines, but they are never referred to as traditional healers. In South Africa, an increasing number of white people claim to have been called by their ancestors to be healers. These people are often called white *sangomas* and always wear African regalia. To me this implies that the call by the ancestors is only associated with black people. White people who have herbal shops are never called traditional healers. Therefore, I will avoid such terms as I feel they undermine the religious practices of the black people.

I am a fully-fledged *igqirha* having received my *itshoba*, the brush of the ox tail, as a certificate confirming that I have passed the training. The ox was slaughtered during my graduation ceremony. Being an *igqirha* means being called by the ancestors to heal. Contrary to what the missionaries claimed, this individual is not a witch doctor nor does s/he use human body parts to make medicines. The *igqirha's* main function is to diagnose and to heal.

An important distinction often overlooked by scholars, especially in the translation of African terminology, is the difference between an *igqirha* and

an *ixhwele*. An *ixhwele* may have learned the use of Indigenous medicine from a parent or grandparent. In some ways, an *ixhwele* can be compared to a pharmacist who is well versed in the uses of different medicines but, ultimately, it is a qualified doctor who provides a diagnosis and prescribes the medication. In other words, the role of an *ixhwele* is limited to his/her knowledge of the medicinal properties of plants without having the ability to determine the cause of illness. An *ixhwele* does not undergo the various steps of initiation by the clan. An herbalist may have the gift of knowing a particular medicine revealed by the ancestors but s/he does not undergo any training with regard to the different stages of healing and communication with the spiritual realm. Herbalists learn about medicines or are fortunate enough, in their dreams, to be given a certain medicine by an ancestor to cure a particular sickness.

Amasiko (rituals)

Rituals are very important in the practice of African Religion. Rituals are extraordinary practices performed by the living for the spiritual world. They are special gatherings of the clan for communal religious practices. These communal religious practices are performed for some special purpose such as rites of passage, divination rituals, thanksgiving rituals and sometimes, as requested by ancestors, special rituals such as bringing back the spirit of someone who died far away from home. The community acts out its various forms of worship through which unity and healing are achieved.

Rituals revive the relationships within the community and between the living and the ancestors. This also means reviving the relationship between the physical world (this world) and the spiritual world (the world after death). During these religious gatherings the community acts out its various forms of worship.

In each ritual there is a sacred communion meal, the *umoshwamo*. Some people call it *iyeza*, medicine, as they believe that it heals them; in this case it is a spiritual healing. *Umoshwamo* is the first taste of the sacrificial food; this is only performed inside the kraal as a sacred place. Only blood relatives in the clan, both male and female, can participate. Each member is given a piece of meat of the animal slaughtered for the ritual, and a sip to drink (African beer or *amasi-maas*) prepared for the ritual. The roasted meat is put on special plants used by each clan for ritual purposes. Some families, for instance, use the *umthathi*, sneeze wood, or *umnquma* as a special plant and the

umoshwamo is not complete without the branches of these trees. The first taste is given after some sacred words are said by the elderly.

Sacrifice

Many scholars of African Religion have encountered problems in the analysis and definition of sacrifice as a ritual activity.¹ Within scholarship there is a tendency to describe sacrifice in a manner which does not account for various circumstances under which the ritual would be performed. Several scholars have analyzed sacrifice as a response to illness or disease, or as a ritual performed on the advice of a diviner.² This kind of analysis offers a limited definition of sacrifice. It is understood only in terms of its role as a ritual of appeasement which, in turn, serves to reinforce the misconception that sacrifice occurs only during times of personal or group crisis, or periodically as advised by diviners. In actual fact, within the practice of African Religion, sacrifice forms part of rituals such as those related to rites of passage and thanksgiving.

From conception until death, individuals within African Religion are engaged in actively maintaining close contact with the spiritual world, that is, the world of their ancestors and *Qamata*, the Creator. Communication between the world of the living and that of the ancestors, who reside in the spiritual world, is done in many ways both individually and communally.

Within African society, ancestors play a crucial role in terms of healing, punishing, rewarding and protecting living members of the clan. Communication between the living and ancestral worlds is a reciprocal process and the absence of communication, from either side, is always of concern to members of the clan. Ancestors reveal themselves in many ways: in visions, dreams, symbols, or through such media as certain animals. If the ancestors' needs are ignored, or harmony disrupted, the ancestors punish the living members. Punishment manifests itself in different forms: in sickness, abnormal behavior, or misfortune. Feelings of frustration experienced by the clan, or its individual members, owing to what is regarded as neglect by the ancestors is articulated verbally as *izinyanya zakowethu zindinikele umqola*, my ancestors have turned their backs on me. In such cases, people look for *unobangela*, the reason or cause, as to why the ancestors have neglected the living and, subsequently, perform the needed ritual. Punishment by ancestors is only healed by *ukuvuma*, that is acceptance to perform the ritual.

Ukuvuma is a complex term used in different ways and contexts but, ultimately, communicates a message of acceptance. The translations of *vuma* in an everyday context can sometimes be thought as contradicting the different translations of *vuma* in a ritual context. The role of *vuma* in the healing of a Pondo girl, as well as different perceptions of the term, are clearly revealed in the following abstract by Monica Hunter.

The “old people” of the *umzi* when they heard of her dream decided that they would have to kill. There was speaking in the great hut at midday. Peace was made by the word of mouth with the *amathongo* [ancestors]. Thanks were given to the *amathongo* for revealing the cause of illness. It was said, “we understand: we have heard” [...]. As soon as they spoke, promising the beast, the child got better.³

After the old people had heard the ancestors’ message through the dream of the young girl, they unanimously decided to perform a sacrifice for the ancestors. To *vuma*, therefore, means to come to a decision in which there is agreement to accept the ancestors’ request to perform a ritual. Once there was agreement, or acceptance, further negotiations took place with the ancestors and among the living members of the clan and, as reported by Hunter in the above paragraph, “peace was made by word of mouth.”⁴ The negotiations leading to acceptance, by the living, to perform the sacrifice for the young girl were sealed by the utterance, *sivile*, we have heard. By saying we have heard, the living members of the clan mean that they have listened to the ancestors and decided, or agreed, to perform the sacrifice. The acknowledgment, we have heard, also constitutes a promise by which the living community commits itself to fulfilling the ancestors’ expectations. The making of a promise can therefore be understood as another form of *vuma*, acceptance.

As a result of negotiations between clan members, the display of gratitude, and the making of peace with the ancestors by the living, as well as promising the ancestors that the ritual would be performed, the ancestors accepted the plea by the elders and the child was healed. The healing of the child thus shows that the ancestors are in agreement, *ukuvumai*, with the physical world and that the relationship between the spiritual and the physical realm has been successfully reestablished and confirmed.

As explained earlier, it is misleading to explain the term *vuma* in the singular. It refers to a series of stages in a process through which a state of acceptance, involving both the living and the spiritual world, is achieved. This pro-

cess involves the reciprocal exchange of words and actions between the living and spiritual realms until, finally, the living realm becomes consumed by that of the ancestors, and dialogue is seen to be occurring exclusively in the spiritual world. Refusal by the living to accept, *vuma*, the request made by the ancestors and failure to perform a ritual are believed to result in living members of the clan falling ill. As a process involving the cooperation and participation of the entire clan, *vuma* serves to reinforce communal ties and creates a sense of unity within the community as a whole. This shows that healing could be effected through the power of words. In this case, no medication whatsoever is involved. In the Xhosa way of life, *ukuvuma* could also be done by going to the *exhantini*, the cattle kraal entrance, as a sacred place and talking to the ancestors to say that you have heard, the ritual is to be performed. Some time is needed before the person is healed.

Ancestors and *ukuthwasa*, the call to divination

Ukuthwasa or *ukufa okumhlophe*⁵ or *umsholugu*⁶ manifests itself in various ways. *Intwaso*, which is a noun for *ukuthwasa*, is associated with sickness in that the individual undergoes a transformation which, in some cases, manifests itself as a profound change in behavior. During *intwaso*, dreams are no longer analyzed in a conventional sense but become “real” in the sense that they are regarded as messages which must be taken literally. The English translation of the word sick, used in relation to a diviner, can sometimes convey a distorted interpretation of the expression. *Ukufa*, literally death or to die, is a symbolic expression which, within the context of divination, denotes a spiritual call to heal and conveys the ability of the diviner to predict and reveal that which is hidden to the living. It is called “white” not in the sense of race but because it is associated with light. The person who now has *thwasa*, changed, acts as the symbol of mediation between the spiritual and living worlds. The association of a diviner with light can be understood in terms of his/her ability to reveal and unveil. In Xhosa terminology, the diviner is described as a light illuminating, *uyenza mhlophe*, that which is hidden from ordinary members of the community. This metaphorical association is reflected in the white clothing and beads worn by an *igqirha*, and the use of white ochre by the *amathwasa* or *abakhwetha*, initiates or novices. In Xhosa cosmology, the color black is associated with darkness, death and misfortune and therefore needs to be avoided by the *amagqirha*. This is clearly revealed in the daily chanting during

invocation in which the following words are said, *mabuded ubumnyama kuvele ukukhanya*, darkness must be removed and replaced by light.

Divination cannot be understood as a singular, uniform process. It is believed that the ancestors call diviners in different ways in order to perform different duties. As discussed earlier, a literal translation of Xhosa terminology can sometimes distort the meaning. It is important to take into consideration that the issue is made more complex because certain words take on different meanings when used in relation to the ancestors or the spiritual world. For instance, various scholars have described *ukuthwasa* in many different ways, but none have succeeded in conveying the real meaning of the term.

Descriptions such as these are misleading in that they identify disturbance as being the basis of the experience when one is called to be a diviner. However, it is believed that diviners are called through dreams and visions and it is neglect, ignorance or refusal to accept the call by the living, which cause an imbalance in the individual's life. The disturbance serves as a reminder that one is being called by one's ancestors or as a form of punishment for refusing to respond to the call and thus showing disrespect to the spiritual world. Under such circumstances, the ancestors usually convey their dissatisfaction and anger in the form of sickness which is manifested in the individual or his/her children.

It is evident that in African Religion harmony is taken very seriously and ancestors, as intermediaries between the Creator and the living, play a crucial role in monitoring this harmony. The disruption of harmony results in punishment which manifests itself in many ways. The elderly, as the wise and respected, are able to identify the sickness caused by the ancestors as punishment. They therefore appease and perform the needed ritual. Healing could therefore be seen holistically as it aims at unifying not only the individual but also the clan with the spiritual world. Sickness is not only caused by the need for an unperformed ritual but also sometimes by the refusal to accept the call to perform some rituals. All these forms of sicknesses can only be healed by *ukuvuma*, to accept, the call or to perform the needed ritual.

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³ Hunter, *ibid.*, p. 241.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ This term can literally be translated as white sickness; white representing light, to know the unknown.

⁶ A. M. S. Sityana, *Izixingaxi ZamaXhosa* (Umtata: Shuter and Shooter, 1978), p. 35.

Healing from the Traumas of Crime in South Africa: Interaction of African Religion with Christianity as Perceived by African Female Traditional Healers

Isabel Apawo Phiri

Introduction

From 1947 to 1994, apartheid was official government policy of racial segregation and political and economic discrimination against non-European groups in South Africa. The enforcement of apartheid over a period of five decades led to the systematic domination and oppression of black people that caused physical “pain and psychological trauma to millions of black South Africans.”¹ When, in April 1994, South Africa changed from apartheid to a democratic form of government, where the majority black people came to power, the new government chose the route of unity between the black majority and white minority. For this to happen, the government insisted that the entire nation go through a process of telling the truth about what happened during the apartheid period so that people know what they are forgiving. Only then can the reconciliation of the different races take place. Eric Brahm observes that,

Human rights violations create massive trauma, which can in turn fuel additional human rights violations and so on. Feelings of trauma can generate feelings of frustration and revenge that can produce a cycle of violence and perpetuate feelings of victim-hood on all sides of the conflict.²

Thus, in order to interrupt the cycle of violence, the new government set up the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC), under the leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, which for two and half years heard stories of human rights abuse from victims as well as perpetrators. “The task of the TRC was defined as com-

ing to terms with the past and reaching out to the future.”³ The TRC submitted its report to government on 19 October 1998. Whether or not the TRC fulfilled its mandate is subject to theological debate.⁴ Some people felt betrayed by the TRC feeling that the compensation was inadequate while others felt that even those perpetrators who did not tell the whole truth were given amnesty. However, it is generally accepted that the TRC provided a space for those who had survived the apartheid regime and its policy of oppression to start a process of healing from trauma. The report made it clear that the effects of apartheid have continued to haunt people in South Africa; this will continue for a very long time. What is important is that by telling their painful stories, the survivors have taken control over their lives. This is an important step in the process of healing.

From the stories we learn that there was a gendered violence under apartheid: women not only suffered from racism and classism, but also from patriarchy. This resonates with Eric Brahm who argued that women have unique trauma healing needs. He says that,

Women are often in particular need of trauma healing. They may themselves be victims of traumatic experiences such as rape or incest. However, they are also more likely to be left behind after husbands and children are killed in conflict. Women are often humiliated, feeling that they could do nothing to stop the violence. What is more, the loss of a husband or children can make it difficult for women to provide for their families, thereby adding further humiliation.⁵

Thus a number of articles were published reflecting on the women’s TRC hearings in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban.⁶ These publications show that there was a gendered dimension to apartheid. We must also acknowledge that in addition to being victims of apartheid, they are survivors who continue to contribute toward the heading of their communities from trauma. This essay concentrates on this group of women because they deal with the seventy percent⁷ of the South African population who seek traditional modes of healing. This is a significant number and thus warrants our attention.

Methodology

This is one of three papers⁸ based on an ongoing research project about African women religious leaders. I have used the methodology of oral history

and African women's theology to tell stories of trauma. The research is part of the Sinomlando project⁹ whose aim it is to retrieve the silenced memories of religious people who suffered trauma under apartheid. It gives visibility and a voice to the voiceless so that their experiences can contribute to the telling of the history of faith communities in South Africa. It did not end in 1994 with the dawn of democracy but continued in order to examine the current high rate of crime which reflects the effects of apartheid. As stories of trauma are told, the interface between Christianity and African Religion as practiced in South Africa becomes visible. The study recognizes that especially in times of crisis the majority of African Christians are still influenced by the beliefs and practices of African Religion, even though they may not publicly admit to it.¹⁰ African theology acknowledges that African Religion and culture are some of its sources.¹¹ In addition, African women theologians have also declared that African theology needs to be critical of its sources, so that it cannot be seen as promoting the oppression of women.¹²

This essay is based on interviews conducted with twelve African women healers, commonly known as *sangomas*, based in the eThekweni and Umsunduzi municipalities and Newcastle in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. While research on this topic started in 2002, the information used here is mainly based on follow-up research that was conducted between June 2003 and September 2004 by my assistant Lindiwe Mkasi and me. Almost all the interviews were conducted in IsiZulu. Together we attended one cleansing ritual and virginity testing celebrations. We also conducted a group interview with five traditional healers in Newcastle, in Northern KwaZulu Natal. We interacted with some women traditional healers through the various programs of the Centre for Constructive Theology,¹³ which gave us the opportunity to ask follow-up questions of clarification. The study required a series of interviews that involved meeting each interviewee more than twice. The first visits were to establish a relationship of trust. Thereafter, more information was given with each visit. We have found the *sangomas* very willing to share their stories because they feel that they have been sidelined for a very long time. Therefore, this project is indeed a retrieval of silenced voices. Most of the *sangomas* gave permission to have the conversations recorded, transcribed in IsiZulu and translated into English. Each interviewee was also given a copy of their interview in the form of a tape and a manuscript in IsiZulu as a way of giving something back to the community after having taken something away. Upon finishing each academic paper, a workshop was conducted with the women to give them some feedback from

the group. Such workshops have proved to be very valuable in terms of gaining new insights on issues which are being researched.

Oral history was favored in this case, because whilst a lot has been written on women in African Religion,¹⁴ little is available in writing about traditional healers as religious leaders contributing to the healing of trauma. The original choice of whom to interview was based on a snowball methodology. The interviews also followed in-depth interviews using the methodology of story telling. Important for us were the personal stories which gave depth to the issues that each woman raised.

Stories of apartheid and crime

Nompilo Mangondo¹⁵ is a *sangoma* based in Durban. Her story is an example of a trauma that took place during the time of political violence in Lindelani. Nompilo left school at the age of six because of ill health. Her mother, who was also a *sangoma*, recognized her sickness as a calling to become a *sangoma*. In 1989, she went for training to become a *sangoma*. She did not respond to the treatment of the first trainer and had to change to one who was mixing Christianity with traditional healing. She remembers that at the time there was political violence among the different political organizations of Lindelani. After two years of training, the comrades came to the house where she was being trained, looking for the *thwasa* mother.¹⁶ They surrounded her house accusing her brother of being a police informer. The *thwasa* mother was badly beaten in front of her trainees. The comrades said they were waiting for the *thwasa* mother's brother to appear, and if he did not do so, they would kill all of them. Knowing that they meant what they said, the *thwasa* mother, in the presence of the comrades and the trainees, made herself disappear.¹⁷ All the trainees were kidnapped and taken to a certain house where they were to be killed. Nompilo escaped from that house and changed her *sangoma* attire to ordinary clothes so as not to attract attention. As she walked, bullets were fired at her. Not one hit her and she reached her parents' home safely.

After six months Nompilo fell ill again. It was obvious to the whole family that she needed to go back to Lindelani to her *thwasa* mother to finish her *sangoma* training. Her real mother helped to trace her *thwasa* mother who had moved to another place. Nompilo resumed her training.

When, aged fifteen, Nompilo was about to graduate from the *sangoma* training her *thwasa* mother sent her on an errand. As she was walking from Lindelani

to Matikwe, dressed in her *sangoma* trainee attire, a van stopped next to her. There were two men in the car—one white, the other black. Before she knew what was happening, she was grabbed and forced into the van. They sped off to the sugar plantations in Veralem where she was gang raped at gunpoint. Nompilo emphasized that until then she had been a virgin. At the place where she was raped, she saw a number of girls' corpses. She realized that this was not just a case of rape but that she was running a real risk of being killed. She attempted to escape but could not go very far as she was bleeding heavily. The two men took her in the van and dropped her near a bus stop. Nompilo could not walk. A woman whom she did not know picked her up and took her to her parents' home. She was treated at St Joseph's hospital, where she was tested for HIV and pregnancy; both tests were negative. A month later another pregnancy test showed positive and six months later the second HIV test was still negative.

No charges were filed with the police because Nompilo's mother feared that the police would give Nompilo the choice to abort. As religious people, they do not believe in abortion. Nompilo underwent a traditional healing ritual to remove the evil spirits of the rape experience. A cow was slaughtered for her cleansing ceremony at home. On the day that she was raped, the cow which was to be used for her coming out ceremony died mysteriously. It was interpreted as having died in her place. She later graduated as a *sangoma* and gave birth to a colored baby boy with whom she continues to live. He is a constant reminder of her ordeal. Through another ritual, the child has been incorporated into Nompilo's father's family.

Interaction between African Religion and Christianity

Nompilo's story highlights the fact that *sangomas* as a group experienced violence aimed at them because of their profession. The *thwasa* mother was attacked because of her brother's crime. Nompilo escaped gunshots aimed at her because of her association with the *thwasa* mother. The violent experience led to more violence including being forced to relocate and thereby being taken away from her ancestors' graves. What the apartheid government did not take into account is the fact that for Africans land has religious connotations. Forced removals traumatized people at different levels, one of which is religious.

Nompilo was raped while wearing her *sangoma* attire. In the black community, religious uniform is treated with utmost respect. Therefore, to be

raped while wearing religious uniform, as in the case of Nompilo, is a sign of extreme disrespect and an insult to her belief in God. Yet it was her faith in God that helped her to cope with the abuse and to go on with life.

In Nompilo's family, Christianity and African Religion coexisted peacefully. Her father is a practicing Christian, while her mother, sister and she are *sangomas*, who sometimes go to an African initiated church. The children are raised in the two traditions. This was the experience of most *sangomas*. For example, Ms Zuma, who conducted a cleansing ritual for Lindo Gumede's family, is a founder of her church and also a practicing *sangoma*. Jane Myembe is a student of theological education and a practicing *sangoma*. Her husband is a leader of an African initiated church. Thus there is a free flow of beliefs and practices between the two religions.

When the research project was conceived it was assumed that African religious women leaders have nothing to do with Christianity.¹⁸ Through interviews and participating in rituals we learned that the women healers are divided into two categories: the first is that of traditional healers who are also members of churches, the second category have totally disassociated themselves from Christianity, exclusively practicing African Religion. However, even the *sangomas* who are in the second category were once Christians. They made a conscious decision to leave the church in favor of maintaining African culture and religion. Once belonging to the Roman Catholic or Presbyterian church, they see Christianity as a Western import associated with Western civilization that came to destroy African culture. They claim that their ancestors had told them to leave the church and practice traditional healing without mixing it with Christianity. However they still claim, through the ancestors, to be in touch with *Mveliqangi*¹⁹ as the source of their healing ministry. The first category of *sangomas*, those who have remained in the church, go to Uniting Congregation Church in Southern Africa, Zion, Shembe; some of them claim to have leadership positions in the church, such as a church elder, a minister with theological training and a student of theological education. Of particular interest is the fact that they do not understand why some churches do not allow *sangomas* to be members of the church, yet some of the church leaders who condemn them in their churches are their clients at night. One argued that Jesus had a healing ministry and he too was called by *Mveliqangi* through the ancestors to a healing ministry. They did not see any difference between the Yahweh of the First Testament, who accepted sacrifice, and *Mveliqangi*, who is the source of their ministry.

Women's experiences of rape

Rape is a traumatic experience; all over the world, women live in constant fear of being raped by strangers or people whom they know.²⁰ During apartheid, rape was used as a weapon of domination. Annalet van Schalkwyk has shown that,

There was a keen awareness by the police of the nature of gender power relations, and how these power relations could be used to threaten and abuse their victims. This determined how women in the struggle against apartheid experienced torture, which often took the form of sexual violence.²¹

Nompilo is not the only *sangoma* who shared her story of rape and pregnancy. While she is one of only a few women of faith who have broken the silence over rape in order to seek healing and to take control over her life, there are many women of faith, who have not yet found words to describe what happened to them. They still live with the trauma. Sometimes, out of embarrassment or humiliation, people choose to remain silent. This could be why most rape cases are not reported to the police.

A prominent, married *sangoma* told us that she had never before shared her experience of being gang raped when she was a teenager. She had borne her rapist's child and found consolation in the fact that her husband had decided to marry her despite this experience and had adopted the child conceived during the rape.²² The issue of whether or not to keep a child thus conceived is a divisive, ethical question. Nompilo's mother clearly stated that the ancestors would not advise her daughter to abort. Abortion, even in the case of rape and despite the fact that the child is a constant reminder of the trauma experienced, is not an option for the women traditional healers we interviewed. They argued that as people of faith their healing does not include taking away life, in spite of how this life came into being. The Newcastle *sangomas* emphasized the importance of performing rituals of cleansing for the mother and to incorporate the child into the mother's ancestral family. This ritual is intended to promote forgiveness, healing and reconciliation with oneself, one's family and one's ancestors in order to build a better future. It is not a requirement that the perpetrator is present.

Nompilo shares her experience of rape with whoever is willing to listen and claims to have come to terms with her experience and to have moved

on. The experience has become a draw card for rape survivors who go to her to share their stories. For those who are willing, she performs a healing ritual. Nompilo and other *sangomas* are creating a safe space for survivors of gender-based violence to share their experiences without fear of being judged.

The rituals are holistic, reaching out to every aspect of life that has been violated, and aiming at easy integration into the community. Nomagugu²³ argues that, for example, in a culture that values a girl's virginity, virginity testing has become vital. She is of the opinion that the revival of the virginity testing ritual has helped to reduce cases of incest. It has also restored the dignity of the girls. As described elsewhere,²⁴ during a virginity testing ritual, the girls who are found to have lost their virginity are interviewed and divided into two groups. Those who were raped undergo a cleansing ritual and are thereafter treated as virgins. While the ritual is supposed to restore their virginity, they cannot participate in the planting of seeds at the *Nomkhumbulwana* festival. These rituals provide a spiritual practice that aims at the restoration of traumatized girls and women. The healing technique is designed to fit in with people's worldview, thereby increasing its effectiveness. It resonates with people's spirituality and therefore works for them.²⁵

Same sex relationships and cleansing

In our research we noted that issues of cleansing were linked to uncleanness, a result of having sexual relations even within a legitimate relationship. It was said that ancestors are very clean. Female *sangomas* operate well when they have not had sexual relations. Their medicines work well and they get many clients.

They argued that ideally *sangomas* are supposed to be single because the ancestors control every area of their lives. Therefore, in a marriage relationship, the husband is under the authority of the ancestors. This explains why some scholars have argued that women become mediums as a protest against patriarchy and as a way of gaining power.²⁶ Traditionally, the problem of the *sangomas* not being sexually active was solved by the practice of polygamy. Today, if the husband of a *sangoma* is a Christian, polygamy is out of the question (unless they belong to an African initiated church that accepts polygamy). Otherwise the husband must accept a life with long periods of abstinence. Where the husband does not respect the ancestors, the ances-

tors can go against tradition of the permanency of marriage and ask a *sangoma* to divorce a husband.

One *sangoma* went further to state that one option was for the female *sangomas* to engage in same sex relationships. The ancestors do not oppose such relationships and there is no “uncleanliness” that requires constant cleansing rituals. We observed that in cases where same sex relationships were mentioned, those involved had also been traumatized by rape. One wonders then whether same sex relationships practiced by some of the female *sangomas* were not only a way of keeping the rituals effective, but also a reaction against the abuse they had experienced. It is possible that despite the cleansing rituals after a rape, the survivor remains traumatized by a heterosexual relationship. Therefore as a way of taking control of their sexuality, they decide to opt for a same sex relationship. The discovery of the practice of same sex relationships among some *sangomas* contradicts the argument that homosexuality came to Africa through Western influence.

Conclusion

In this essay we have shown that female *sangomas* have continued to play a prominent role in bringing spiritual, social and psychological healing, especially to women in South Africa. Their stories combine the African religious and Christian heritages. While we may not know which criteria they use when deciding on which tradition to draw, it is clear that whether they mix the religious traditions or opt for one only, they still bring healing to their clients. This essay has used Nompilo’s story to show that also *sangomas* experienced life-threatening political violence. Gender violence was also discussed both as an attempt to humiliate their ministry and as a springboard to bring healing through cleansing rituals to women, girls and their children. Whether one agrees with the practice of virginity testing or not, we have seen that female *sangomas* promote it as another way of bringing healing to abused girls. Their concept of healing is broad enough to include every aspect of life. This is in contrast to the Western healing system that seems to compartmentalize the patient. This essay has also touched the sensitive issue of same sex relationships among the *sangomas* as a way, approved of by the ancestors, of keeping their practice effective. This may confirm the existence of this practice in Africa prior to Western influence. *Sangomas* are considered the custodians

of African culture. Therefore to find the practice of same sex relationships among the *sangomas*, raises a number of questions concerning the secrecy surrounding African cultural practices. As there were some *sangomas* who argued strongly against its practice believing it to be a deviation from African culture, more research is required to establish how widespread this practice is. Only thereafter can serious conclusions be drawn.

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⁴ See the work of Tinyiko S. Maluleke, "Dealing Lightly with the Wounds of my People? The TRC Process in Theological Perspectives," in *Missionalia*, vol. 25, no. 3 (1997); Charles Villa-Vincencio, "Telling one Another Stories: Towards a Theology of Reconciliation," in Gregory Baum and Harold Wells (eds), *The Reconciliation of Peoples: Challenge to the Churches* Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997).

⁵ Brahm, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 5.

⁶ See Beth Goldblatt "Violence, Gender and Human Rights—an Examination of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission." Paper presented to the Law and Society Association's annual meeting, St

Louis, Missouri, US, 1996. Beth Goldblatt and Sheila Meintjies, "Dealing with the Aftermath—Sexual Violence and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," in *Agenda*, 36 (1997); N. Madladlaa-Routledge, "What Price Freedom? Women's Testimony and the Natal Organization of Women," in *Agenda*, 34 (1997); I. Olckers, "Gendered-neutral Truth—a Reality Shamefully Distorted," in *Agenda*, 31 (1996); Annalet van Schalkwyk, "Gendered Truth: Women's Testimonies, the TRC and Reconciliation," in *Journal of Constructive Theology*, vol. 5, no. 1 (July 1999); D. M. Ackermann, "A Voice was Heard in Rama. A Feminist Theology of Praxis for Healing in South Africa," in D. M. Ackermann and R. Bons-Storm (eds), *Liberating Faith Practices: Feminist Practical Theologies in Context* (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1998).

⁷ The UN Integrated Regional Information Networks of 10 September 2004 reported that according to the Department of Health, an estimated seventy percent of South Africans consult the country's 200 000 healers.

⁸ The other two are: Isabel A. Phiri, "The Contribution of African Religious Women to National Development," a paper presented at a colloquium, "Theological Fragments and Connections," in honor of Professor John de Gruchy, University of Cape Town, 3–5 June 2003; Isabel A. Phiri, "Virginity Testing? African Women Seeking Resources to Combat HIV/AIDS," in *Journal of Constructive Theology* vol. 9.2, (2003).

⁹ Professor Philippe Denis is director of the Sinomlando Project of the School of Religion and Theology at the University of KwaZulu Natal.

¹⁰ See Gabriel M. Setiloane, *African Theology: An Introduction* (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1986), preface; Klaus Fieldler, "Even in Church the Exercise of Power is Accountable to God," in Kenneth R. Ross (ed.), *God People and Power in Malawi: Democratization in Theological Perspective* (Blantyre: CLAIM), p. 190.

¹¹ John Pobee, "Sources of African Theology," in John Parratt (ed.), *A Reader in African Christian Theology* (London: SPCK, 1997), pp. 45–56.

¹² Musimbi R. Kanyoro, "Feminist Theology and African Culture," in Grace Wamue and Mary Getui (eds), *Violence Against Women* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1996); Mercy A. Oduyoye, "African Women's Hermeneutics," in Simon Maimela and Adro Konic (eds), *Initiation into Theology: The Varieties of Theology and Hermeneutics* (Pretoria: J.L. van Schaik Publishers, 1998), pp. 359–373; Mercy A. Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001).

¹³ The Centre for Constructive Theology was established in 1996 by the Faculty of Theology at the University of Durban-Westville, South Africa as a positive response to the challenges of transforma-

tion and reconstruction in the new South Africa. It is now housed at the Diakonia Centre in Durban where it functions independently. Its objective is through research, advocacy and outreach to bridge the gap between formal theological education and the practical concerns and needs of the people of South Africa.

¹⁴ Kenneth Kojo Anti, "Women In African Traditional Religions," a paper presented at the Women's Centre, Eastern Washington University, Cheney, Washington, May 1996; John Mbiti, "The Role of Women in African Traditional Religion," in *Cahiers des Religions Africaines*, 22 (1988), pp. 69–82; Isabel A. Phiri, "African Traditional Religion and Eco-feminism: The Role of Women at Chisumphi Shrine in Preserving Ecology," in Rosemary Radford Ruether (ed.), *Women Healing Earth* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), pp. 161–171.

¹⁵ Nompilo Mangondo is a pseudonym.

¹⁶ The woman who was training them to become *sangomas* is called *thwasa*, mother. She is also commonly known as their ancestral mother.

¹⁷ She made herself disappear using her spiritual powers. Nompilo says she could have made all of them disappear if she had an opportunity to touch them or explain to them what to do. Unfortunately there was no such chance.

¹⁸ This section is adapted from the work found in Isabel A. Phiri, "The Contribution ...," *op. cit.* (note 8).

¹⁹ *Mveliqangi* is a name for the Creator used by the Xhosas before the coming of Christianity. It has now also become commonly used by the Zulus.

²⁰ Isabel A. Phiri, "Domestic Violence in Christian Homes: A Durban Case Study," in *Journal of Constructive Theology*, vol. 6, no. 2 (December 2000), pp. 85–110.

²¹ Annalet van Schalkwyk, "Gendered Truth: Women's Testimonies, the TRC and Reconciliation," in *Journal of Constructive Theology*, vol. 5, no. 1 (July 1999), p. 13.

²² Most of the women did not give permission for their stories to be shared.

²³ Nomagugu Patience Ngobese, is a female traditional healer, who is a cofounder of the *Nokhubulwana* festival, in Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg, in KwaZulu Natal Province.

²⁴ Isabel A. Phiri, "Virginity Testing? ...," *op. cit.* (note 8).

²⁵ The girls who were found to have lost their virginity for reasons other than rape were counseled about the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV; teenage pregnancy and its consequences and losing opportunities for further studies. Initially, this group of girls was discouraged from further participation in the ceremony. It was argued that the testers did not want a “bad” influence from this group to be exercised on the “good” girls. In the current practice, all girls who go for testing are given dots on their forehead. Virginity certificates are given to all girls who are tested. However, the instructors record in their books who is a virgin and who is not. This might be a response to the critique that the procedure of separating virgins from those who are not, destroys the self-esteem of the girls who are found not to be virgins.

²⁶ Iris Berger, “Rebels or Status Seekers? Women as Spirit Mediums in East Africa,” in Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay (eds), *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976), pp. 157–183.

The Nature Spirits in African Culture: A Nigerian Perspective

Asriel S.T. Myatafadi

I am a member of the Bwatiye tribe, from both my mother's and father's sides of the family. Both my parents are practitioners of African Religion. From birth I have lived with my people, the Bwatiye, and other tribes such as the Yorubas and Mbula of northeastern Nigeria. Today I am bishop of the Lutheran Church of Christ in the northeast of Nigeria.

Since my childhood I have learned that spirits play a considerable part in the culture and religion of the Bwatiye people who believe in two types of spirits: nature and ancestor spirits. The ancestral spirits are divided into two types: the ghosts of the deceased, *pullei mye mbori/guluntu*, and the deified ancestors, *hama bolki*, *nzokuditihiidon*, *nzeanzo*, *gbeso*, etc. Deified ancestors are considered protectors. In this essay we will concentrate on the relationship of the Bwatiye people with nature spirits. My observations are based on my sixty-four years of experience, experiences of friends of mine, as well as interviews carried out in 2004 with medicine men and priests.

The domains of the nature spirits

In accordance with the ancient African worldview the Bwatiye people believe that the world is thickly populated with *pullei*, spirits, created by God as invisible beings. The Bwatiye people of northeastern Nigeria call God, the Creator, *Homonpwa*, the king of heaven; the Yoruba call God *Olorun* or *Blodumare*, the owner of the sky. There is no shrine for worshipping *Homonpwa*. Like many Africans, the Bwatiye people believe that the spirits, who live everywhere in thousands, control people's lives. Their domain is everywhere: in the sky, the air, the water, above or under the earth. Those on the land, the *pullei*, can be found in the forest, on mountains, in big trees, animals, human being, insects, reptiles, farms, houses, birds, lonely bushes, rocks, metals, boulders, etc. The *jidwato*, water spirits, live in rivers, lakes, oceans, ponds, waterfalls, lagoons, riverbanks, seas, rapids, etc.

The Bwatiye and Mbula peoples believe that the spirits' lives are exactly like those of human beings: they cry, are befriended, marry, bear children, fall ill and die. They have leaders, queens and kings. They sing and dance like human beings and celebrate festivals—also human ones.

The Bwatiye people distinguish between good and evil spirits who can unveil themselves to anybody. The spirits give human beings the power both to see them, *wundiya*, and also to disappear at will. Some people have extrasensory power and can therefore see the spirits at any time. They possess a special gift to see anybody coming from any direction. Neither a good nor an evil spirit can pass without being seen by them. God gives them the power to distinguish good from evil spirits and they are rewarded with good fortune if they obey the spirits' instructions.

Some spirits can act in both senses: good and bad. They can bring wealth and great fortunes and protect you from evil. Some people believe that the price for bringing wealth can be a very high one, such as turning a person into a murderer.

Evil spirits

All over Africa, evil spirits are feared because they are said to be dangerous and to cause calamities. The Bwatiye people believe them to have great powers and consequently the cause of all sorts of evil. If a person is possessed by evil spirits s/he will be regarded as a mad person (*cf.* Mk 5:1–13). Besides human beings, they can also possess animals (in this case they are most likely to come in the form of insects, reptiles, fishes and birds) and trees. They always bring misfortune, disease and even death. The Bwatiye people believe that the evil spirits cause misfortune and enmity between friends and clan/family members and set one tribe against the other. Evil spirits can cause all types of diseases especially smallpox, polio, meningitis, coughs, etc. and they are blamed for epilepsy, lunacy, insanity, etc. They can act through snakebites, motor accidents, drowning or direct attack. If a man is possessed by a female or male evil spirit, then the spirits will go against the spouse and prevent her from giving birth, make her sick or even kill her.

Evil spirits are unpredictable and can attack and possess a person at any time and in any place, but especially their respective habitat (domain). In 1964, following an attack by a water spirit, I spent one month in hospital and, subsequently, three months at the house of a medicine man. I was walking with a friend from Tingno to Waduku when suddenly a spirit shouted at us from the top of a tree. We could not see anybody. The next day, while swimming with

my friend Zabdiel Nzoganggang, I discovered to my surprise that we were three. So I asked my friend to come out of the water and to go home. When I arrived at home I was so ill that I could no longer stand up. Subsequently I fainted. I was taken to the Christian hospital at Numan where I spent one month. Discharged from hospital I returned to my village but could not sleep for the next two nights. During the first night, whenever I closed my eyes, the whole room was bright as if lit up by electricity. When I opened my eyes the room became dark. This lasted until 5 a.m. when I was finally able to find sleep. In my dream I was being pursued by a snake. Whenever I opened my eyes, the snake disappeared, but when I closed them the snake continued to chase me. On the second night, my brother Harrison and friend Zabidel slept with me and I had the same experience. I shook my brother and my friend but they did not wake up. Throughout the night I found myself being chased by a hippo in the lake.

The next day I was taken to a medicine man who told me that a black water spirit, *nzodwato*, had possessed me and that he was telling me that nothing would make him depart from me, because I had lit the torch on him, and he would therefore show me that he has more light than I. In the medicine man's house I was covered with a blanket during the night and some medicine was put on the fire so that I could inhale the smoke, *dusato*; I slept well that night. I opened my eyes at 5 a.m. and behold a very tall man was standing at my feet. When I started to withdraw my feet, he raised his foot and touched my finger. I felt something like an electric shock and became unconscious. I only came to at 10.30 a.m. I used this medicine for four months.

From my own experience I know evil spirits to be dangerous and that they can attack. Elam T. Hamajen, in Zekum, confirmed that water spirits can attack or possess a person who is in the water, but that they can also come out of the water, enter a village or town and wreak havoc there. Saratu Siman, in Zekum, told me that she went fishing to a lake called Gorohase, bad lake. A young water spirit followed her and she conceived and gave birth to him. One night, his water mother, Dadaíye, came up from the water, lit her tobacco pot and started smoking. Then the Holy Spirit woke Saratu up and she started to pray. When the spirit took the child, Saratu grabbed the child back and the spirit left. The child, who is now grown up, told Saratu that,

The woman coming wanted to go away with me. She is my mother with whom we lived on the island before I saw you and followed you. Please help me with prayers, because I do not want to follow her.

Then, one Saturday, the child asked Saratu to take him to church for prayers, because his mother, from the water, would be coming to take him away. They went to church and the water spirit came and left. That evening they returned to church, and the spirit followed them. As Dadaiye entered the church many people were moved by the Holy Spirit and they started to pray. She ran away and entered a hollow in a *gongoro kouto*, baobab tree. The child eventually died of a snakebite at the gate of their house. This is what I will call *abiku* (spirits that come into the womb and are born there only to die; this cycle is constantly repeated). It shows the different ways in which the evil spirits can do a lot of damage to a person.

Water spirits are also responsible for numerous accidents such as drowning and shipwrecks. Such natural disasters as earthquakes, floods, locust plagues, droughts etc. are regarded as activities of the evil spirits. The Bwatiye people believe that evil spirits can use thunderstorms to harm people.

According to Elam T. Hamajen, for the *ndakei* (Bwatiye fishermen clans on the banks of the river Benue) and *kwaye* (Bwatiye fishermen clans on the lakes) the good water spirits are their kin taking care of all their needs. A cousin of mine, Haniel Dadi, who was possessed by a female water spirit told us that his spirit is a primary school teacher and one of her parents a church elder. He said that their house is very religious and that they worship and read the Bible every morning and evening. One day, she told him that he would be elected chair of his congregation at Salti. He was indeed elected and has been the church's chairperson for nine years now. The spirit becomes human at will and takes him to expensive hotels for meals or to the market for shopping. But he was warned by a medicine man that the day he has sex with her, he will die.

All over Africa spirits are feared because of their evil powers. People believe that evil spirits can also give people the power to harm innocent people. According to the Bwatiye, some evil spirits have to be appeased through sacrifices, libations and many other ways, depending on the respective culture. The good spirits are asked to provide protection from evil spirits.

Tapping fortunes from good spirits

Some nature spirits are regarded as God's emissaries, as being half way between God and human beings. The Yoruba people call them *orishas*, legions of divinities, and the Bwatiye, the sky spirits, *pullei pwa*, who are the major spirits, *pullei kpankpanye*, who control the minor spirits. The sky spirits are

also connected with such natural forces as storms, rainstorms, thunder, lightening. The sun, the moon and the stars are considered to be divine and some Bwatiye called them gods. People believe that human beings, especially kings, have their own divine stars and that when they die, their star will also die. I remember vividly what happened after the death of Hama Dyamsa, the king of Dyamsa in Zaro (Jalo), in 1955. There was a star that broke up from the northeast to southwest and everybody came out saying *zaro ndo di mudi*, Zaro is going away, and so people were bidding him farewell.

It is a good omen if a person is possessed by good spirits. The good spirits are loved by those who are possessed by them due to the powers the spirits have invested in them. Good spirits will bring wealth, health, good fortune, etc. For example, there is a story about my great uncle Khobe some of whose goats were stolen one day. He was very angry. Over the next days more goats were stolen. He followed their tracks, crossed the River Benue and came to a certain mountain in Yangdang. There was a hollow in the mountain and he entered the hollow and behold there was a big town under the mountain. There he saw all his stolen goats. An old man gave him a hoe and asked him to depart quickly telling him that whenever he used this hoe, he would reap a good harvest. Khobe became the greatest farmer in the Bachama kingdom. This shows how the good spirits can enrich a person. They may give you the power to catch a lot of fish, or the power to hunt, courage, or make you invincible.

There are different ways by which people tap the powers of the spirits, for good or for bad. Some people acquire spirits of fortune through meditation and the offering of food in a particular place, either under a tree, on a mountain, the bank of a river, by the sea, in forests, under bushes, etc. If the spirits enjoy the food offered, they can reveal themselves to the person and start helping him or her. If the person continues to offer sacrifices to a specific spirit then this spirit will later be deified.

Prayers are very important in order to tap the fortunes of the spirits. In their petitions, Africans ask for practically everything: protection; guidance; gifts; food; good health; good news; good harvest; wealth; peace; etc. Prayers are used to communicate and commune with the spirits that are closer and intimate to them. People hope that the spirits will fulfill their wishes. In some cases, the good spirits will take care of all their needs and whatever the spirits initiate will be blessed and become plentiful. These people can do nothing without consulting the spirits, as some of them are guardian spirits. In case of war, the spirits will give advice regarding how to attack the enemy.

Medicine men and self protection from evil spirits

The good spirits teach their servants how to acquire the powers they have. There is a special treatment called *subwa humato*, washing of the face, so that the servants can see the spirits and use them for their benefits.

Some good spirits visit a person and bestow on them wealth, the power to heal, the power of divination or prophesy (to make divinely-inspired predictions) without any effort having been made by this person. It is by chance or grace that the spirits give them the power to become medicine men, herbalists, magicians, priests, rainmakers, sorcerers, etc. Since people believe that the spirits possess these people and act through them, they have a very powerful place in the community. If a medium uses his or her power for the good of a person and/or the community s/he will be popular and people will love him/her. If the spirit power is used to bring disaster, people will fear and hate him/her.

According to the medicine man Bolokowo, one of the main functions of the good spirits is to empower those who become herbalists. Some herbalists are very well known. If the spirit is a moral one, he will not allow the herbalist to collect more money than the spirit has prescribed. If s/he does, the spirit will either disappear totally or the herbalist will be punished and become sick. Kanikau Foygbare, in Lawaru, used to be visited seasonally by three spirits who supplied her with all sorts of herbs to heal diseases. When the spirit disappeared she was unable to continue healing because the spirit had taken everything she needed to know in order to heal. She cannot even distinguish the herbs anymore.

The good spirits give some people the power to heal without using any herbs like the medicine man Bolokwo. He got that power from a spirit who came to him in the form of a snake. The name of the chief snake spirit is *alfamu*. His successors, Bolokowo and Bakpul, cured a person who was bitten by a snake. They took a knife, inserted it in the place of the bite, sucked the area with their mouths and then spat into their palms. I looked at their palms and saw the shape of a snake. Later they wriggled out and were placed in the snake bags. They feed the snakes with *vurei*, pounded bene seed, and if someone enters their houses without saying *kouna*, excuse me, the person will find the house full of snakes. Now they are using the same snakes to heal people with snakebites, even though the system is different. He said that he always converses with the snakes like with a human being. This story is a good example of how the nature spirits can empower a person to become a medicine man.

There are many legends about Bolokowo. For instance, if a person went hunting with him and became hungry, he would enter the bush. Later he invited the person to enter and s/he would find plenty of food there. S/he was allowed to eat all that s/he could, but was asked to leave the remaining food there. My cousin Binda Tamboma told me that he ate food and drank locally brewed wine from Bolokowo three times before her death.

Bolokowo could call on the rain to come at will even in the dry season as he once did during the reign of Hama Bachama Mbi (1921-1941) at Bang. When it rained, there where he stood remained dry and when he traveled, no rainwater touched him. He was a real miracle worker and was loved by everybody.

Some medicine men can cure even at a distance by chanting or singing certain words. Sometimes the person may dance as s/he sings.

The good spirits are good companions to native doctors, medicine men, fortune-tellers, etc., giving them good advice, bearing good news and warning people of dangers that lie ahead. Good spirits empower people to become fortune-tellers and make prophesies. They can do that through dreams, visions or by hearing voices. If the person refuses to follow their advice s/he will be in trouble. Some of the fortune-tellers are so powerful that people travel from faraway countries in order to consult them. It is most unfortunate that people in Nigeria use them in some churches.

Self protection from evil spirits

Africans have many ways of protecting themselves from evil spirits, depending on their culture, environment, or location. For the Bwatiye people the major divinities and ancestral spirits are guardians asked to provide protection from evil spirits, sometimes through a priest. In this case, people have to obey the priests and follow their instructions.

Good spirits not only protect those whom they possess but also their families, communities, or villages. They will fight evil spirits that bring disease and calamities to their communities. The herbalists, medicine men, seers and priests are the ones who provide protection from evil spirits.

Medicine men, who are also called witch doctors or traditional doctors, can deal with the problems that evil spirits may cause and provide protection from evil spirits by using the powers of the good spirits. Some may use drumming, singing and dancing in their performances, while others do it quietly.

Some of the medicine men use water to determine the cause of the problem, while others write or draw something on the ground. Some speak in the voice of an animal, insect or bird while others give armlets, or medicines to be put in one's pocket or car. The diviners, rainmakers, herbalists, etc. try in one way or another to solve problems and help to protect a person from the effects of the evil spirits.

Medicine men use animal horns, herbs, animal faces, leaves, bones, roots, tree bark, grass, insects, certain types of soil, etc. to make charms to ward off evil spirits, as well as for material gain such as finding a lover, protection and employment. They are used as protective medicine and their effectiveness depends on who prepares them and the potency of the material used.

Herbalists and medicine men provide herbs to those who ask for them. If you grow them or follow certain incantations like burying them or pouring them around your house, no evil spirit, witch or sorcerer will enter your house and cause problems there. Some of these medicines or herbs are given to you to drink and any evil spirit who sees this person will run away. However, in northeastern Nigeria there are some fake medicine men and deceivers who give charms and herbs that have no effect.

When sickness and plagues are believed to be the work of an evil spirit, sacrifices are made to good spirits or higher divinities to intercede with God in order to stop the plague or calamity. Thus, and in the case of Christians through direct appeal to God, people can drive away any mischievous spirit.

When some of the Bwatiye and Mbula people in northeastern Nigeria and northern Cameroon do not receive help against evil spirits, they call upon *jiwuro boshe*, people who dance with gourds, or *jiwuro mamto*, people who dance by shaking their chests, from the Jenjo or Bandawa tribes to come and do their performance in order to drive away or even to kill evil spirits. When things are out of control the Bwatiye people will say, "Let us leave everything to God, *Homonpwa*." As Christians we have to bear in mind that all creatures are created by God and that God is sovereign over all, even nature spirits and ancestral spirits.

Biblical culture is closer to African culture than to the Western world. For the Bwatiye tribe the African and biblical views of the spirits is reality, not just mere superstition and imagination. The Scriptures teach us about fallen angels and unclean spirits and how they are opposed to God and Jesus Christ, so accepting the reality of the existence of the spirits, is accepting the truth of the Bible. We know that Jesus had power over all evil spirits (Lk 11:9) but

cannot conclude that all illnesses are due to spirits. They are powerful in that they can injure human beings in many ways (Mt 9:32–33, 12:22; Mk 9:18, –22; Lk 8:26–29, 36; 13:11–17).

The belief in spirits, which is at the core of African spirituality, challenges the churches. On the one hand, Africans believe that both ancestor and nature spirits have a relationship with us in our daily lives and some major nature spirits are regarded as God's emissaries. They inspire human beings and act as intermediaries between us and God, the Creator. On the other, Christianity is Christ-centered, with Christian inspiration coming from the Holy Spirit, with Christ as the mediator between the Christian and God. Some Africans who become Christians are torn because they fail to reconcile the differences between African beliefs, which are a part of them, and Christian beliefs. This is a challenge to the Lutheran church in Africa. As a solution, some African theologians suggest a christology in which Jesus and the Holy Spirit are ancestral figures as we will see in Sylvester B. Kahakwa's essay, "Christ and the Ancestors in African Christian Theology."¹

Notes

¹ Cf. pp. 89ff. in this publication.

Ancestors and Spirits in Tribal Spirituality in Northeast India

Limatula Longkumer

Introduction

The northeast of India comprises seven states referred to as the seven sisters: Arunachal, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. The inhabitants are Indigenous people popularly referred to as tribals. It is important to note that the tribals, so categorized in the Indian constitution, of northeast India differ from those in the rest of India. A basic difference is that the majority of the tribes in other parts of India are more or less hindunized, while in the case of the tribes in northeast India, with the exception of a few tribes in the plains, most of the hill tribes are rooted in their own culture and civilization. The majority of the people belong to the Mongoloid race. Today, most of the hill tribes in northeast India are Christians and therefore no longer practice their tribal or primal religion except in Arunachal Pradesh where the majority still practice their traditional tribal religion.

This essay focuses on the hill tribes of northeast India comprising various groups of the Mizo-Kuki-Chin family living in Mizoram, Manipur and Tripura; the Nagas in Nagaland and Manipur; the Arunachalis in Arunachal Pradesh; the Khasis in Meghalaya; and the Garos in Meghalaya and Assam. Most of them have been Christianized except for the Arunachalis who have been isolated and were therefore not exposed to Christian missionaries in the past. In this essay we will examine the belief in and understanding of ancestors and spirits in their traditional religion and culture, and how these beliefs have led them to understand the concept of life after death and the work of the spirits in the tribal communities.

Tribal religion

The understanding of spirits and ancestors is part and parcel of traditional tribal religion. The belief in the existence of the Supreme Being, whom they perceive

as the Creator, Sustainer and Dispenser of the universe, is common to all the tribal people. One important aspect of tribal religion is that it is basically a community religion. To be truly human is to belong to the whole community, including the ancestors, spirits and creation, and to do so is actively to participate in the religious ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community.¹ A person cannot live in isolation from his/her community. Therefore, in tribal religion individual life and community life are inseparable. Moreover, one cannot understand the core of tribal religion without understanding the religious journey of the individual from the womb to physical death and the hereafter. Further, for the tribals, religion is doing. That means, belief and action always go together. The practice of Christianity and the existence of churches in northeast India should also be looked into from the communitarian perspective of tribal society.

Tribal religion does not have a sacred scripture and written creeds to be recited; instead the creeds are contained in the hearts and minds of the people and therefore, each individual, family, clan and village is a living creed. It is not centered on a founder or a great historical person. Like other religions, tribal religion also has a tradition of divine birth and manifestations, but they are not worshipped. There are priests, officiating elders, diviners and other famous men and women in the body of beliefs and mythologies, who are respected and form an integral part of the religious milieu, but they are never worshipped or adored as divine representatives.² Tribal religion is centered on earth/creation. As a result, the festivals and religious ceremonies are centered on the annual cycle of crop cultivation.

Tribal religion is a world of face-to-face interaction not only with the living, but, just as vividly, with the dead and with the whole of nature. According to the tribal worldview, one cannot make a clear-cut distinction between the sacred and the profane, between the religious and nonreligious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. All are interrelated. Referring to the tribal worldview, M. M. Thomas mentioned that,

there is the sense of a spiritual continuum within which the dead and the living, natural objects, spirits and gods, the individual, the clan and the tribe, animals, plants, minerals and man [sic] form an unbroken hierarchical unity of spiritual force.³

Hence, according to the tribal worldview and religious beliefs, the worlds of humans, animals and spirits coexist and are closely interconnected. If one element is affected, the whole cultural structure is affected.

Divinities

The term divinity refers to the objectification of the manifestations of God through natural phenomena and objects. Any object or natural phenomenon which is supposed to reveal something supernatural, is considered to be the act of God irrespective of its usefulness to the community or the individual. It is the manifestation of divine powers. God manifested Godself in different objects and, as a result of this awareness, life, places and objects take on new meanings for humans. They worship through objects and places because of the growing awareness of the presence of God in those objects and places while also recognizing the ownership of God in all things and activities. This however, is not to be interpreted as the personification of nature as understood by the naturalists. Many anthropologists, sociologists and Christian missionaries have categorized the tribal religion as “animism,” believing tribals to worship animals, big trees, mountains, rivers, etc. This assumption is completely wrong. Tribals have never worshipped objects and animals as such. It is not nature or natural objects that are worshipped, but always the “power of God” as revealed in these objects and places.⁴ The tribals believe these to be the acts of Supreme God who controls the whole universe. Since God is omnipotent and God’s revealing power is manifested everywhere they worship that supernatural power alone. Their immediate concern is the well-being of life in community and therefore maintaining a good relationship with the one who controls them and nature is a necessity.⁵ The tribals worship God’s power through certain objects and thus come to a definite encounter with something unusual, something they call Supreme God. There are many important objects and places which they used to worship and these objects and places still exist in the northeast of India.

Spirits

Belief in the existence of spirits or spirit occupies the core of tribal religion. The spiritual world of the tribal people is covered with spiritual beings, spirits and living death. Besides the belief in the existence of one God, the tribals believe in the existence of impersonal supernatural beings called spirits. The tribals believe that the power of the spirits manifests itself constantly to humans intervening in human beings’ enterprises and affairs. This belief is so

strong that it colors all their activities. They believe themselves to be completely surrounded by these spirits. Spirits are capricious; they do whatever they wish be it good or bad. The spirits, which are impersonal beings, are revealed through material objects. They can influence human beings and even animals, and can work through many other living creatures, human beings, natural objects, animals, etc., to fulfill their own ends.

There are some spirits who cannot be seen except through living beings. They also enter into close alliance with some special persons, and it is believed that there are some cases of intermarriage between spirits and human beings.⁶ While the spirit can take any form, they are usually invisible, live in the invisible world and endowed with some supernatural powers. Hence, people only believe them to be there without actually seeing them with their own eyes. Referring to African Religion, John S. Mbiti said that,

even if the spirits may be the depersonalized residue of individual human beings, they are ontologically “nearer” to God; not ethically, but in terms of communication with Him. It is believed that whereas humans use or require intermediaries, the spirits do not, since they can communicate directly with God.⁷

This applies also to the hill tribes of northeast India. There is no definite, permanent place of abode; they move to and fro in the atmosphere. Different regions such as the underworld, thick forests, mountain caves, waterfalls, etc., are designated as their abode. Spirits carry out their duties under well-organized bodies consisting of officers, assistants and subjects. Thus, the world of spirits, wherever it might be, is very much a carbon copy of the human world. They know the human mind and are capable of doing unusual things.

The tribal people believe in the existence of many spirits, both benevolent and malevolent. Broadly speaking, we can recognize two categories of spiritual beings: those created as such, and those who were once human beings. These can also be subdivided into divinities, associates of God, ordinary spirits and the living dead. In short, the tribals believe in the works of the spirits in the universe and with humans in different capacities.

The hill tribes in northeast India believe the benevolent spirits to establish a friendship with special persons and to be responsible for the welfare and prosperity of humans. They guard and protect the village from disease, pestilence and natural devastation such as crop failure, storms and floods. The spirits not only create but also sustain and control the earth. It is the good spirits

who work for the welfare of the community. Both benevolent and malevolent spirits manipulate humans for their own purposes. Tribals do not worship the spirits—they are propitiated as and when necessary and sacrifices are made to appease them. The benevolent spirit is propitiated and people offer sacrifices not out of fear, but out of reverence and love.⁸ If the right offerings are not given on time, the spirit might not guard the people. Consequently, disease, epidemics and crop failure might occur in the village. Different rituals or ceremonies were instituted through proper sacrifices in order to appease the spirits so that they will continually bless the village, provide abundant crops and protect the community from sickness and unknown dangers.⁹

The malevolent spirits are always thought to be dangerous and destructive to human affairs. They are called bad spirits and therefore harmful to human communities. They are, for instance, the spirits of women who have died in childbirth or during pregnancy; children who have died in their mother's womb or before the cleansing ceremony¹⁰ is completed; those who have met an accidental death through drowning, falling from a tree, being killed by wild beasts and so on.¹¹ These spirits are thought to live outside the village, on the roadside, in fields, rivers, ponds, trees and stones. All kinds of human sufferings such as disease, accidents, madness and damage to property are attributed to these spirits. They can possess human beings and as a consequence the spirit possessed person might behave in abnormal ways or may be driven insane. For tribals, insanity or abnormal behavior are the works of malevolent spirits which prevent humans from worshipping the Supreme God.¹² Bad luck is due to the work of the bad spirits.

Because of the negative elements associated with these spirits, people had to offer sacrifices of domestic animals, food and libations of rice-beer; if this is not done, the spirits would harm them. Therefore, the sole reason for offering sacrifices to malevolent spirits is to avert disaster. The hill tribes in northeast India do not worship these spirits but propitiate them in order to chase them away from the human communities. Many of the diviners, traditional healers, seers or prophets are associated with the process of propitiation. They work for the welfare of the communities. The responsibilities of the diviners and the healers are to seek the will of God in times of sickness, to act as mediators between God and humans and, in times of crisis, advise and counsel the people. In spite of technological and scientific advancement and the influence of Christian teaching, traditional healers and diviners remain active in the tribal society of northeast India. When the tribals were

Christianized they identified the work of the Holy Spirit with benevolent spirits and the work of devil with malevolent spirits.

Ancestor spirits

The tribals believe that after leaving the body the soul of his or her social personality is not annihilated but transformed into an ancestral spirit. The term ancestral spirits refers to the souls or spirits of the deceased members of the lineage or kin, national heroes and leaders.¹³ Their belief in ancestral spirits is the result of the belief in the immortality of the human soul and a strong and clear concept of life after death. They are also aware of the existence of a heavenly home where the souls of humanity live together eternally in the presence of God.

It is through the ancestral spirits that the divine world becomes personal to human beings. Speaking the language of the spirits, of God and also human beings with whom they lived until recently, the ancestral spirits are the closest link that human beings have with the divine spiritual world. Having personal memories of the ancestors, the tribals believe that the ancestral spirits are interested in what is going on in the family. Therefore, they return to their human families from time to time, and symbolically share meals with them. They can appear in dreams and visions, etc., and assist the family especially in times of sickness and crisis, at birth and weddings, and in the settling of household problems, etc. The tribals believe that the ancestral spirits do not depart forever from the family members but continue to live with them in the form of the spirit.¹⁴ Therefore, tribal people hold them in high esteem. This is sometimes misinterpreted by Westerners as being ancestor worship. The term veneration comes a little bit closer to the correct understanding of the ritual relationship to the ancestral spirits. The tribals often invoke the ancestral spirits to ensure the welfare of the living members of the family and clan. They believe it to be their duty to see to the welfare of their living relatives and to share in all the difficult moments in the lives of the living members of the family. In this way, the living and dead of the same lineage stand in a close relationship with one another. Since ancestral spirits are said to be aware of the actions and thoughts of their living relatives, the veneration of ancestral spirits forms an integral part of their religion. The motives for ancestor worship are (1) a desire to venerate the dead; (2) a desire for their blessings and protection; (3) a feeling of reverence due to them; (4) a fear of incurring their wrath.¹⁵

The relationship of the living with their dead relatives is somewhat ambivalent, comprising both affection and fear. The tribals believe that the souls of unnatural deaths—accidents, drowning, women who die during pregnancy or in childbirth, infectious diseases—do not reach full spiritual status. Their souls turn into ghosts or the devil and hover around the world.¹⁶ These ghosts are called bad or malevolent spirits. Only after repeated rituals and ceremonies is the dead person freed from the enemy that killed him/her and able to join the ancestor spirits.

The family, represented by the living and the dead, continues to be a focus of powerful sentiments. Ancestor veneration serves to keep the memory of the dead alive and welds the community of the living into one with those who have deceased. Their welfare is bound up with that of their living relatives. For one generation, at least, they must not be ignored and the conventional tributes must be paid to them. Otherwise, though generally benevolent, they will visit the family in times of sickness and other misfortunes for they are very sensitive to neglect. In the past, sacrifices to the departed were carried out by the eldest male member of the household. Their blessings are invoked at every social ceremony and at all major festivals when a portion of food is offered to them. Even today, some tribal Christians pay tribute to the dead on special occasions. They are remembered and invoke special blessings for the living members of the family.

Notes

¹ A. Wati Longchar, *The Tribal Religious Traditions in Northeast India: An Introduction*(Jorhat: Author, 2000), p. 3.

² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³ M. M. Thomas, "Modernization of Traditional Societies and Struggle for New Cultural Ethos," in *Ecumenical Review*, vol. XVIII, no. 4 (October 1966), p. 429.

⁴ O. Alem Ao, *Tsungremology: Ao Naga Christian Theology*(Aolijen, Mokokchung: CTC, 1994), p. 79.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁷ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1970), p. 80.

⁸ Longchar, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 19.

⁹ Raghuvir Sinha, *Religion and Culture of North-Eastern India* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1977), p. 51.

¹⁰ In tribal culture, when a child is born the cleansing ceremony is observed for both the mother and the baby. For a baby girl the duration is five days and for a baby boy, six. This duration differs from tribe to tribe. If a child dies before completion of this cleansing ceremony the spirit would turn into a bad spirit.

¹¹ Longchar, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 19.

¹² Alem Ao, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 89.

¹³ Joseph Troisi, *Tribal Religion: Religious Beliefs and Practices Among the Santals* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1978), p. 93.

¹⁴ Longchar, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 20.

¹⁵ Troisi, *op. cit.* (note 13), p. 96.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

Healing in Asian Indigenous Spiritualities: The Rungus of Borneo

Marunsai Bin Dawai

Introduction

The Rungus of northwestern Sabah or Borneo inhabit the Kudat district of Sabah, Malaysia. They speak a Dusunic *isoglot* and identify themselves, their *adat* and their *isoglot* as “Rungus.” In addition, there are number of other Dusunic-speaking ethnic groups in Kudat.

The Rungus, a subgroup of the Kadazan-Dusun peoples, are the main ethnic group living in Kudat. In the early 1960s, there were approximately 10 000 Rungus out of a total population of 29 456 speaking Dusunic or related languages in the Kudat region. The Rungus are found on the two major peninsulas of Kudat: Kudat and Bengkoka.

The domestic household/family

In Rungus society, the family is the only producing, consuming and asset accumulating social unit. This unit is symbolized in their religious system. A number of sacrifices are made in order to cure illness within the family or to create an enhanced ritual state between the family and members of the spirit world who are responsible for protecting the family from illness and harm, for promoting fertility in the swiddens and for securing the fecundity of the family's domestic animals.

The longhouse

The Rungus live in the longhouse which comes into existence through the gradual lateral enlargement of individual family apartments. In the economic

realm, the members of a longhouse are not involved in any corporate or collective action. However, they do take collective, but not corporate, action to protect themselves against *rogon*, pathogenic spirits.

The village

The village is the fundamental political unit of Rungus society. It is not a kin grouping; membership is open to individual domestic families whether or not one of their relatives is resident there. It may consist of several hamlets in which one or more longhouses may be situated.

Like the family, the village is considered corporate in judicial and ritual terms. Unlike the family, the village is not a social entity since it cannot enter into economic relations and accumulate assets. However, through jointly organized sacrifices, the village can increase the state of ritual goodwill, as a corporate entity, between itself and the gods to improve the fertility of its territory, its plants, animals and inhabitants.

The ritual status of the village as a corporate entity is illustrated in the ceremony held by the village every decade or so in which a pig is sacrificed to renew the fecundity of the land and community. During this ceremony the village's territory is closed off to non-villagers. A person violating the boundaries is sued by the headman for a pig so that the ceremony can be repeated and the goodwill between the village and the spirit world reestablished. The number of inhabitants of a village can vary from 40 to 400 people.

Rungus cosmology: the Rungus self and its behavioral environment

The osunduw: gods

The Rungus distinguish between *riniba*, humans, and *osunduw*, supernatural beings. In everyday discourse the term *osunduw* refers to the celestial gods that inhabit the various layers of the upperworld and are helpful, not harmful, to humans. The term *rogon* refers to terrestrial spirits and demigods who are the embodiment of the social and physical environments and can be harmful to humans, as can the rice spirits, *odu-odu*. The *rogon* are referred to as inhab-

itants of the earth, *putanaon*, to be of the earth. The earth, *tana*, is separated from the upperworld, *avan*, by a river that can only be crossed by *osunduw*.

The rogon: demigods and spirits

The *rogon* inhabit the natural and social worlds—the same as human beings in both space and time. It is a seamless world in which the *rogon* are found in certain, distinct aspects of the landscape: a landslide, a large group of boulders, a grove of trees with a spring or wet place, banyan trees, etc. The *rogon* inhabiting wet places were originally human beings. When trying to cross a log bridge, some of the human beings slipped off and became *rogon*.

The *rogon* are potentially the most dangerous to human beings; they are capricious, irascible and cause afflictions if they are not properly treated or their living space is intruded upon. Like human beings, *rogon* have families and engage in the same activities.

The rusod: protectors of the members of a household

The *rusod* are the guardians of proper cultural order in the household and protect the household members. They do not die when their human counterparts die but continue to protect the rest of the family. However, when a family moves to a new longhouse apartment, the *rusod* of the dead family members are left behind. The household members can offend the *rusod* by violating the cultural order of the family.

The odu-odu: rice spirits

The third major category of spirits are the rice spirits. These rice spirits, like the *rogon* of the household, *rusod*, mirror the social order of the family. Thus, when a new child is born into the family, a new rice spirit comes into being. During the harvesting season, this new rice spirit along with the rice spirits of the other family members is called to the swiddens in order to ensure a good harvest

In addition to these rice spirits there are specific swidden *rogon*, such as the spirits of mice and other agricultural pests. Ceremonies for all these various agricultural spirits involve prayers and exhortations, and every few years the sacrifice of chickens.

Divato and lugu: celestial counterparts of human beings

Dwelling in the lower level of the upperworld with other celestial *osunduw* are the celestial counterparts of individuals. These are called *divato* for women and *lugu* for men. A celestial counterpart is born with each individual, along with their multiple souls, rice spirit and *rusod* counterpart. When an individual is in danger, the celestial counterpart looks out for him/her and protects him/her. Thus, a *lugu* or *divato* is called upon for help when one is frightened. For example, when alone and lost in the jungle a person will call out to his or her celestial counterpart, saying s/he cannot see him but needs his help.

Lumaag: spirit familiars

The celestial counterparts of living or deceased individuals become spirit familiars of practicing *bobolizan*, particularly if they are or were efficacious *bobolizan* or individuals of renown. The term *lumaag* refers to any spirit familiar, god, *rogon*, or celestial counterpart that communicates with a spirit medium. Thus the term *lumaag* is frequently used to refer to the celestial counterpart of a living individual, male or female. However, only the *bobolizan* obtain replies from their celestial counterparts when they are called upon in trance.

It is through the help of the *lumaag* that a *bobolizan*, while in trance, diagnoses illnesses and obtains information on the proper sacrifice to be made in order to effect cures; these involve the performance of hymns to the gods and spirits over sacrifices of pigs and chickens. The primary *lumaag* of a *bobolizan* is usually her own celestial counterpart, although sometimes it can be her mother's or teacher's. The *lumaag*, except for *rogon* spirit familiars who inhabit the earth, live in *libabow*, the lower layer of the upperworld.

The Rungus self in its behavioral environment

The Rungus self is composed of body, *inan*, multiple souls, *hatod*, the *rusod* counterpart, an individual's rice spirit, *odu-odu* and the celestial counterpart, *divato* or *lugu*. All these appear at the birth of the individual. It is only the celestial counterpart that dwells in the first layer of the upperworld. Upon the death of the body the *min* soul goes to the afterworld, *nabalu* (Mount Kinabalu). Other souls reside in the individual's joints. These go wandering during dreams

and become exposed to malicious or angered spirits, *rogon*, who capture and torture these souls, causing illness. When the spirit medium retrieves these souls at the end of a ceremony, she returns them to the body through the hair.

The issue of invisibility as a defining characteristic of osunduw

While normally the *osunduw* are invisible to human beings in their ordinary state of consciousness, they can be seen in a changed state of consciousness. In dreams the soul goes wandering and may meet up with *rogon* and other *osunduw*, as well as the *hatod* of other people. When a guardian *rogon* is solicited to provide protection, one may see the *rogon* indistinctly or in a transmogrified form. However, in a state of trance, the *bobolizan* does not always see the inhabitants of the spirit world, although she becomes the channel through which information is passed onto the human world. Occasionally, a particularly skilled *bobolizan* will say that she has seen her *lumaag* standing on a leaf of a banana plant, *kadau*, although no one else can see her, nor are there any indications of her presence such as the movement of the leaf itself.

Explanations for human afflictions

Illness and the soul

Illness is explained as the result of harm done to the soul when it absents itself from the body or when it has been captured by the *rogon* and bodily impairment is a consequence of the involvement of the soul. For example, a *rogon* may capture one of an individual's souls and subject it to torture. This is reflected in the physical body through various symptoms. Tormenting a soul by subjecting it to the heat from a fire will produce an illness with a high fever.

An offended *rogon* will not necessarily inflict an illness on the particular member of the family who has caused the offence. For instance, if a man, while cutting his swidden, inadvertently damages the dwelling of a *rogon* family, the *rogon* will seek revenge by causing any member of that man's family to fall ill.

Infertility, bad harvests and misfortune.

Swidden failures can be the result of the rice spirits being scared away or offended by ignoring the customary rules of swiddening. Ceremonies to locate

the source of misfortunes are generally, but not exclusively, carried out by men. Trance behavior is not part of these ceremonies. Only the reciting of a sacred text and the sacrificing of chickens, or occasionally a pig, are required.

However, there are times of misfortune for everyone in a village: children die; domestic animals fail to reproduce and die; women are unable to conceive; fruit harvests are bad; there is a major crop failure; and many people are sick. This type of misfortune is the result of incest or illicit intercourse.

The *bobolizan* and her spirit familiar: curing illness and infertility

The *bobolizan* serves as an intermediary between human beings and supernatural beings, both the upperworld *osunduw* and the terrestrial *rogon*, to alleviate such afflictions as disease, misfortune, infertility and crop failure. *Bobolizan* are generally female. They go into a trance to communicate with the spirit world in order to diagnose and cure illness and misfortune, and then recite long, sacred texts that accompany the necessary sacrificial offerings to the spirit world. Thus, the term *bobolizan* may be used for a spirit medium as well as a priestess. This indicates that the concepts and terminology currently available for describing and analyzing religious, and in particular the performances of spirit mediums, are inadequate to describe this cultural domain. They are still ethnocentric.

As a result of their ability to go into a trance and to communicate with the spirit world, women are considered to be the authorities on the nature of the cosmos and the interpreters of most forms of misfortune except those relating to farming activities, where there are male experts as well. Responses by men to queries as to the nature of gods and spirits, their locations, their powers and activities are frequently concluded with a statement that they really do not know about the *osunduw*; women are the ones who know the ultimate answers to such questions.

Trance: *rundukan*

The *Rungus* classify trance behavior into two types on the basis of the manner by which it is entered. Spirit mediums can actively induce a trance to ask help from their spirit familiars, or they may spontaneously go into a trance during a dream or on returning from visiting a *rogon* in the forest to ask for his help.

The trance is induced when the *bobolizan* is asked to communicate with her spirit familiars to determine the causes of illness, and also occurs as a part of the healing ceremonies.

During healing ceremonies, ritualized trances, *rundukan mangambo*, occur at certain stages. Each time they differ little in content. In these the *bobolizan* calls upon her various *lumaag* to assist her in communicating with the *rogon* to make sure that the sacrifice has been sufficient to placate them and thereby insure the safe return of the wandering souls of the sick person. In essence, they describe the journey of the *lumaag* as they travel to the villages of the *rogon*, bargain with them for the return of the souls in exchange for the sacrifice, gather up the souls and return them to the *bobolizan*. At this point, the *lumaag* tell the *rogon* to remove their agents of pain and to refrain from capturing or torturing any more souls.

Spontaneous trances, *rundukan tomod*, often occur as a result of a dream about a *bobolizan's lumaag*. When this occurs, she wakes up already in a trance. It is said that the *lumaag* misses his or her spirit medium and wants to talk to her. At other times, this happens if a *bobolizan* has tried to call upon her *lumaag* when he was busy and could not communicate with her. He is now contacting her to see what she wanted.

Occasionally a *lumaag* will bring news of a sick child or other relative in another village before the news has reached the person who has had the dream.

Diagnosing the cause of illness and misfortune

In addition to calling upon her guardian spirits to determine the source of illness, a *bobolizan* will also analyze the dreams of the person who is ill. It is during dreams that the soul goes wandering and becomes vulnerable to being attacked by *rogon*. After a person describes in detail his or her dream to the *bobolizan*, she can call upon her spirit familiar to find out just what class of *rogon* has been angered, and what must be done to appease them. At times the *bobolizan* herself, after she has heard a description of what happened to the soul of the person who had the dream, can ascertain what *rogon* are guilty.

Behavioral environment and physiology of trance

When a *bobolizan* wants to enter a trance, she must first go through the invocations, *mangambo*, to call her *lumaag*, alerting them to the fact that she

needs their assistance. A woman about to invoke her spirit familiars sits upright on the floor with her legs straight in front of her.

Before beginning to dissociate herself the *bobolizan* must first make a fresh quid of betel and sirih. She chews this and at the same time starts shaking her ritual clapper, the *gonding*. She then starts chanting ritual invocations, the first step of which is to wake up the spirit, *divato*, of the basket which contains her ritual paraphernalia. As she progresses, the rhythmical shaking of the *gonding* becomes faster and faster. Next she takes a small piece of the root of the *komburongo* plant, which is believed to have a soul of its own. Prayers are uttered over the *komburongo*, and its soul precedes the *bobolizan's* words summoning the *lumaag*.

When the *lumaag* arrive, they do not enter the body of the *bobolizan* but hover above her in the lower layer of the upperworld and look down on her. There is a symbolic "bridge" between the dwelling place of the *lumaag* and the *bobolizan*.

The *bobolizan's* various ritual activities

Ceremonies for illness

The structure of the ceremonies involves ascertaining the type of *rogon* causing the misfortune; this may be discovered during an induced trance or the interpretation of dreams. These may be the *rogon* of sacred groves or the forest, as well as the *rusod*, who at times are the fickle protectors of the household. While in trance the *bobolizan*, with the help of her spirit familiar, determines what *rogon* sacrifices are required for the return of the souls. Some *rogon* receive large pigs, others small ones; some *rogon* want red chickens, while others want white ones. At this time the *bobolizan* can ask for mercy and bargain for a smaller sacrifice.

The ceremony includes the recitation of the appropriate sacred texts for those *rogon* who are being addressed, the invoked trances to have the *lumaag* obtain the return of the souls, the killing of the sacrifices and the eating of them by the domestic family.

The *rusod* and the *rogon* which dwell in every Rungus longhouse apartment are responsible for the well-being of each family member. When not angered they protect all family members. Since it is not difficult to anger them inadvert-

ently, it is necessary from time to time to hold a *tumoron* ceremony to undo the anger of the *rusod*, which manifests itself in the illness of a family member. These *tumoron* are the ceremonies most frequently held throughout the year.

However, for major or lingering illnesses a bargain will be struck with the *rusod* to hold a renewal ceremony, a *moginum*, at some point in the future, when the family has had enough time to raise a pig of sufficient size and to collect the supplies for such a ceremony. It is hoped that this will alleviate the illness. At the time of making this bargain, a piglet is designated to be raised for this ceremony.

The *moginum* is held infrequently, only once every five to ten years per family. It is the ultimate ceremony for illness and the only one where rice wine is consumed. The term *moginum* is derived from *lexeme minum*, to drink. During this festive ceremony, rice wine is prepared and friends and relatives come from near and far to celebrate, dance and sing in honor of the *rusod*. More than one *bobolizan* is required for this ceremony as the prayers and songs go on for five days or longer. After many pigs and chickens have been offered and much feasting and drinking on the part of the assembled guests have taken part, the ceremony culminates with the *bobolizan* going into trance on a raised platform above the roof of longhouse. At the end of her *rundukan* the *bobolizan* dances with the *rusod* as they celebrate the renewal of their relationship with the family.

The *bobolizan* also officiates at marriage ceremonies with the recitation of sacred texts over the chickens. She prays that the couple will successfully raise a family, their children grow up and their gardens be profitable. There are no trances activities involved in this.

The *bobolizan* also performs the ritual and offerings accompanying death. After the death of a spouse, the widow or widower is considered *alas*, hot, and no one may talk to them until the next weekly market is held. After this a *bobolizan* will hold a ceremony to send away the lingering souls of the dead from the family apartment for fear they might try to lure the souls of the living to follow them to the afterworld.

Perceived efficacy of various *bobolizan*

Not all *bobolizan* are perceived as being equally effective. Some *bobolizan* have a good name for being able to cure, and they are very sought after. The compe-

tence of a *bobolizan* depends on several factors. The first is her knowledge of the ritual texts and hymns. If she carelessly or lazily omits certain portions, this will anger the *rogon* and they will not return the souls of the sick person.

Another factor that gives a *bobolizan* a reputation for competence is how skilled she is at diagnosing illness and its cause. Ceremonies for illness are costly. The less a family has to spend on providing animals for sacrifices because the patient has been successfully cured and recovered, the more sought after a *bobolizan* will be.

The reputation of her *lumaag* is another aspect of the efficacy of the work of a *bobolizan*. Certain *bobolizan* have a *lumaag* who is *olohis*, straight, and not devious. Such a *lumaag* can handle the offending *rogon* rapidly and efficiently. A *bobolizan* who attains such a reputation will be sought after for cures and will bring the family a certain amount of income. Less trusted *bobolizan* will not be called on as often. ¹

Payment for performing a ceremony

For her mediation with the spirit world and curing of illness a *bobolizan* receives a ritual payment consisting of plates, bowls, dyed yarn, knives and a part of each of the animals sacrificed. This, in addition to the ritual payments she receives for tutoring prospective *bobolizan* and the sale of her weaving with the yarn from her payments, provides a considerable income for the family.

Weaving and the *bobolizan*

Prior to the Pax Britannica and the cessation of hostilities, a particularly eminent *bobolizan* was not supposed to do any work, but had a room of her own, a *rorizan*, situated above the family quarters in the longhouse apartment. Here she would sit all day and weave the ritual clothes of the *bobolizan*, the elaborate skirts and blouses worn by women on special ceremonial occasions, as well as the ceremonial jackets worn by men. Food prepared by others was brought to her here.

While weaving is closely associated with the role of *bobolizan*, not all women who weave are *bobolizan*, nor are all *bobolizan* accomplished weavers. A woman who is both a *bobolizan* and a weaver of the ceremonial garments is very highly regarded.

Conclusion

The activities of the *bobolizan* provide a bridge between the objective world constructed by Rungus culture and the individual's subjective world, which is also constructed and interpreted by Rungus culture. The experience of this subjective world is so mapped onto the objective world that there is no seam, even between the visible and the invisible.

This subjective world is also modified by each individual's life experiences and his or her interpretation thereof, creating for each a uniquely structured unconscious. The Rungus spirit medium, through her trances and interpretation of dreams, provides access to this unconscious world that would otherwise remain unexamined, cause psychological distress and influence drive behavior in non-rational ways.

Notes

¹ George N. Appel, *The Seen and the Unseen: Shamanism, Mediumship and Possession in Borneo* (1993), pp. 7–38.

Blood Sacrifice in Peninsular Malaysian Folk Hinduism and the Doctrine of Justification

Solomon Rajah

In Asia, religion is a very intimate spiritual affair at the foundation of which lies a resolute exercise of faith. One's professed religion remains the guiding lights through the many and varied mysteries of spiritual life. A community collectively deposits its values and accumulated wisdom into the conceptual framework of its religion and spirituality. Hence it is inescapable that religion becomes a sensitive matter. The study of religion is bound to touch on the sensitivities of the population, especially if the study is "cross-religious." There are numerous influences among the people in Asia who profess a wide spectrum of views regarding the practice of blood sacrifice. Some who want to promote that which is perceived as orthodoxy will find the practice abhorrent declaring it not to be part of their religion. The problem is exacerbated by the dire lack of any significant corpus of academic research in the field of folk religious practices in Asia.

Some common reasons for offering blood sacrifice in Asia

Folk religions synthesize popular beliefs and practices, frequently animistic in nature, that are developed in order to deal with everyday problems. This may occur in urban as well as rural environments. In many contexts, these practices may coexist with religious traditions in Asia (i.e., Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism or Confucianism) and sometimes even with secular humanism.¹ In this sense, folk religion absorbs much that might be frowned upon by official religion. It is extremely eclectic, picking up elements from popular culture, superstition, sentiment, the paranormal, astrology, etc., and characteristically unorganized.² Nevertheless, it can form systems of belief and practice.

The majority of people adhering to folk religions are simple people who struggle for their livelihood in the face of poverty, substandard education

and other uncertainties. They find solace and consolation in the worship of their deities who guide their lives. They are not overly concerned with doctrinal reasoning or elaborate rituals, but rather with the practical side of their beliefs. The simplest way to meet their needs is by using an uncomplicated act of worship such as offering blood sacrifices to the deities in the temples or shrines. The practice of blood sacrifice is a focal point in the lives of folk religionists; it is inextricably bound up in the spiritual traditions of Asian folk religions. Those adhering to folk religions are culturally and historically conditioned by beliefs that involve fearing supernatural spirits, using placatory animal sacrifices in festivals, pursuing purity and pollution through caste, tribe or clan systems, offering blood libations to the lesser deities or spirits and observing auspicious and inauspicious times.

The reason for offering sacrifices in temples or shrines is the perception of the spiritual efficacy of the deity to grant boons. The most common reason for offering a blood sacrifice is to express thanksgiving and to seek blessings. Special reasons for offering blood sacrifices vary from the simple to the complicated: for healing; success in business; career promotion; a better salary; good relationships at the work place; to be able to study better; success in exams; success in state elections; to seek protection for the women in the vicinity; to seek blessing for a child (fertility); safe child delivery; to win the lottery; to win soccer match bets; to ward off bad omens and harm done by enemies; to appease the deities; for a safe journey; to hurt someone; to pay for faults committed against the deity, knowingly or unknowingly; family obligation or custom; to ward off the evil eye and seek protection, territorial or otherwise; to solve domestic problems. In some rural communities, sacrifices are offered to destroy an enemy or the enemy's crop, to render an enemy's plot infertile or to inflict an ailment on the enemy or their loved ones, to seduce women or to separate married couples. The press refers to such cases as "ritual murder."

Blood sacrifice in Peninsular Malaysian folk Hinduism

The vast majority of Hindu migrants in Peninsular Malaysia come from the rural villages of Tamilnadu in South India. Early Tamil Hindu migrants brought with them their folk religion that assimilated regional village deities and practices. The focal point in its ritualistic worship is the practice of ritual slaughter of animals. Two generations have passed since the early Tamil Hindu set-

tlers arrived, but the practice of ritual slaughter in Peninsular Malaysia persists among eighty percent of the present generation. It is not confined to rural areas, but also practiced in most towns and suburbs along the western states in Peninsular Malaysia.

Blood sacrifice is understood as an efficacious ritual employed by Peninsular Malaysian Tamils practicing folk Hinduism in the context of their worship. It is integrated primarily into festival settings, and to a lesser extent into life cycle rituals. The practice of blood sacrifice involves the ritual slaughter of goats, cockerels and pigs. These blood sacrifices are offered to the lesser deities either at temples or wayside shrines.

Deities and blood sacrifices in Peninsular Malaysian folk Hinduism

In folk Hinduism deities are called *siru-theivam*, the generic term for “lesser deities.” The deified dead are also patronized in the worship of *siru-theivam*. Although the deified dead persons are venerated reverentially, such veneration sometimes crosses over into magical and occult practices. The veneration of *siru-theivam* among Tamils practicing folk Hinduism is the most popular. Among them is a class of malevolent deities whose origins are rural and whose antecedents are found only in folklore. There are not many such deities and they vary in popularity. In Peninsular Malaysia, deities such as *Nagama*, *Pechayi*, *Sangili-Karuppan*,³ *Mathurai-viran*,⁴ *Muniswaran*⁵ and *Idumban*⁶ are worshipped in shrines and temples either as the main deity or a co-deity. The generic term *sami*, literally god or goddess, is a commonly accepted name for malevolent spirits. Worship of some deities entails direct blood sacrifice.⁷

Within the veneration of *siru-theivam* another class of “beings” are considered “spirits” in folk Hinduism. Sometimes these “beings” or “spirits” are actively appeased, at other times they are ignored. In many cases, they are used by occult practitioners for magical purposes and involve blood sacrifices. It is believed that sacrifices offered to *siru-theivam* often attract evil spirits, *katru-settai*. Therefore, during the act of sacrificing, care is taken to protect observers and participants. Although the beings can be termed as ghosts, spirits, demons, family deities and lesser deities, worshippers have their own ways of giving honor and priority, which may not be obvious. An improper choice of word when communicating with a Hindu can be a serious offence.

However, the most popular deities do not demand sacrifice directly but receive it vicariously through other deities. The vicarious offering can be as

elaborate as having another temple at a different site. Ignorance of these particulars can offend Hindus. Although some devotees do offer blood sacrifices vicariously, they will not tolerate any reference to their deities as receiving blood sacrifices.

Most of the malevolent deities function as tutelary or guardian deities to the main deities considered benevolent deities in temples and shrines of Peninsular Malaysia. Both the benevolent and malevolent deities often coexist in the same temples or shrines. The guardian malevolent deities are normally situated in front of the benevolent deities in most temples and shrines.

For instance, the benevolent deities may bestow blessings, descend on the priests to empower acts of exorcising evil spirits, and remain as giving deities. The malevolent deities, on the other hand, may grant boons, demand blood sacrifices and remain the receiving deities. The characteristics of the malevolent deities underscore both good and evil traits. In the malevolent deities the evil traits are manifested in diverse forms of spirits. Such manifested forms also include spirits of the persons who have died by violence or have committed suicide and are restlessly wandering the earth as evil spirits, *katru-settai*. These spirits are said to be powerful, malignant and malicious. It is believed such spirits will possess weak-minded and fearful Hindu devotees or any such person in other religions.

Many of the malevolent deities continue to be venerated in folk Hinduism. Spirit possession occurs when the malevolent deities are not suitably propitiated with blood sacrifices. Hindu devotees are vulnerable to *katru-settai*. However, those adhering to folk Hinduism in Peninsular Malaysia believe that spirit possession occurs when devotees take part in occult activities near graveyards, on secluded roads, in haunted houses and areas outside the protection of the deities. Spirit possessed persons often become hysterical, described as *marul*, spirit possession. Most of the possessed persons are taken to a *samiyadi*, god dancer, who attains trance, *arul*, bestowed by the benevolent deities to perform exorcism. Largely idols or some other forms of benevolent deities are found in most Peninsular Malaysian temples and shrines that practice folk Hinduism. Benevolent deities are considered higher deities that expel evil spirits in possessed persons.

Blood sacrifice and exorcism in Peninsular Malaysian folk Hinduism

One of the peculiarities of folk Hinduism in Peninsular Malaysia is that it has assimilated some features of Malay folk beliefs and practices. For example,

blood sacrifices are offered to secure exorcism by the *Datho*,⁸ the guardian spirit. The *Datho* is believed to be the spirit of a dead person who emerged after many years to aid or haunt human beings.⁹ The *Datho* is believed to be masculine, and is normally invoked by reciting magical chants. The *Datho*, like an ordinary human being, has scruples and morals. It is commonly believed that the *Datho* causes disturbances if it is not appeased with blood sacrifice. The *Datho*, believed to be a territorial spirit and the guardian spirit or *penunggu* is often thought to hold equal rank with the lesser deities and to play a specific role in the faith of the community.¹⁰ Whenever the *Datho* is disturbed in its abode, or not appropriately propitiated or worshipped, it avenges itself by possessing a person. The *Datho* usually resides in the body of the possessed person for long periods. At times the *Datho* may mysteriously derive power, *kuasa*, from animals such as horses, beavers, tigers and pythons to possess people who, in turn, react by behaving like an animal.¹¹ Such behavior involves changing the body to become a medium for a spirit (for example, the *Datho*). A possessed person would exude body odor smelling of jasmine, dried fish or even meat.

The *Datho* is also said to inflict harm on people by causing distractions when driving or by poisoning their food. However, it is believed that it cannot kill human beings directly. A *Datho* who descends on a human being can personify “into” one of the above mentioned *Datho*. He is used for wining lotteries and business transaction. When a person plans to build a house or any structure on a plot of land where the *Datho* is residing, the *Datho* will not allow the building unless it is appeased. To appease the *Datho*, a local priest, *pusari*, is consulted.¹²

The *Datho* is approached with a variety of items such as a white chicken, white silk thread, *pattu-nul*, beer or liquor, betel leaves and areca nuts, *paku*, pumpkin, camphor, *sudam*, bleached tobacco leaves, *roku*, or a cigar and a bottle of oil-based perfume, *athar*. Symbolically a black chicken is offered for wining a lottery or successfully hurting an enemy. A white chicken is offered once a year or whenever necessary as a common offering. Every *pusari* has an assistant on whom the *Datho* descends. In order to invoke the *Datho* to descend the *pusari* makes the assistant inhale the scented smoke, *sambirani*, arising from the incense burner. Normally this invocation is done around midnight on a Thursday. The invocation may attract other spirits rather than the *Datho*. Such spirits may include malignant spirits such as *Kateri*, *Nagakanni*, a female serpent spirit, or a spirit that is passing by. The de-

scending *Datho* may sometimes be angry and demand that a chicken be brought to it. If it is happy, it will ask for a cigar or liquor. The *pusari* will then determine the *Datho*'s identity. An angry *Datho* usually asks for blood sacrifices. After pacifying the *Datho*, the *pusari* will make his intention known to the *Datho*, and ask that it fulfill the requests. If its residence has been disturbed, the *Datho* may demand to know what it will receive in return. Whatever food is placed before the *Datho* will be eaten. After eating, the *Datho* may agree to solve the problem or fulfill the request made. The highest sacrifice a *Datho* would demand is a human fetus from any member of the family. If the *Datho* does not get what it asks for, it will attack the person dealing with it by biting their fingers, pulling their hair or hurling objects. Sometimes the *Datho* leaps from one person to another causing them to run amok and attack others violently. If the *Datho* does not want to leave the possessed person's body, it will make the person hurt him/herself or instigate someone else to injure or kill the concerned person. The *Datho* is resorted to for exorcism in temples and shrines in Peninsular Malaysia. In most temples the *Datho* is normally housed in a shrine, painted red, situated beside the main deity. The *Datho* descends on the *pusari* or sometimes on another person to perform exorcisms. The *Datho* speaks Malay through the *pusari* or his assistant in a trance and instructs the process of exorcism. Since the *Datho* is an age-old and powerful guardian spirit the task of delivering evil spirits is not tedious work. Evil spirits are less powerful and easily subdued by the *Datho*.

The séance for delivering the possessed usually concludes with prescriptions of protective charms given by the *Datho* through the *pusari* or his assistant. Those seeking assistance for exorcism from the *Datho* must slaughter cockerels or hens as gift offerings. Interestingly, adherents to other religions such as Chinese folk religions, Catholics, Punjabis, and Malay Muslims consult the *Datho* through the *pusari* in temples and shrines for lottery numbers, healing or exorcism. Normally these other devotees offer blood sacrifice whenever the *Datho* fulfills their requests.

Theological motifs for offering blood sacrifice

Those who practice blood sacrifices have a twofold concern: physical health and financial security. The question of atonement, central to the Semitic reli-

gions, is completely absent. However, there is a belief in the efficacy of blood sacrifice, i.e., getting the deities to do what the devotees desire. Most of the theological assumptions are based on beliefs arising from the practitioners' reasons for offering blood sacrifice. The reasons for blood sacrifices given above show that adherents of blood sacrifice are only concerned with their daily existential problems or temporal needs and the liberation from them. It can be theologically interpreted as "temporal salvation." We can identify three theological motifs for the practice of blood sacrifice: a substitutionary motif, a propitiatory motif and a redemptive motif. In some cases, blood sacrifices are also offered for the purpose of divination and exorcism. The theological motifs enhance the fundamental notion of salvation that is decisively temporal. The practice of blood sacrifice reveals the practitioners' spiritual perceptions, their fervent devotion in their approach to deities and their ritualistic demands.

Substitutionary motif

A mother came to the priest complaining that her child was suffering from chickenpox. After chanting prayers addressed to *Kali*,¹³ the goddess who brings and removes the scourge, the priest said that the child was the object of *Kali*'s displeasure. Therefore, *Kali* has to be appeased with a blood sacrifice so that she will take upon herself the chickenpox.¹⁴ It is not uncommon for priests to act as medicine men or spirit mediums who are consulted by practitioners of blood sacrifice. A fowl may be sacrificed to appease the goddess who will take the chickenpox upon herself. In this case, the role of the substitutionary aspect of the blood sacrifice is evident.

Propitiatory motif

Adherents to folk Hinduism often believe that forces of evil, *ketta kalam*, may predominate and inflict injury upon them at certain times of the year. Blood sacrifices are carried out at such times in order to avoid any dire consequences. This motif of sacrifice was explicitly described by a *pusari* of the Om Sakti Durga temple in an urban area:

We ask mother *Durga*¹⁵ for help especially when we encounter evil times, *ketta kalam*, within our families. In case of constant mishaps or accidents due to unforeseen circumstances, it is imperative that we have to offer sacri-

fice to mother *Durga*, in order to propitiate her. Since it is the desire and concern of our caste, *varugam*, a festival is organized in the month of *Aadi*, mid-July–mid August, for those who promised to fulfill their vows, *veinduthalai*. In the case of *Durga* who is our goddess of protection, *kakum deivam*, we sacrifice goats at the sacrificial altar, *palipeedum*, in front of her shrine. The festival, *thiruvilla*, begins on a Friday and ends on a Sunday on which day sacrifice is offered to the deity. The goat is blessed with magical chants, *mantrams* by *pusari*, and then taken to the sacrificial altar to be slaughtered. The goat is decapitated with a single stroke and the blood spilled onto the ground. It is a symbolic way of releasing the life, *uyir*, of the goat and it is believed that *Bumadevi*¹⁶ drinks the blood. Blood is believed to be the life force and by offering it to *Durga*, spiritual power, *sakti*, is obtained. Sacrifice is performed to seek the deity's grace, *arul*, which comes to us in many forms in order that we may be blessed by the good time, *nalla kalam*.¹⁷

The purpose of the sacrifice is to protect from harm and from supernatural elements. The deity is propitiated with blood sacrifice. Blood from the sacrifice is understood to sustain life and power. The blood is poured out to the goddess' subordinate deity, *Bumadevi*, and the flesh is normally cooked and eaten by the devotees in a communal feast. The intention is to gain or regain the goodwill of both the deity of the shrine and its immediate guardians. Thus the purpose of sacrifice includes warding off evil forces by seeking grace and power through blood oblations to the benevolent deity.

Another object of worship in the *thiruvilla* is that sacrifice is intended to appease various spirits, both good and evil. These spirit beings are regarded as indifferent to ethical considerations, unpredictable and bloodthirsty. In this connection, for example, sacrifice that is being offered to *Durga* is understood as a substitution so that the evil spirits or beings will not disturb the community or her devotees.

Propitiatory blood sacrifices are also associated with specific life cycle rites. In this connection, it is predominantly concerned with warding off the spirits that are associated with calamities, misfortunes and diseases. For instance, sacrifice is offered to the deity to avert illness during pregnancy.

A pregnant woman who takes a vow to pray to *Kateri*¹⁸ after her delivery asks her husband to buy a black fowl and a black sari. On the day of the worship the fowl is slaughtered and its freshly laid eggs boiled. All close kinswomen proceed to the shrine of the deity where food and other materials

are being offered. The food includes the black fowl, curry, boiled eggs and dry fish. Betel leaves, areca nuts and coconut halves are offered on banana leaves. The women pray to the deity and, afterwards, eat all the food at the shrine. Each woman ties a yellow thread around the wrist of the pregnant woman and the main worshipper puts on the black sari. This worship when performed by an expecting mother, is believed to protect her from disease.¹⁹

Similarly blood sacrifice is offered to propitiate another deity who wards off evil influences during the mother and child's period of confinement.

As for *Pechayi*,²⁰ a chicken is sacrificed thirty days after childbirth. The sacrifice must be offered by noon or else after five in the evening. Together with the chicken sacrifice, such items as dry fish, betel leaves, eggs, black cigars and fruits are offered to the deity. As a rule, only those with grandchildren can perform the sacrifice to *Pechayi*. She grants fertility vicariously to have grandchildren.²¹

Redemptive motif

The notion of redemption conveys yet another dimension to the understanding of blood sacrifice. A priest in a wayside shrine of a suburban area narrated the following:

Sacrifice is *parikaram*, remedy, doing away, abolition. It is performed to secure personal goodness, *punniyam*, and peace for the soul, *atma shanti*, by abolishing present and past sins, *pavam*. Blood sacrifice is offered to *Madurai Kali*, a female version of *Kali*, to redeem our sins from the present life and for good life after rebirth, *marupirappu*. This is called sacrifice for sins and evil influences, *pava dosha pali*. A goat is offered as a sacrifice to this deity. Blood sacrifice for past and present sins and evil influences, *pava dosham pali*, is done in accordance with the devotees' caste, *jati*, duties and obligations. In this case, the devotees are of low caste status. During the *Aadi-thiruvilla*, (festival that falls in the Hindu months of July–August) which is celebrated for the three consecutive days, blood sacrifice is offered to gain grace, *arul*, and deliverance from fate, *vidhi*, and deeds, *karma*, in this life.²²

The term *parikaram*, which implies a redemptive principle, correlates with the idea of salvation and deeds, *karma*, and duty, *dharma*, within the ritual of blood sacrifice. For example, *pava dosham pali*, sacrifice as sin offering,

denotes the act of *parikaram*, doing away with sin. Again, caste consciousness that embraces the belief in *karma* is being exploited in the context of folk Hinduism.

The doctrine of justification and building bridges

According to the biblical-theological understanding the term “justification” is God’s divine act of declaring sinful human beings as righteous. Thus, justification is God’s redemptive work in Christ. The doctrine of justification by faith in Lutheran theology²³ affirms that it is God who justifies people in acts of grace by means of faith that he himself gives them. Grace gives, and faith gratefully receives. Faith must itself be seen as a gracious gift of God. Christ bestows his righteousness upon the believer, and the believer’s sin is transferred to Christ. Therefore, justification involves a change in the individual’s status before God, rather than a fundamental change in the individual’s nature. In other words, the individual believer is *simul iustus et peccator*. A significant understanding of the Lutheran doctrine of justification is the idea of the “alien righteousness of Christ.”²⁴ This idea emphasizes that the righteousness gained by believers in justification is not part of their being but something that is and remains external. Lutheran teaching on the doctrine of justification stresses that justifying righteousness is something God works “outside” and “not within” believers. It is the development of this idea of an “external” or “alien righteousness” that led to the establishment of forensic justification in Lutheran theology. This idea was fully developed by Melanchthon in the Apology.²⁵

The three phrases in justification

In the Apology the *sola*, meaning “alone” or “only,” is used in a wider context and is best represented synonymously with the three phrases “by grace alone,” “for Christ’s sake” and “through faith.”²⁶ The phrase *sola gratia* speaks of the objective element in justification which is “freely” given by God ruling out human effort and works. The phrase *propter Christum* corresponds to the objective element in justification and shows the basis of God’s freely given grace that is related to Christ’s vicarious atonement and saving work for the sinners. The content of the phrase *propter Christum* in the Apology is pre-

sented through terms such as “propitiator,” “mediator,” “redeemer,” “sacrifice,” etc., with other connected emphases on Jesus Christ’s saving work. The phrase *sola fide* emphasizes the subjective element of justification, inextricably linked to the entire work and person of Christ (objective justification), by which the relationship between God and sinner is established. Therefore, justification by or through faith alone is understood to mean that even the faith, through which sinners receive Christ, is God’s saving merit (gift) and does not involve the subjective merits of the sinners.

The significance of justification for the communication of the gospel

At the center of the doctrine of justification stand the person and work of Christ. The Apology describes exhaustively what the “benefits of Christ” are. They relate primarily to the salvation of humankind which is to be proclaimed in Christ’s name. The essence of this proclamation is the gospel. The gospel’s central message is that God offers sinners salvation as a gift through Jesus’ death and resurrection. This message is the heart of the doctrine of justification as described in the Apology. It is this message that makes the doctrine of justification the gospel. It declares that in Christ God has established a new relationship between God and sinners and that the life of faith stands or falls with the knowledge of this decisive action on the part of God. It is also based on the knowledge that the Christian church takes its stand against a disbelieving world and proclaims the gospel. This confessional doctrine gives life to the church’s preaching and teaching, and impels the church to evangelize people for Christ by proclaiming to them what Christ has done for them and how they make this sacrifice their own.

While we need not apologize for the missiological premise of Christianity, “cross-religious” exercises do not constitute attempts to convert since conversion is God’s prerogative and not purely a human endeavor. What one can hope for is by “building bridges” to allow for a better understanding of one another and an opportunity to make an informed decision about Jesus Christ. The doctrine of justification is the formula that attempts to explain the way of salvation. Evidently, such a response may include acceptance, indifference or rejection. Both the nature and purpose of the doctrine of justification provide the confessional answer to the crucial issues raised by adherents of folk Hinduism in Peninsular Malaysia. The content of the doctrine of justification is the meritorious work of Christ on the cross. The Apology con-

tends that the believer is justified not by good works (such as rituals) but on the basis of the completed redeeming, sin-atonement work of Christ. Jesus Christ is the final sacrifice and is the God appointed way to salvation. Thus, the doctrine of justification offers a complete message by which to communicate the work of Christ to those practicing folk Hinduism in Peninsular Malaysia. Theological debate on this is part of the church's corporate heritage, and the doctrine provides ready means for correction and clarification. To meet on the bridge with a Hindu anticipates both agreements and disagreements in language, symbols, perceptions and conceptualizations. Dissimilarities are not necessarily barriers between the doctrine of justification and the practice of blood sacrifice, and similarities do not mean assimilation, but both are the building blocks of the bridge. A bridge acknowledges the existence of a river which is a boundary, and from which people on both banks draw water for their spiritual sustenance. Therefore, it is fitting that the conversation on the bridge revolves around why each person is on the other side. In Christian parlance, this is the opportunity to communicate the gospel. One cannot escape the fact that it is often not that simple. In Peninsular Malaysia, as in many other parts of Asia, the bridge has become rather politicized. It is like finding an impartial jury for a case which has already faced a media trial and where a verdict has already been passed.

Implications of communicating the gospel

Christians view the doctrine of justification as the guideline or paradigm that enables people to focus on the gospel of Jesus Christ. It provides the paradigm for the effective proclamation of the gospel and the Christian faith in relation to non-Christian religions and concepts. In order to communicate the gospel effectively to people of other religions it is crucial that we understand and grapple with the truths, hopes, meanings and salvation concepts present within these other religious paths. Based on the Hindu understanding of tolerance, the Hindus in Peninsular Malaysia have allowed or permitted Christian evangelistic work among themselves. Hindus, however, also believe that conversion to the Christian faith "de-culturalizes" a Hindu, who in the process is not only Christianized but also Westernized. It is heartening to note that there is now a movement by people to return to Indian culture while remaining Christian. The communication of the gospel requires acceptance or rejection by the people. Conversion, while it is related to the heart,

mind, soul and body of the person, need not be hindered because of its sociological implications. Conversion is an inevitable step in communicating the gospel effectively to those adhering to folk Hinduism.

The issue of conversion was addressed in a dialogue between church leaders and some prominent Hindu leaders in Peninsular Malaysia in 1991. The Hindu leaders pointed out that Hindus have no objection to general preaching but were upset with preaching the gospel in ways that had conversion in view at marriage services, funerals, public gatherings and house to house meetings.²⁷ The Hindus wanted the Christians to answer such questions as, Is the main goal of Christians the conversion of non-Christians to Christianity? Do Christian groups condemn other religions? What solutions do established Christians propose to the issue of conversion? The Christian leaders stated that only fanatics in certain sectarian churches propagated the gospel by unethical methods and apologized for such occurrences. At the same time, they affirmed that when conversion occurs it is a matter of God's activity and not that of a preacher. The consensus reached was that conversion belongs to religious freedom and any person is free to change his or her belief. Conversion, however, should take place in a setting that is free of deception, condemnation, ridicule of another's religion, disrespect for religious values and cultural insensitivity. It was also agreed that Christians should have the freedom to preach the gospel and encourage love and peace when encountering people of other faiths.

From this dialogue between Christians and Hindus one can sense the growing hostility against Christianity. Hindus in Peninsular Malaysia are raising objections to "preaching" or "communicating the gospel." Despite this, the Hindus indicated no particular critique of the traditional churches' methods of gospel communication. Apparently, the Hindus are not threatened by the mainline denominational churches but rather by the rapidly growing sectarian churches. This indicates the strength of the local traditional congregations and the respect they have gained among the people of other faiths. Seventy percent of the Indian churches' congregations in Peninsular Malaysia are in rural areas and thirty percent in urban centers. Indian based Christian churches are certainly in an appropriate position to communicate the gospel to Indian Hindus in their own language and with religious sensitivity. The practice of blood sacrifice as a viable bridge for communicating the gospel may add another dimension to the existing mission strategies of the Indian based Christian churches, which have been successful in rural and urban settings.

Conclusion

Most Christians in Peninsular Malaysia are ill equipped to deal with Hindus, both theologically and practically. There are insufficient facilities for training. Having neither sufficient knowledge nor skill to address the gospel holistically when encountering Hindus, local theological seminaries are ill equipped to provide adequate resources to meet the challenges of Hinduism in Peninsular Malaysia. Moreover, local congregations are not providing adequate training to equip laypersons to communicate the gospel meaningfully. From the perspective of communicating the gospel to Hindus through evangelistic work by local congregations, a number of identifiable trends can be delineated.

Essentially, they can be summarized as follows:

- *Importance of mission:* Churches do not see the importance of mission to the Hindus. They claimed that they do not know how to reach out to them. Therefore, it is crucial that these congregations reinstate the nature and purpose of mission to their neighbors, especially the Hindu community.
- *Approach to evangelism:* Churches need to rethink their fundamental approach in evangelism to Hindus. The present myth is that Hindus are familiar with the concepts of the Christian faith. Hence, it is significant that Christians seek to understand the worldviews and terminology of Hindus before reaching out to them.
- *Sensitivity:* Christians insensitively condemn Hindu beliefs and practices, often identifying them as “idol worshippers” and claiming that “all their doings are evil.” This notion cuts off any contact with Hindus. It is suggested that Christians be taught the art of developing informal friendships even before communicating the gospel. To improve Hindu-Christian relations for ongoing evangelistic work among Hindus, Christians need to inculcate tolerance and understanding.
- *Contextualization:* The traditional missionary way of presenting the gospel may not be the most suitable approach to evangelistic work among Hindus, as it often does not deal with the context or practices of the local people. Therefore, Christians in local congregations need to dis-

cover and apply contemporary, contextualized approaches that are appropriate for the Malaysian situation.

- *Ethnicity*: In Peninsular Malaysia, ethnic polarization has resulted in an increasing awareness and identification with ethnicity. As Tamils (Hindus and Christians) constitute the bulk of the Indian population, this emphasis on ethnicity has consequently led to a stress on Tamil consciousness and identity. While Christian congregations do not have to stress Tamil consciousness and identity based on communal factors, they must not isolate themselves from the rest of the Malaysian Indian community. Christian congregations ought to demonstrate and assert some form of Tamil identity and consciousness in order to be part of the Malaysian Indian community. Within the context of such pursuits, the local congregations in urban and rural areas will be able to attract Tamil Hindus in their midst. One way is to communicate the gospel in Tamil. This would provide a forum for the increasing expression of Tamil consciousness and identity. Furthermore, local congregations often confuse issues relating to culture and religion. They are unable to relate or communicate the gospel using Indian elements. It is evident that Christians in local congregations need to widen their knowledge of Tamil culture and spiritualities for the purpose of communicating the gospel.
- *Deliverance ministry*: Some local congregations profess that it does not help to communicate the gospel by preaching alone. They feel that the deliverance ministry must be carried out among those practicing folk Hinduism instead. A small number of Christians in local congregations use the deliverance ministry as a means of bringing Hindus to the Christian faith. However, the danger lies in deliverance done publicly, especially when the onlookers are other Hindus. For example, some Christians in one of the churches were casting out evil spirits that possessed some Hindus. The deliverance was done in the church compound with the whole Hindu community watching the act. In the process of the deliverance, phrases such as “in the name of Jesus, I command you, *Kali*, to leave this person!” or “in the name of Jesus, I command you, *Muniandi*, to leave this person!” The Hindus who were watching the whole ordeal were offended because they venerated these deities as their family deities, *kulatheivam*. The tension between the Christians

of this local church and the local Hindu community further escalated and seriously strained relationships between them. Although the deliverance ministry may pave the way for communicating the gospel, it must not be done if there are Hindu spectators. The local congregations must discern the religious sensitivities of the Hindus before dealing with issues of spiritual welfare.

Notes

¹ Gailyn Van Rhee, "Introduction to Folk Religions," <http://missiology.org/folkreligion/introduction.htm>, 17 August 2004.

² "Folk Religions," in John Bowker (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 350.

³ *Sangili Karuppan*, a male deified warrior.

⁴ *Mathurai-viran*, a male deified folk hero of Madurai, South India.

⁵ *Muniswaran*, a lesser male deity. The name means godlike ascetic.

⁶ *Idumban*, a deified male hero. This deity receives blood sacrifice vicariously from other deities.

⁷ As in the case of *Muniswaran*, *Kali*, *Muniandy*, *Angalamman*, a lesser female deity that receives pigs as sacrifice *Mathurai-viran*, *Pechayi*, *Kaliyamman*, *Sudukatukali*, *Idumban*, *Kathumathurai*, *Bathrakali*, *Nagavalliamman*, *Samundiswari*, *Karuppan*, *Datho*, *Nagamand Bairavar*, the deified dog companion of certain lesser deities.

⁸ The *Datho* has numerous names but three among them are prevalent in the temples and shrines of folk Hinduism: *Datho Hitam*, black, *Datho Panglima Garang*, a ferocious general and *Datho Perwira*, warrior. Other personifications of the *Datho* include the following: *Datho Harimau*, tiger, which would usually reside in the jungle; *Datho Helang*, eagle, which would reside in mountainous areas; *Datho Musang*, wild cat, which would live in caves; and *Datho Siam*, originated from Thailand, which would appear in reddish attire and eat pomegranates (*buah delima* in Malay or *mathulampalam* in Tamil). *Datho Langsia*, boastful and arrogant, is the chief and said to be 250 years old. It has two horns protruding from its head.

⁹ Abu Saim Bin Daud, personal interview by the author, 15 February 1998. Mr Daud is a Malay *bomoh*, a practitioner of Malay magic and occult.

¹⁰ See R. J. Wilkinson, "Papers on Malay Customs and Beliefs," in *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* vol. 30, part 4, no. 180 (November 1957), pp. 10–16.

¹¹ See Kirk Michael Endicott, *An Analysis of Malay Magic* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 22–23; 28–34.

¹² Packianathan, personal interview by the author, Johor Baru, 13 August 1998. Mr Pakianathan was a priest and was keeping a *Datho* for twenty-five years before becoming a Christian.

¹³ *Kali*, a female lesser deity who is believed to be the manifestation of *Siva* to vanquish evil. She is personified in various forms.

¹⁴ Eye witness account, Cameron Highlands, Pahang, 15 January 2002

¹⁵ *Durga*, a personification of *Kali*, the consort of *Siva*.

¹⁶ *Bumadevi*, a vedic goddess of earth and fertility.

¹⁷ A. Nathan, personal interview by the author, Jalan Raja Muda, Kuala Lumpur, 13 September 1997.

¹⁸ *Kateri*, a malignant spirit of ferocious nature.

¹⁹ Ravindra K. Jain, *South Indians on the Plantation Frontier in Malay* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya, 1970), p. 138.

²⁰ *Pechayi*, a female spirit revered as a deity that grants boons to women who desire children or protection during childbirth. Temporary crude shrines are made for her whenever her services are needed.

²¹ Karupaiyee, personal interview by the author, Sentul, Kuala Lumpur, 10 June 1992.

²² Sinnathamby, personal interview by the author, Cheras, Kuala Lumpur, 1 March 1998.

²³ Alister E. McGrath, *Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), p. 52.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 55–56.

²⁵ Lowell C. Green, *How Melancthon Helped Luther Discover the Gospel* (Fallbrook, CA: Verdict Publications, 1980), p. 226.

²⁶ Theodore G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), pp. 97 ff.

²⁷ “An Extraordinary Meeting to Discuss Conversion,” cited in *Minutes of Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism (MCCBCHS)* 6 February 1991, Cardijn House, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Christ and the Ancestors in African Christian Theology

Sylvester B. Kahakwa

Introduction: seeking a suitable christological model

In this essay an attempt will be made to find a theological model with which to integrate Jesus Christ more fully into people's way of life. This demands applying an African christological model that can reflect on the meaning and significance of Jesus in an African cultural context, and involves an interpretation and understanding of Jesus that is in accordance with the African worldview. The underlying assumption is that we cannot understand Jesus' true face unless we know him from our own context and experience. Hence, "Africans must experience Christ in their own communities [and] cultural traditions, without betraying biblical witness of him."¹ Pobee regards such an approach as a way of reducing the perception of Jesus' strangeness prevailing among most converts.²

Ancestors from the Christian missionary perspective

Throughout history the gospel has been propagated in cultural terms often alien to the people expected to respond positively to it. Such an approach led to most missionaries forbidding or undermining African beliefs and practices on the grounds that they were against the Christian faith.³ As a consequence, converts were instructed to renounce spirits and ancestral beliefs. Bediako describes this attitude as the complete elimination of tribal religion, on the assertion that giving the new implies taking away the old. The attitude poses the question, If the old is taken away, to whom is the new given?⁴ It resulted not only in a vacuum in propagating the gospel, but also to presenting it in a way that did not address or provide appropriate answers to people's questions.

For the missionaries the ancestors were Babylonian gods. Nonetheless, the fight against them was not successful and converts continued to commu-

nicate with their ancestors, at least in secret. This means that “African converts received the Christian message as it was delivered to them, and thereafter subjectively assimilated it in their own religious ancestral beliefs and practices.”⁵ Bishop Sundkler, quoting a Zulu theological student, describes this attitude and its consequence and suggests a solution.

Our first missionaries missed the gate. They would have won many people by transforming the old belief into the new and by changing the way of approaching the Almighty. The deceased [ancestors] would have been compared to the angels of God which are never worshipped but just praised as God’s messengers. Something must be done [to establish contact] between the old belief and Christianity, [which] are the key to enter the African door and the African’s heart.⁶

In response to this challenge, some theologians embarked on a positive approach to the ancestors, wanting to understand their nature and contribution to Christianity.

The necessity of an ancestral worldview: toward a definition of ancestors

The importance of the belief in ancestors for Christianity can be comprehended in light of Bediako’s questions, Can a system of life which has been lived for many centuries be entirely worthless? Or, does it contain elements of divine knowledge that might shed light on the understanding of the Christian faith? He maintains that we cannot understand the nature of the Christian faith in an African context if we ignore the role and impact of the tribal religion which incorporates the belief in the Deity and ancestors as its key aspects.⁷

The question has been raised as to whether the term ancestor properly expresses the African religious experience of the departed relatives. For some theologians the term ancestor does not appropriately express the nature and background of African cultural religious experience either of the past or the present, and it should therefore be replaced by another term. Other theologians maintain that the term ancestor has contributed considerably to appropriately describing primal cultural religious beliefs and practices. They suggest that it would be unwise to reject or abandon this term simply because it is inaccurate.⁸ Instead, it

would be used as the starting point for seeking a more appropriate term. Mbiti's term, the "living dead,"⁹ and Kahakwa's term, *abazaire abahumwire*, parents who are resting,¹⁰ are attempts to seek a more suitable term, not only to replace the term ancestor, but also to depict and describe adequately tribal religious belief from the African ancestral perspective. However, resting does not mean being inactive or unconcerned. Rather, it describes a special state of one's completion or graduation of earthly life, a mandate for ongoing involvement and care of one's descendants. This concept could be viewed in light of the biblical portrayal, where resting does not mean sitting idle. Instead, it is viewing and confirming the work that has been done (Gen 2:1–3).

The state of *abazaire abahumwire*, one's completion or graduation, is well expressed in the Nyakyusa's¹¹ single term model, *unsyuka* (singular) and *abasyuka* (plural), according to which the verb *ukusyuka* means *bata na ba juba*, parents—fathers and mothers—who have come back from death or those who have risen from death, hence the resurrected ones.¹² This is reported by Gwakisa who has done research on ancestors among the Nyakyusa people in the southern highlands of Tanzania. For the Nyakyusa, resting is achieved after being resurrected. Those concerned are empowered not only to maintain their earthly status, role and profile, but also to function as intermediaries between descendants and the Deity, *Kyala*.¹³ The notion of resurrection or being resurrected depicts a Nyankyusa-African paradigm shift in the understanding of the theology of ancestors.

For those who have converted to the Christian faith, the *abasyuka* model verifies and confirms the Christian belief in resurrection. The Christian concept of resurrection is the same as *ukusyuka*. Therefore, on their way to Emmaus, the disciples met, walked and ate with Jesus (Lk 24:13–35), the *Unsyuka*. Here, Jesus is looked upon as the proto-*unsyuka*, the one who has resurrected, who is the hero among and above all *abasyuka*. In addition, the *abasyuka* model supports the Christian belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ as an event that has actually taken place.¹⁴

Another ancestral parental model exists among the Chagga and Pare of northern Tanzania who invoke and address their departed relatives as *wameku wakacha*, dignified parents of a long time ago, and *verongole*, parents who have gone before, and who are believed to have acquired supernatural powers.¹⁵ The models of the living dead, *abazaire abahumwire*, *abasyuka*, *wameku wakacha* and *verongole* depict the notion that descendants still remember the former status and roles of departed relatives. Hence, they are still parents and as such leaders

of the family; they still bear titles such as grandfather or grandmother, father, mother, uncle or aunt,¹⁶ as they continue to play their earthly roles among their descendants with more power than they used to have while on earth. Trompf used a different term to describe the state of departed relatives. He says, “our ancestors [...] are not dead. They are asleep, literally.”¹⁷ While Haya and Nyakyusa used a more active phrase, *abazaire abahumwire* and *abasyuka*, people who have risen.¹⁸ Trompf uses a less active phrase, “ancestors who are resting/sleeping.” The difference between “parents who are resting” and “parents who have been resurrected” is clear: resting while sleeping, resting while awake, and resting after being resurrected. The latter two imply that the ancestors are seen as active agents. They can continue to be involved in the affairs of their descendants living on earth.¹⁹ Most Haya²⁰ and Nyakyusa, as well as other Africans, claim that their departed parents never sleep as they are watching over them all the time. It involves guiding their descendants to “honor God and obey whatever they tell them to do in order to live a good moral life.”²¹ Rwehumbiza has applied the terms paternal and maternal to describe the Haya-African understanding of departed relatives, from the *abazaire abahumwire* perspective.

I would define ancestors as those deceased members of both the paternal and maternal side who ontologically exercised either a vertical or a horizontal vital influence while living on earth and still maintain the same vital influence, though now spiritual, on the living offspring, regardless whether they had children or not.²²

The terms *abazaire abahumwire*, *abasyuka*, *wameku wakacha* and *verongole* describe the nature of the relationship between the living (descendants) and the departed (ancestors) better than the term ancestor, as they refer to a continuous communion. All terms are similar to Temple and Mulago’s terms, father of men,²³ Nyamiti’s term, the one who has joined the company of the living dead,²⁴ and Mbiti’s term, the living dead.²⁵ All terms, particularly *abazaire abahumwire* and *abasyuka*, describe the concepts of parenthood and departed relatives from past and present perspectives. All clarify the state, status and role of the departed relatives more clearly than the term the living dead, which is not only a provisional, but also a general and limited term (exists for four generations and thereafter the living dead becomes a wondering spirit of less concern).²⁶ Thus, they are essential for a correct understanding of ancestors and for seeking a suitable christological model in Africa.

Ancestral spirits: role and contribution

The question of ancestors and their contribution raises other questions: If African Religion and Christianity are not opposed to one another, what are the theological implications?²⁷ Is the belief in spirits acceptable from a Christian point of view? For most scholars, missionaries and theologians, especially in the past, all spirits are agents of Satan and should therefore be eradicated as quickly as possible.²⁸ Such a negative attitude is questionable, since the belief in spirits and ancestors has also been observed in monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. They, however, do not worship them.²⁹ Most adherents of African Religion, when asked whether they worship spirits or ancestors and God together, replied, “We worship only God who is powerful and provides for our needs.”³⁰ The answer gives rise to the question of whether or not Africans worship or venerate their ancestors. Even the offerings and tokens have been widely misunderstood by most scholars and missionaries. Fortunately, after intensive research, this misconception has been corrected by African theologians for whom the continuous relationship with departed relatives and tokens given to them are merely a symbolic remembrance and therefore expression of their honor and respect.³¹ It demonstrates “family and clan continuity, solidarity, security and [...] link between them and God.”³²

Moreover, most African theologians further assert that the ancestors contributed towards an understanding and worshipping of God, as well as the inception of Christianity. Thus, they were among the factors contributing to the conversion to Christianity. In some cases, their utterances (through a medium and dreams) contributed to a greater understanding of God. It implies that spirits and ancestral beliefs created an arena for the Africans’ apprehensiveness toward Christianity.³³ In his doctoral dissertation, Pastor Bahendwa, a convert, reports:

I remember when the spirit of *Wamara* (*Wamara* is the greatest male spirit among the nineteen Haya-Nyambo’s spirits of different genders) possessed my uncle Kaibanda, my father asked him to prevent the occurrence of death in our clan. He replied: “I am not [the Deity] the Creator of heaven and earth. I was a human being, now I am dead therefore I am not able to prevent the occurrence of death. The decision over life and death belongs to [the Deity] alone.” I was surprised and from that time on I started to further perceive and experience the Almighty God.³⁴

A similar incident is also reported in the New Testament where the utterances of spirits were among the divine signs for identifying Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah and the Son of God. Luke reports, “When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, ‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me’” (Lk 8:28). The spirit’s statement has been regarded as a doctrinal affirmation of God’s nature and role. Since human beings are incapable of having direct contact with God, communication with God through a benevolent spirit would be useful. In his doctoral thesis Lutahoire asserts,

Man [sic] is so small that it is difficult for him to approach the Almighty directly. But man can do so by way of those who are already close to Him and capable of seeing Him [...]. Because God is the Spirit and because the spirits can be contacted by specialists (diviners, medicine persons, doctors and others who have the spiritual virtues in them or are trained in demonology), communication with the spirits is important.³⁵

Neglecting this reality has led to misunderstanding the nature and positive role of spirits and ancestors. Their contribution toward an inception of Christianity raises the question of how far the church could apply it in order to understand the Christian faith, morality and spirituality.³⁶ Without a concern for and the contribution of ancestors “the story of Christianity in Africa at the close of nineteenth century would be very different.”³⁷ Without it, Christian theology would have faced a hard time to justify its doctrinal beliefs. Thus, the ancestral contribution is greatly needed, not only for African Religion but also for the church.

A suitable christological model

The need for a christological model rooted in the African context has been affirmed by most African theologians. Current mission christology is limited and unsuitable as it does not depict and present Jesus Christ appropriately and Jesus is therefore either badly or not at all understood. Jesus is presented in a way that has no relevance to the African context and ignores such questions as, Who is Jesus Christ for you as an African? What do African Religion and culture say about him?³⁸ Taylor strongly argues for this type of christology as well as suggesting how it could have been presented:

Christ has been presented as the answer to the questions a white man [sic] would ask, the solution to the needs a Westerner would feel [...]. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would He look like? If he came into the world of African cosmology to redeem man [sic] as Africans understand him, would he be recognizable to the rest of the church universal? And if Africa offered him the praises and petitions of her total, uninhibited humanity, would they be accepted? ³⁹

On being an ancestor: a christological question

In light of Taylor's assertion I shall attempt to address the questions, What is the identity and significance of Jesus Christ in Africa? Who is he for Africans and where is he to be found in Africa today?⁴⁰ How does he reveal himself in their beliefs? Until today little effort has been made to seek answers to these questions.

Answers to these questions should take into account the fact that "African Christians are in a position to express in their own context and language what Christ is and what he means to them."⁴¹

The Christian doctrine of incarnation provides an excellent basis; God is no longer a distant God or a hidden reality as he comes to humanity through his Son, speaking a language comprehensible to all. Hence African theologians are called to "consider the points of contact between African Religion and Christianity."⁴²

At the first Consultation of African Theologies held at Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1965, African theologians attempted to establish and develop a truly African christology. They resolved that,

We recognize the radical quality of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, and yet it is because of this revelation that we can discern what is truly of God in our pre-Christian heritage. This knowledge of God is not discontinuous with our people's previous traditional knowledge of him.⁴³

Their resolution has been regarded as being the starting point for incarnating Jesus Christ and Christian theology in the African context. Responding to this resolution, some African theologians have been applying an ancestral model for describing and presenting Jesus Christ in an African context. Bujo explains its theological justification.

When we say that we want to use the concept of ancestor as the basis of christology, we refer to God-fearing forefathers, who exercise a good influence on their descendants by showing how the vital force or life is, and how it could be lived according to God's wishes.⁴⁴

It could involve addressing the question of whether Africans knew of the reality of Christ before the advent of Christianity.

Was Christ known in African Religion before Christianity?

The question whether or not Christ was known in African Religion entails the question, Was Jesus Christ present or absent among Africans? Those who decide to follow an historical approach should take into account Schubert Ogden's view. In his book, *The Point of Christology*, he argues that "christology should not be based on the historical Jesus because [he is] a representative of a reality larger than himself."⁴⁵ Bediako, like Walls,⁴⁶ applies biblical texts to justify this hypothesis. The true children of Abraham are those who put their faith in Jesus Christ in the same way that Abraham trusted God (Rom 4:11–12). He maintains that according to the biblical history and witness, Africans are not merely the natural children of God, but "adoptive" ones or what he describes as the *Abrahamic* link. He maintains that Jesus Christ, as the Word of God, *logos*, has from the beginning been extant among them (Jn 1:1–5). Accordingly, Jesus has been the source of their life and illuminator of their path regardless of the fact that like people everywhere, they failed to understand his true face. Accordingly, Bahemuka argues that the physical presence of Jesus of Nazareth may or may not have been known in traditional Africa (although he stayed in Egypt in early life, cf. Mt 2:13–23). But, Christ as humanity's liberating force was and is present in various manifestations of African culture: in myths, rituals, invocations, beliefs, symbols, art and language. He concludes that it is the task of African theologians to uncover or interpret these manifestations in light of the New Testament witness and that at this stage, the "hidden" Christ would emerge in glory, to further interact with his people.⁴⁷

African Religion did not give birth to Jesus nor did it pronounce his name; Jesus is an historical reality of the New Testament. The absence of the name Jesus does not mean the absence of Jesus. He is present through the presence of God. Pobee maintains that he is the unnamed Christ, that is, unknown but present as he

works through the insights and spiritual aspirations that people have developed concerning God, provided that these insights do not contradict God's revelation as revealed in the New Testament. Thus, like Bediako, he argues that Jesus would not be regarded as a stranger, since he is incorporated into the African way of life and belief. If we believe that one and the same God is known in the Bible as in African Religion, then it is legitimate to raise the question, Who is Jesus in African Religion? This presupposes that we cannot talk about God and leave out Jesus Christ, unless we contradict ourselves.⁴⁸ Pobee defends this thesis by raising such questions as, If the Son is one with the Father, and if the Father has revealed Himself to Africans, then why should the same Africans not discover Christ in their acts of faith?⁴⁹ According to John 14:8–11, seeing the Father is seeing the Son. Can we say that there where people have recognized God in African Religion, they have not only seen and recognized him as the Father, but also Jesus Christ his Son? Pobee's hypothesis is applicable to African Religion where the first article of faith refers to the Deity who is the Creator. How does Jesus Christ fit into this fundamental affirmation of the Creator? Referring to the biblical witness he points out that the "[...] followers of African Religion are in a real sense walking the way of the Lord Jesus Christ, who in turn is walking with them, but yet he remains hidden from them, revealing only flashes of himself."⁵⁰

The claim that Africans knew of Jesus Christ even prior to the Christianization of the continent, challenges African theologians to respond to the assertion that "... the development of local theologies depends as much on finding Christ already active in the culture as it does on bringing [him] to the culture."⁵¹ It has a biblical mandate. "If we really believe that the divine *logos*, who lightens every man [sic] has shone in the souls of Africans, we shall endeavor to trace and find him."⁵² For Twesigye, this is possible since Christ, who is *logos* and God, is efficaciously omnipresent and universally active, teaching and leading human beings everywhere.⁵³ Accordingly, those who confess Jesus Christ, even though they are not in contact with his history and tradition, still receive the Spirit and effect of his mystery in their lives and consciousness.⁵⁴ Does such an understanding presuppose inculturation?

An African christology: an example of inculturation

Inculturation means transmitting a message into a specific context and having it understood in terms of the culture of that context. Hence, inculturation has been

defined as a process of transferring faith from one culture to another. Such an approach has been responded to in different ways. Some lay African converts, clergy and theologians of different denominations are negative toward it and therefore reluctant to apply it, asserting that it is a betrayal of the authentic Christian faith as was communicated to them by mission Christianity.⁵⁵

Other African converts have reacted positively regarding it as being of prime importance. It demands a serious study of people's local cultures, focusing on discovering fundamental elements, in this case christology. We need to examine whether certain elements of African Religion need substitutes, whether they are to be rejected, or whether they can be incorporated or applied with minor or no changes. This is based on the assumption that inculturation gives access to Indigenous images that would contribute not only to the building up of genuinely African theology, but also an understanding of Christ according to people's idiom.⁵⁶ Hence, inculturation has been regarded as an honest and serious attempt to make Christ and the gospel fully comprehensible for peoples of every culture. It entails enabling Christianity to enter the very blood and veins of African converts, resulting in recovering their own face of Jesus Christ.

An inculturated African interpretation of christology has proceeded in two theological directions, namely Scripture (traditional approach) and cultural reality (contemporary approach). The former aims at constructing an African christology from the perspective of the biblical witness and the portrayal of Jesus Christ. It has been identified as christology from above, that is, the process of God becoming human. The point of departure for theologians of this school is the Scripture from which African christological themes arise. The latter, which deals with the human existence of Jesus, the fullness and completeness of his humanity of which the climax is the resurrection, has been identified as a christology from below. Here, African cultural reality provides the starting point as it seeks to address the question of how the African worldview can enlighten the mystery of Christ.⁵⁷ It attempts to answer the questions, Who is this man Jesus? Where do we encounter him?⁵⁸ This approach has been identified as a functional analogy, since it seeks to describe Jesus' redemptive work in terms of African thought categories. It has been applied extensively and most christologists in Africa belong to this school. Their mandate has roots in the assertion that "the African defines his [sic] own situation, which in turn can lead him [sic] to the discovery of Christ."⁵⁹

Pobee maintains that an African understanding of Jesus Christ, in this case the idea of Christ as an ancestor, is not only suitable for but also more

meaningful to Africans than the mission christologies. Since christology holds a central place in Christian theology⁶⁰ any christological model found, applied and interpreted should portray the centrality of Jesus Christ. Hence, “theology falls or stands on how it understands, translates and interprets Jesus Christ, at a given time, place and human situation.”⁶¹

Indigenization of a Trinitarian model

By applying the inculturation model, some African theologians have attempted to address the question of the nature, role, significance and relationship between Christ and the ancestors. The ancestors remain a model for understanding God and Christ according to the Christian experience, and therefore cannot rival Christ Jesus. This entails a Trinitarian understanding of God, according to a threefold perception of the Deity and the doctrine of the Trinity.

The Deity: father ancestor

Some African theologians such as Nyamiti have applied the term father to develop an understanding of God in accordance with the ancestral approach. Accordingly, Africans never question the importance and authenticity of the term father as a model for describing the Deity.⁶² In his book, *The Akan Doctrine of God*,⁶³ Danquah maintains that, in Africa, God is perceived as the great ancestor, the source of all, including all human ancestors. He is perceived as the proto-ancestor or ancestor *par excellence*.⁶⁴ For Bujo, the concept of proto-ancestor ensures not only an African understanding of God but also the unity of the past, present and future communities of descendants and departed relatives.⁶⁵ Such past ancestral experience of God, is not only suitable for describing the African perception and experience of the Deity, but also the Christian concept of God who has always been identified as Jesus Christ's father. Since most Africans perceive and experience the fatherhood of the Deity from an ancestral perspective, they address and invoke him as father ancestor. An ancestral model of God could be applied to identify both experiences of God that is, African Religion's and Christianity's, of which the former paved the way for understanding the Christian faith

The Son: the brother ancestor

The ancestorship of Christ has roots in the ancestorship of God. It is the question regarding the relationship between the Father and the Son, through which Jesus Christ became our ancestor. While the Father's ancestorship is parental, the Son's is brotherly. Harry Sawyerr uses the terms elder brother and first born to describe Christ's ancestorship.⁶⁶ He regards them as a more suitable biblical portrayal of Jesus in the African context.

For Nyamiti, Christ as an ancestor has become our archetypal model. He is superior to all African ancestors and spiritual beings.⁶⁷ From the brother ancestor perspective Christ's ancestorship entails a christology both from above and from below. While the former starts from incarnation, redemption and the Trinity, the latter starts from Christ's humanity, whereby his vicarious death on the cross and resurrection justify this departure. God's deed determines his uniqueness and superiority. Through the resurrection Jesus received new life, which is neither identified with human existence on earth nor with the ancestral mode of life. Thus, he attained maturity through his death and resurrection, which led to the fullness of his ancestorship. Hence, Christ's death is crucial for an African interpretation of his ancestorship. Nyamiti further maintains that while the father's ancestorship to the *logos* is immanent, eternal and necessary, Christ's to us is essentially economic and bestowed on us.⁶⁸

Twesigye and Kahakwa regard Christ, the brother ancestor, as *Kazoba*, the illuminator, who illuminates human beings and other creatures, hence he is eternal light or *logos* that enlightens and guides all of humanity.⁶⁹

Accordingly, for Pobee, Christ is the great ancestor (*nana* in Akan) who has the power and authority to judge, reward and punish.⁷⁰ Thus, he echoes Danquah who uses the same term to identify the father ancestor. This agrees with the New Testament portrayal whereby the one who has seen the Son has also seen the Father, in this case the father ancestor (Jn 17:20–26).

Moila and Bujo, strongly maintain that Jesus is the proto-ancestor or ancestor *par excellence*.⁷¹ Most African theologians believe Christ to be more important than the natural ancestors. Therefore, he has authority not only over the living but also over all ancestors.⁷² The belief in his status reveals qualitative differences between Christ and biological ancestors. Christ's brother ancestorship was made possible through habitual grace, while ours was enabled by being adopted as sons of the father and brothers of the *logos*, God's Word in Jesus Christ.

Bujo perceives Christ as the source of life and highest model of ancestorship. On the grounds that it fits into African anthropocentrism (prominent in ancestral thinking),⁷³ Bujo believes the identification of Christ as ancestor to be more meaningful to Africans than the term *logos* or *kyrious*, Lord, or the classical term, the second person.

Bujo's perception of christological ancestorship differs slightly from Nyamiti's. While Nyamiti insists on the common biological origin of Christ and humans, Bujo takes a metaphysical view of Jesus entering human relationships. In his words,

to say that Jesus is an ancestor is not to treat him as an ancestor in any crudely biological sense. Rather, it is to regard him as an ancestor *par excellence*, and that we find in him one who begets us in a mystical and supernatural life.⁷⁴

Both approaches are relevant to an interpretation of the second person of the Trinity, as they offer different clues to understanding Jesus in ancestral Trinitarian terms.⁷⁵

Moila suggests that any valid African ancestral christological model should portray Christ as the unique ancestor, who is closer to the Deity than ordinary ancestors. In his words, "his status as the Son of God gives him a status of extraordinary ancestor, prime ancestor [or super ancestor] because he did what no human being is able to do."⁷⁶ Thus he calls for "an African contextualization of christology."⁷⁷ Moila echoes Young when he suggests that a christology from below rather than from above suits an ancestral interpretation of the Trinity.⁷⁸ He defends his thesis by arguing that leading traditional notions of the son of the Deity (like *Kgobe* and his son *Kgobeane*, or *Ruhanga* and his son *Kazoba*) of Pedi and Haya beliefs were perceived in ancestral perspectives from below.⁷⁹ He further points out that even the New Testament teaching on the unique humanity and sonship of Jesus agrees with the African belief systems. He concludes that Jesus is an elder brother ancestor who shares with all members in the African family, since he plays an ancestral mediating role.⁸⁰

The spirit: sister ancestor

The implications of the ancestral christological model is incomplete unless it is understood from the perspective of its relationship with the Spirit of God.

Here the Spirit plays a central role which has been described as sanctifying grace, necessary for a full and authentic ancestral relationship.⁸¹ Accordingly, Bediako suggests that an ancestral interpretation of christology should involve the spirit of the Deity, who was first imparted upon the ancestors. Twesigye emphasizes that for Africans this was an undeniable reality.⁸²

Defining the Christian doctrine of God along the lines of father ancestor and brother ancestor constitutes a conceptual gap. This is rooted in the fact that until today there are more theological interpretations of and explanations for God the Father and the Son (christology) than for the Spirit of God (pneumatology). This tendency is mostly inherited from the early missionaries.⁸³ Any reaction to this should be examined in light of the question, How can we identify the Spirit of God in African terminology similar to that applied to identify the Father and the Son of God? Some African theologians have started to respond to this challenge by seeking ways and means with which to bridge this gap.

Reacting to this question, Kahakwa admits that the father ancestor and brother ancestor models provide a basis from which further to seek a pneumatological model for inserting the missing link within the Christianized concept of God. He suggests that this gap can be bridged by applying an African pneumatological model, expressed in African terms, for which he suggests sister ancestor. It implies an ancestral interpretation of christology that involves the spirit of the Deity. The validity and application of a pneumatological model of sister ancestor has a basis in the Haya (northwestern Tanzania) and Nkole/Kiga (western Uganda) belief in creation, whereby the Deity, *Ruhanga*, created the first human being from clay. Thereafter his son, *Kazoba*, the illuminator, breathed the breath, which was perceived and identified as *Ntangaire* (She for Haya) or *Rugaba* (He for Nkole/Kiga),⁸⁴ who is the vital force or spirit of *Ruhanga*, into the created man, and thus brought him to life.⁸⁵

The Haya concept of the Spirit of God, *Ntangaire*, is similar to that of the Zaramo (east coast of Tanzania) who believe that a female divinity, *Nyalutanga*, who came from the earth, is the origin of life and the mother of the earth or the proto-mother of all human beings.⁸⁶ Etymologically and structurally the name *Nyalutanga* (for Zaramo) is quite similar to the name *Ntangaire* (for Haya), both of which mean the one who protects, shines or surprises.

The application and Christianization of the *Ntangaire* or sister ancestor model demands an understanding of an invocation of the Deity in a threefold form. This perception incorporates the realm of spirit power and its effects

on understanding the Deity in an African milieu. An application of it would bridge the existing gaps within the Christianized Christian concept of God along the lines of father ancestor and brother ancestor.

The Trinity: a Trinitarian/threefold model of God

Relation with the father ancestor, brother ancestor and sister ancestor

Any model applied like the father ancestor, brother ancestor and sister ancestor cannot be understood outside the framework of understanding God. Hence, it is argued that all valid christologies should be rooted in the Trinity. However, some African christologists explicitly claim the irrelevance of the Trinity for African christology. This attitude has been regarded as one of the great weaknesses of christology from an African perspective.⁸⁷

Nonetheless, most African christologists strongly assert that any christology formulated according to the African ancestral model should not be separated from the theology of the Trinity, since christology implies trinitology. Twesigye asserts that “[...] the African tradition conceives the brother ancestor or *Kazoba* as the second person of the Trinity.”⁸⁸ Therefore most African theologians maintain that those who have an interest in Christ or christology, but not in the Trinity, are interested in a false christology or a Christ who is not of the Bible.⁸⁹ They are convinced that without the Trinity, Christ would lose his personality.

To avoid formulating a defective christology, Nyamiti relates African christology or the second person of the Trinity to Jesus Christ, whereby his ancestorship was rooted in his divinity and humanity. Viewed from the perspective of his divinity, Christ’s ancestorship appears as one with his eternal divine descent. In Nyamiti’s words, “it is because the Son is generated in the Trinity that he is our brother ancestor.”⁹⁰ Nyamiti further maintains that,

Analogically speaking, one can affirm the presence of the ancestral kinship in the Trinity, [whereby] God the Father is the ancestor of the Son and the Son is the descendant of the Father. [Both] are entitled to eternal reciprocal communion in the Holy Spirit who they produce as the fruit of their mutual love.⁹¹

In a collaborative effort Mugambi and Magesa attempted an interpretation of the Trinity in African terms along the ancestral or contemporary approach.

They maintain that “with an understanding of ancestral relationships it is possible to examine the inner life of God (Trinity) and discover that there is an ancestral kinship among the persons.”⁹² Thus, they agree with Nyamiti, that the persons of the Trinity should be interpreted in terms of close links and relationships of ancestral kinship surrounding the Deity. They argue that the two persons, or father ancestor and brother ancestor, both live in their ancestral kinship through the Spirit whom they mutually communicate.⁹³

Moila's approach has taken us a step further toward an interpretation of the Trinity along ancestral models. He describes the basis for his approach as a continuous communion between living descendants and departed relatives based on the conviction that the spirit of the ancestors continues to govern living descendants.⁹⁴ However, Moila's interpretation of the Trinity does not involve replacing or distorting the persons of the Trinity with ancestral spirits. Rather, he uses them as images for understanding the unity of the Deity in the plurality of his oneness that is, giving them the Christian meaning of the Trinity. Such an approach involves Moila's change of direction. While other theologians such as Nyamiti, Bujo, Mugambi and Magesa start from Christian concepts (an indigenization of the persons of the Trinity), and move to traditional concepts (a christinization of traditional concepts) Moila starts differently: from traditional ancestral images moving to Christian images (indigenization). His approach is in line with the Nkole/Kiga and Haya whereby aspects of the Deity in a threefold form are addressed and invoked. Such an approach promises a remarkable ancestral interpretation of the Christian Trinitarian model and has been recommended for indigenizing the Trinity. Twesigye says:

I came aware for the first time that in the traditional [understanding of God-Ruhanga] there existed a Trinitarian understanding of God that is almost the same as the Christian one [...] this was the first time that I had come across this claim, namely that the Banyankole and Bakiga [Haya, Nyoro and Toro] people a Trinitarian concept of God prior to the arrival of Christianity and that it had been so well and clearly stated compared to the Christian Trinitarian doctrine.⁹⁵

From this perspective, most African christologists assert that an ancestral christological model that addresses all aspects of the Deity, either according to a Trinitarian or a threefold conception, could be an appropriate answer to Bediako's quest for seeking a theological model that addresses the Christian concept of God, that is, the Trinity in an African cultural context.

The relation to believers

The theology of brother ancestor is incomplete and inappropriate without a theological link and relation to the believers who are the presupposition of any christological model, not only to the father ancestor and sister ancestor. Its absence would mean a Christ who is the head without a body, that is, the church or the converts.⁹⁶ Its justification is Christ's Adamite origin and divine human nature; he is the brother ancestor of all human beings.⁹⁷ Hence, Christ's ancestorship comprises divine sonship, humanity, redemptive activity, as well as our participation.

The relationship between Jesus Christ and believers is based on the belief that through habitual grace they become the adapted sons of the Father and brothers of the Son. This has resulted in regarding the church as the extension of Christ's ancestorship to believers.⁹⁸ Without this mutual relationship, Christ's and our ancestorship would remain theoretical.⁹⁹ An ancestral interpretation of christology along father ancestor, brother ancestor and sister ancestor models enables people to become Jesus' true brother descendants within the framework of the doctrine of the Trinity, or what Nyamiti describes as the ancestral relationship between ancestors and descendants.¹⁰⁰ It neither hinders nor undermines the divine ancestorship of his father, nor eliminates the relationship between the believers and Jesus Christ. Rather, it leads to a profound Christianization of the doctrine of the Trinity.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

"The Christian way of life is in Africa to stay, certainly within the foreseeable future."¹⁰² In order to make this statement a reality, the church in Africa has to realize that it has no future unless it realizes and pays attention to the internal dynamics, which determine people's response to life's crises.¹⁰³ It challenges us to rethink its theological concepts in ways that express and present the Christian faith in an African context. This step has to conform to people's past and present experience of God, involving discovering a real continuity with the African religious past. This is necessary if Africans are to regard Christianity "as their religion, and not a foreign import."¹⁰⁴

This does not mean merely referring to a past which cannot be revived, or to a future that is uncertain, but only "values which are meaningful here and

now, and which are likely to survive.”¹⁰⁵ It demands offering a model for understanding Christianity from the African ancestral christological perspective. Any African religious model obtained should be tested by critical clarification and analysis, that is, discerning whether or not it fits into its respective context. This would lead to seeking an African christological model that describes Jesus Christ in a way that touches the African heart and way of life without giving a false image of Jesus. For Ela, such a step demands doing the same thing in different ways. “If Christianity wants to reach Africans, to speak to their hearts, and to enter their consciousness and the space where their soul breathes, it must change.”¹⁰⁶

Notes

¹ Aylward Shorter, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation* (London: Chapman, 1988), pp. 22–23.

² John S. Pobee (ed.), *Exploring Afro-Christology* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1992), pp. 47, 52.

³ Aylward Shorter, *African Culture and the Christian Church* (London: Chapman, 1973), pp. 66, 70.

⁴ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), p. 191.

⁵ Rosino Gibellini (ed.), *Paths of African Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), pp. 67–68.

⁶ Bengt Sundkler, *Christian Ministry in Africa* (London: SCM, 1960), p. 11.

⁷ Bediako, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 97, 202–225.

⁸ Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor* (Harare: Mambo Press, 1984), p. 148.

⁹ John Mbiti, *African Traditional Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), p. 83.

¹⁰ Sylvester B. Kahakwa, *A Haya Interpretation of the Christian Concept of God: How Applicable is an Invocation of the Deity in a Threefold Form for Indigenizing and Understanding the Christian Trinitarian Model?* (PhD dissertation, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, 2003), p. 55.

¹¹ The majority of the approximately 1 million Nyakyusa live in the area north and northeast of Lake Malawi/Lake Nyasa. In Tanzania their area extends to just around Mbeya city limits in the north and down to the lakeshore in the south. The eastern border is the Livingstone mountain range where the Safwa and the Kinga live.

¹² Mwakagali Gwakisa, *The Johannine Concept of Life: An Exegetical and Hermeneutical Study with Reference to the Nyakyusa Pre-Understanding* PhD dissertation (Lutheran School of Theology: Chicago, 1992), p. 241.

¹³ Mwakagali Gwakisa, *Some Elements of Worship in the Traditional Religion of the Banyakyusa and the Christian Interpretation* (BD thesis, Makumira Theological College, Tanzania, 1977), pp. 18, 21.

¹⁴ Gwakisa, *op. cit.* (note 12), pp. 240–243.

¹⁵ Cuthbert Temba, *Ancestors are Worshipped or Venerated?* (BD student class paper presentation, Makumira University College, Tanzania, 2004), p. 3, and E. J. Mpinda Mbaga Paris, Pare Diocese, Tanzania

¹⁶ Rulange Rwehumbiza, *A Comparative Study between the Development of Ahwistic Monotheism and the Concept of God Among the Bantu People of Africa South of the Sahara. A Biblical-Theological Evaluation* (PhD dissertation, Rome: Pontifical University, 1983), pp. 204, 219.

¹⁷ Garry W. Trompf (ed.), *The Gospel is not Western* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), p. 67.

¹⁸ Gwakisa, *op. cit.* (note 12), p. 242

¹⁹ Kahakwa, *op. cit.* (note 10), p. 56.

²⁰ The Haya people are a rather large tribe (approx. 1 million) that live west and northwest of Lake Victoria, Tanzania.

²¹ Wilson Niwagila, *The Haya High God* (Diploma thesis, Makumira Theological College, Tanzania, 1966), p. 89.

²² Rwehumbiza, *op. cit.* (note 16), p. 205.

²³ Mbiti, *op. cit.* (note 9), pp. 137–158.

²⁴ Nyamiti, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 26.

²⁵ Mbiti, *op. cit.* (note 9), p. 25.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁷ Hance A. O. Mwakabana (ed.), *Crises of Life in African Religion and Christianity* LWF Studies 02/2002 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2002), p. 25.

²⁸ Sundkler, *op. cit.* (note 6), p. 46.

²⁹ Sebastian Lutahoire, *The Human Life Cycle Among the Bantu with Special Reference to the People of West Lake Region, Tanzania* (Usa-River, Tanzania: Makumira Publications, 1974), p. 42.

³⁰ Kahakwa, *op. cit.* (note 10), pp. 54–57.

³¹ Gwakisa, *op. cit.* (note 12), p. 63.

³² Elisa Buberwa, *Spirits and Ancestors in African Traditional Religion and Christian Teaching about the Holy Spirit: Parallels and Contrasts* (S.T.M Thesis, Iowa: Wartburg Theological Seminary, 1996), pp. 62, 114.

³³ Kahakwa, *op. cit.* (note 10), p. 53.

³⁴ Festo Bahendwa, *Christian Religious Education in Lutheran Dioceses of Northwestern Tanzania* (PhD dissertation, Finland: Helsinki University, 1990), pp. 23–24.

³⁵ Lutahoire, *op. cit.* (note 29), p. 9.

³⁶ Nyamiti, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 128.

³⁷ Bediako, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp. 97, 192, 223.

³⁸ Jesse Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa (eds), *Jesus in African Christianity: Experimentation and Diversity in African Christology* (Nairobi: Acton, 1998 [1989]), p. 111.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴⁰ Pobee, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 55.

⁴¹ Kwesi Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (London: DLT; New York: Orbis Books, 1984), pp. 1–4.

⁴² Shorter, *op. cit.* (note 3), p. 218.

⁴³ Mugambi & Magesa, *op. cit.* (note 38), p. 5.

⁴⁴ Benezet Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1992), p. 79.

⁴⁵ James H. Evans, *We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 92.

⁴⁶ Andrew Walls, "Towards Understanding Africa's Place in Christian History," in John S. Pobee (ed.), *Religion in a Pluralist Society* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), p. 18.

⁴⁷ Mugambi & Magesa, *op. cit.* (note 38), p. xiv.

⁴⁸ Pobee, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp. 21, 28.

⁴⁹ Mugambi & Magesa, *op. cit.* (note 38), pp. 8–10.

⁵⁰ Pobee, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 24.

⁵¹ Robert J. Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), p. 29.

⁵² Malclom J. Mc Veigh, *God in Africa: Conceptions of God in African Tadtional Religion and Christianity* (Cape Cod, MA: Claude-Stark, 1974), p. 83.

⁵³ Emmanuel K. Twesigye, *African Religion, Philosophy and Christianity in Logos-Christ* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), p. 7.

⁵⁴ Shorter, *op. cit.* (note 1), p. 97.

⁵⁵ Mugambi & Magesa, *op. cit.* (note 38), p. 145.

⁵⁶ Schreiter, *op. cit.* (note 51), pp. viii–ix.

⁵⁷ Mugambi & Magesa, *op. cit.* (note 38), p. xiii.

⁵⁸ Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1978), p. 15.

⁵⁹ Mugambi & Magesa, *op. cit.* (note 38), p. 4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. x, 25.

⁶¹ Bediako, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 328.

⁶² Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), p. 45.

⁶³ J. B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God* (London: Frank Cass, 1944).

⁶⁴ Harry Sawyerr, *God: Ancestor or Creator?* (London: Longman, 1970), pp. 13, 95–96.

⁶⁵ Bujo, *op. cit.*, (note 44), p. 93.

⁶⁶ Shorter, *op. cit.* (note 58), pp. 17–18.

⁶⁷ Nyamiti, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 83.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 64–65.

⁶⁹ Twesigye, *op. cit.* (note 53), pp. 74, 203

⁷⁰ Schreiter, *op. cit.* (note 51), pp. 6–7.

⁷¹ Philip M. Moila, *Challenging Issues in African Christianity* (Pretoria: CB Powell Bible Centre, UNISA Muckleneuk, 2002b), p. 83.

⁷² Schreiter, *op. cit.* (note 51), p. 67.

⁷³ Bujo, *op. cit.* (note 44), p. 25.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁷⁵ Kahakwa, *op. cit.* (note 10), p. 230.

⁷⁶ Moila, *op. cit.* (note 71), p. 72.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁷⁸ Josiah U. Young III, *African Theology: A Critical Analysis and Annotated Bibliography* (London: Greenwood, 1993), p. 257.

⁷⁹ Moila, *op. cit.* (note 71), p. 75.

⁸⁰ Kahakwa, *op. cit.* (note 10), p. 232.

⁸¹ Schreiter, *op. cit.* (note 51), p. 12.

⁸² Twesigye, *op. cit.* (note 53), p. 104.

⁸³ Buberwa, *op. cit.* (note 32), p. 6.

⁸⁴ Twesigye, *op. cit.* (note 53), pp. 103–104.

⁸⁵ Kahakwa, *op. cit.* (note 10), pp. 147–148.

⁸⁶ Magesa, *op. cit.* (note 62), p. 102.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁸⁸ Twesigye, *op. cit.* (note 53), p. 203

⁸⁹ Mugabi & Magesa, *op. cit.* (note 38), p. 168.

⁹⁰ Nyamiti, *op. cit.* (note 8), pp. 64–66.

⁹¹ Charles Nyamiti, “The Trinity as a Source of African Family Ecclesiology,” in *the Journal of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa*, vol. 15, no. 1 (March 1999), pp. 30–65, here 37.

⁹² Mugabi & Magesa, *op. cit.* (note 38), pp. 129–131.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁹⁴ Shorter, *op. cit.*, (note 58), p. 143.

⁹⁵ Twesigye, *op. cit.* (note 53), pp. 202–203.

⁹⁶ Schreiter, *op. cit.* (note 51), p. 12.

⁹⁷ Nyamiti, *op. cit.* (note 8), pp. 16, 28.

⁹⁸ Mugabi & Magesa, *op. cit.* (note 38), p. 132.

⁹⁹ Nyamiti, *op. cit.* (note 8), pp. 30, 82.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 85, 149.

¹⁰² Bediako, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 3.

¹⁰³ Jean-Marc Ela, *My Faith as an African* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), p. 60.

¹⁰⁴ Shorter, *op. cit.* (note 58), pp. 24–35,

¹⁰⁵ Shorter, *op. cit.* (note 3), p. 72.

¹⁰⁶ Ela, *op. cit.* (note 103), p. 41.

Freedom from Fear: Coping with the Ancestors' Wrath and the Fear of Avenging Spirits

Reinhard Veller

The phenomenon of avenging spirits

This essay is based on information gleaned from the ongoing dialogue with African pastors from mainline churches in Zimbabwe. I teach ethics at United Theological College (UTC) in Harare, and my students regularly draw my attention to the fact that there are situations where African Christians are forced to seek healing and peace in rituals outside their churches.

This is especially true with regard to the fear of avenging spirits and in order to cope with the wrath of the ancestors.

In Shona [Bantu peoples of Zimbabwe and southern Mozambique] religion, in addition to the guarding characteristics of the *vadzimu* [deceased ancestors], there are also avenging or evil spirits, *ngozi*, and witches who communicate with them. The *ngozi* are, briefly, the spirits of deceased individuals who were greatly wronged, neglected by a spouse, murdered, or otherwise neglected, and they attack through sudden death of several members of the same family, or through ill people who fail to respond to treatment. Bucher (1980) and others stress the fear with which the *ngozi* are surrounded, in opposition to the guarding role of the *vadzimu*.¹

The pastors maintain that neither the Christian churches nor the Christian faith provide help in cases involving avenging spirits. But performing certain rituals of African Religion and making respective payments can alleviate fear and restore peace. Apparently, in Zimbabwe, Christians and practitioners of African Religion share the fear of avenging spirits in the same way.

The phenomenon of avenging spirits is not restricted to African culture and belief. Dreams and nightmares in which victims haunt those who caused their deaths are universally known and respective literature is full of examples.

In his novel, *The Reader*,² Bernhard Schlink tells the story of Hanna, a female concentration camp warden, who is haunted by such nightmares. Time and again she sees the women for whose deaths she is responsible, hears their cries and witnesses them die. She tries to cope by making the concentration camps the object of her studies while serving a life sentence. Before she is finally released she commits suicide. According to the African worldview, this is a typical story about the wrath of the ancestors who have unleashed avenging spirits against the person who caused death.

In order to reach a common understanding with the students about the phenomenology of avenging spirits we discussed another example from the European cultural context found in Mark Cocker, Richard Meinertzhagen's, *Soldier, Scientist & Spy*.³ Meinertzhagen born into a British-German business family and later chief of military intelligence in two British campaigns in World War I (East Africa and Palestine) can hardly be suspected of being particularly open to the spirit world. It is all the more surprising then to read about the following episode during Meinertzhagen's early years.

According to his autobiography, shortly after Christmas of 1897, he and his elder brother Dan were returning home from hunting. Suddenly, the brother spotted somebody walk across the lawn and then jump into the sunken ditch. Richard never saw the figure, and although they chased after him they were unable to catch up. He claimed that in the morning they searched for footprints where the person had crossed the sodden ground, but failed to find any. A curse, of which both boys were aware, had reputedly been passed on the house by the last prior at the time of the abbey's dissolution, which foretold that the eldest son of the owner would die in his prime, and a ghost would appear to him as a sign of his impending death. Apparently, the two boys agreed not to tell their parents, since two previous tenants, both eldest sons, had died unexpectedly at a young age, and a story of inexplicable figures ghosting across the lawn at dusk might alarm them. Six weeks later Dan was dead [...].⁴

When confronted with this episode the students at UTC didn't hesitate for a moment with their analysis: *ngozi*! Avenging spirit! For them, the story of Dan's death was proof that Europeans might understand what Africans mean with spirit experience. I did have to admit that occurrences as presented by Meinertzhagen are

rare in the Western world while being rather common in Africa. In fact, they are so common and so frightening that it is difficult to understand life in Zimbabwe without them. It is the fear of avenging spirits that causes people to be so particular when it comes to death and funeral rites. The deceased's will must be respected under all circumstances in order to avoid misfortune sent by the deceased; even public life has to reckon with those powers. If, before Hero's Day, the government of Zimbabwe decides to repatriate the remains of fighters who died in a liberation war in one of the neighboring countries it will first seek the counsel and advice of spirit mediums. Any mistake or oversight regarding the appropriate rituals could anger the ancestors and unleash the avenging spirits. The fear of being punished by the ancestors is so great that it may even be used in political battles or to settle old scores. For example, on 5 March 2003, the *Harare Daily News* published a lengthy letter to the editor in which the floods in the Zambezi valley were interpreted as being a punishment for President Mugabe and his closest supporters:

[...] now that the avenging spirits, *ngozi*, are visiting Mugabe for all the souls that he destroyed, his offspring must not cry foul if they are caught in the cross fire. This is how the *ngozi* operates. It does not start with the offender, no. It first afflicts other people who are close to the offender. First to be afflicted by the curse was Leo Mugabe (a relative to the president). Now *ngozi* has invaded a whole area to wipe out all his descendents [...]. Yes, they are going to die and they have to die because their father killed as well [...].⁵

Since such messages of doom are taken seriously in Zimbabwe it is essential for the people to know counter strategies against *ngozi* and to have ways and means by which fear of those spirits can be alleviated or overcome. In a nutshell: the avenging spirit is usually the spirit of someone you have killed or whose death you have caused, either intentionally or inadvertently. The spirit of the deceased will return to you—even years after the event—and will cause all sorts of misfortune (e.g., sickness in the family, unemployment). While the churches seem unable to help, representatives of African Religion are. People know that you better consult a diviner, *n'anga*, who will perform rituals and advise on how to compensate the family of the dead person. If you follow his advice the avenging spirits will leave you and misfortunes disappear. If not, the misfortune will continue and might even get worse. In her study *Witchcraft, Sorcery and Spirit Possession—Pastoral Responses in Africa*,⁶ Leny Lagerwerf cites a case where misfortune was not dealt with in the traditional way and the worst happened.

She tells us of a Protestant pastor whose son was seriously ill. On the quiet, his wife consulted a diviner who prescribed that a sacrifice be offered on the tomb of the child's grandfather. She then urged her husband that they act on the diviner's advice. He refused angrily and left the healing of their child to God's will. The boy died.

Lagerwerf's example shows the dilemma in which African Christians often find themselves. Should they do what culture suggests, consult a diviner and thereby turn to African Religion again? Or can they trust the powers of the risen Lord and the whole armor of God against the spiritual forces of evil (cf. Eph 6:10–12)?

The students are aware of the dilemma Christians face if they seek help in African Religion. The gospel is good news against all fear (Lk 2:10; Jn 14:26) and when, being baptized in the name of all names, Christians have renounced all other powers. So, if the claim of the gospel is true and baptism places believers under the Lord of all Lords why is it that there is no Christian way (and no Christian ritual) to attain freedom from the wrath of the ancestors? After all, the power of Christ to bring peace and salvation is not limited to any one culture. If disquieted souls can find rest and a terrified conscience can be comforted in Jesus' name why should there be no Christian ritual to overcome the fear of avenging spirits?

Excursus: relating to the ancestors?

A dilemma ignored by the mainline churches of Zimbabwe

From the above we can conclude that for African Christians the avenging spirits pose an embarrassing dilemma. The truth is that the embarrassment includes the relationship to the ancestors in general. When it comes to the ancestors, Christians and churches in Zimbabwe are not at ease for the following reasons:

- In the Shona religion the ancestors seem to compete with the Christian perception of God. They are sacred, they guide and protect and they are consulted at all major family events.⁷
- Although the "Shona religion is not a 'Theistic' single God centered religion,"⁸ people pray to *Mwari*, God, by way of the ancestors.

- In certain instances, such as a drought, a spirit medium “might suggest that the community brew beer for the *varipasi*, the buried ones, because they are ‘thirsty’.”⁹
- The ancestors might make unethical demands, such as demanding that a virgin girl be given to another family as payment for a homicide.
- Scripture seems to be clearly against consulting the ancestors. “Now if people say to you, ‘Consult the ghosts and the familiar spirits [...]’ should not a people consult their gods [...]?” (Isa 8:19).

In addition, the departed seem to be easily offended, unforgiving and always ready to punish. So the fear of the ancestors appears to be quite justified.

Unfortunately, the relationship to the ancestors is rarely discussed in the churches. People receive little or no assistance and are torn between the demands of the extended family to participate in traditional rituals and the official “no” by the mainline churches.

Christians must give up their ancestors

Pentecostal churches offer a radical response. They suggest severing the ties to one’s own family and to accept the fellowship of the church and certain church members as their new family. People would then give up their family names, their totem and any other connection to the extended family and the ancestors. They stop taking part in any ancestor-related rituals. The Lord is their ancestor. This radical step apparently yields freedom from attacks by avenging spirits and from fear of the ancestors. There is however a price to be paid in the form of a loss of cultural identity and a loss of natural family ties.

Christians may have dealings with the ancestors

There is a third way of relating to the ancestors. For years, theologians in West Africa (Ghana) have tried to contextualize the Christian faith and relate it to traditional ancestorology. According to Kwame Bediako¹⁰ and others, Christians may have dealings with the ancestors for a variety of reasons.

- They are part of the living community and like anyone else in the community they cannot be worshipped.¹¹

- Reverence of and respect for the ancestors is nothing more than an expression of family and tribal solidarity and continuity.¹²
- Like in the Shona religion, *kurovaguva*, it is the living community that establishes the departed as a family ancestor in the first place.¹³
- The Akan in Ghana welcome the ancestor at family functions with libations. Bediako presumes that in these libations water was originally used to clean the dusty feet of the arriving ancestors.
- After the ancestor is welcomed by the family already gathered, any prayer made is not to the ancestor, but in the presence of the ancestor and on their behalf to God or Christ.¹⁴
- African theology proceeds further with a theology of ancestors. Applying Hebrews 1:1 it draws the consequences of the fact that God also spoke to the African forefathers, who in word and deed prepared the people for a Christian future of Africa.¹⁵ African theology would give the faithful ancestors their rightful place in the communion of saints and the cloud of witnesses with whom we pray and in whose footsteps we walk.¹⁶

It is enlightening to see that there is no need to shy away from discussing the issue of ancestors openly, seriously and theologically, and to advise and consult with the congregations accordingly. Jesus' promise that the truth will set you free (Jn 8:32) certainly applies.

The ritual

Any Christian ritual must be compatible with the specific problem. In the case of avenging spirits it must include certain elements without which one cannot hope to get rid of the attacks.

There has to be:

- A diagnosis regarding the cause of the problem and a possible solution.
- A ritual of reconciliation involving the victim's family must take place.

- The ritual must include an admission of guilt.
- A payment must be negotiated and paid to the family of the victim.

The challenge is: could those elements (diagnosis, ritual, admission of guilt, payment) have their rightful place in the Christian community and therefore cater for the African spiritual need? I believe that certain Christian communities in Africa are already responding effectively to those needs. They do so in the power of the Spirit according to African culture and worldview.¹⁷

Diagnosis of the problem

Most Christians are quite clear about the underlying causes of certain problem; on the whole, people know where they have failed. The confession of sins, together with counseling, establishes clearly where the problem lies. Even in an individualistic society the admission of guilt may also be followed by acts of repayment and restitution following the biblical example in Luke 19:8. In addition, the communion of believers is not in need of a spirit medium or a diviner to get clarity. In the Christian church, the Holy Spirit speaks quite clearly and directly, providing wisdom and knowledge and enlightenment through the gift of prophecy (1 Cor 12:4–11). In the past, the problem might have been that Christians in the mainline churches did not emphasize the distinctive gifts of the Holy Spirit. But that has changed over the past ten or twenty years. Most mainline churches are considerably more open to the moving of the Holy Spirit than they were before. They conduct revivals on a regular basis, and practice certain gifts of the Spirit, especially the ministry of healing. In Tanzania, people know in the meantime “that even Lutherans have the Holy Spirit.” Consequently, the need to turn to diviners and spirit mediums has been greatly reduced since the mid-1980s.

In 1988, the principal, T. Jeni, of a Lutheran Bible School in southern Tanzania reported that,

We used to have many Christians in the Matema area go to Malawi to consult diviners for their healing. In the meantime we take pain to elaborate to them the gospel truth concerning healing by the power of the Holy Spirit through prayer only. We do not use any paraphernalia, herbs, or medicines but simply prayers of faith. And thank God, many sick Christians are coming to pray instead of consulting diviners and medicine men. Many have received heal-

ing from God, this includes those who are demonically possessed [...]. When we come across a hard case, we voluntarily decide to pray and fast [...].¹⁸

Admission of guilt

In African culture a ritual has to be a community ritual. It is in the gathered community that the admission of guilt and assurance of forgiveness have to take place. Perhaps this could happen as it happens at meetings of the East African Revival (since the 1930s), to which many Lutheran bishops belong. In their fellowship meetings, public confessions take place against the background of ongoing praise of Jesus' blood that cleanses completely. In addition, those confessions were followed by practical acts of restitution.¹⁹

Payment

When it comes to the avenging spirits practical steps are also needed. Besides the admission of guilt, payment is essential. Without it, there can be no peace between the families involved and, therefore, no peace of mind for the individual either. The details of the payment are to be negotiated between the parties concerned. The negotiations will be very similar to those about a bride price, *lobola*, or when payments are negotiated after a fatal road accident. But as numerous examples, especially from the Hebrew Scriptures, show: to negotiate a settlement and peace between families is very biblical indeed (*cf.* Gen 13, Abraham and Lot; Gen 30, Jacob and Laban). There is nothing exclusively African about those negotiations, except that such a settlement will include the ancestral spirit who is part of the community.

Responding to avenging spirits: an example

Let me conclude with an example of how a local church responded to the challenge posed by the avenging spirit's attacks. The response was appropriate to the cultural setting and indeed led to forgiveness, peace and freedom. The ritual of reconciliation involved the pastors of that church. Together with the victim of the attacks they traveled to Mozambique and performed what needed to be done to have the two parties reconciled. The example was told by one of the UTC students:

A man was converted to Christianity in our church. In 1999, he stood up in the church and confessed: “I have killed a person in Mozambique. I want to be a born-again Christian. Now the spirit of the Lord is telling me to go and pay for what I have done.” After this confession he was accompanied by the pastors of our church on his journey to Mozambique. When they returned he witnessed that payments to the family of the killed person were done and said, “I am now cleansed.”

Summary

We can conclude that local churches in Zimbabwe are able to rise to the challenge that avenging spirits are posing. Moreover, it seems clear why the ritual followed was effective. It was both inspired and culturally based. It appears that African Christianity does not need to go back to the “old religion”: faithfulness and contextuality are sufficient.

In addition, the example confirms that there is no African problem to which an African solution does not exist. This means for the churches: more communication, more visits, more sharing—not with the partners from overseas, but with sister churches on the continent.²⁰ They share the same problems. In this context, the affirmation of the 1999 United Church of Christ in Southern Africa (UCCSA) Assembly, admittedly regarding another problem, applies:

We affirm our tradition that “the Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from God’s word.”²¹

Well stated, if we remain conscious that God’s light and truth may have broken forth with neighboring churches already.

Notes

¹ H. Arntsen in: www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/lamdown/post/zimbabwe/religion/arntsen

² Bernhard Schlink, *Der Vorleser* (Zuerich: Diogenes, 1995), p. 207.

³ Mark Cocker, Richard Meinertzhagen, *Soldier, Scientist & Spy* (London: Martin Secker & Warburg, 1989).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁵ *The Harare Daily News* (5 March 2003), p. 9.

⁶ Leny Lagerwerf, *Witchcraft, Sorcery and Spirit Possession—Pastoral Responses in Africa* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1987).

⁷ Jameson Kurasha, *Shona Religion—a Metaphysical Statement and Dialogue with Christianity* (1998), pp. 1–2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁰ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (New York: Orbis, 1995).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 223.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁷ The demand for an appropriate ritual is actually not new. R. Bowen, *So I Send You* (London: SPCK, 1996), p. 149, names W.V. Lucas in southern Tanzania who already in 1913 saw that the mission churches did not meet the needs which people felt most severely. “He felt that (1) the church should supply Christian rituals for any need felt by society; (2) the church should preserve African tradition as far as possible, e.g., the blessing of fields, exorcism, initiation ceremonies and bride price; (3) local Christians should decide what traditional elements be ‘baptized’ and what had to be cut out; (4) the church should take the people’s beliefs seriously, not dismiss them.”

¹⁸ Reinhard Veller, *Der Heilige Geist und die Kirchen*, VEM Mitarbeiterbrief, Wuppertal 5 (1991), p. 27.

¹⁹ Roger Bowen, *So I Send You. Study Guide to Mission* (London: SPCK, 1996), p. 143.

²⁰ Sometimes it looks as if the African churches fail in the same areas as the missions. According to Roger Bowen, *ibid.*, “They did not listen to Africans. Therefore they often failed to relate the Good News to African issues such as witchcraft, spirits, ancestors, land and community. They also failed to bring the holistic deliverance from evil which Africans longed for. Most missionaries were not sure how to deal with African spirit-powers, and they were nervous of calling on the Holy Spirit to conquer evil powers.”

²¹ Minutes of the 1999 UCCSA Assembly.

The Challenges of the Healing Ministry: The Lutheran Church in Nigeria

Pukumah H. Yakubu

Introduction

On the African continent the traditional healing ministry is as old as the existence of humankind. God bestowed on different generations the knowledge of certain types of sickness and afflictions and how best to treat them. This essay attempts to survey the traditional healing ministry of some professing Christians in the Lutheran church today. Some of those healed are Christians. If we question the faith of the person with the gift of healing, then what about the Christian who goes to that person for treatment? What is the position of these people in the church? This essay will deal with the different African perspectives on the healing ministry and the challenges that this ministry poses to the Lutheran church today.

Healing is the means by which someone is being relieved from physical, spiritual, mental and even financial ailment. In this essay our definition for healing ministry will be healing as a profession of a church leader or minister. We shall consider the traditional healer who is also a Christian and shall examine his/her position in the church today. Can a herbalist or a traditional medicine man be given the rightful place in the worship life of the church today? Why must their faith be doubted? After all, practitioners claim that their profession is a gift from God which cannot be doubted. Are there elements pertaining to their profession which make the church skeptical? These are just some of the questions confronting the Lutheran church.

The healing ministry according to the Bible

According to the Bible, God has been a source of healing to his people throughout history. In every generation there are those who have the special ability to heal those who are sick.

The First Testament reveals that in his mercy God healed people afflicted by various forms of sicknesses. Different methods of healing were used by God and his chosen leaders. Some of God's prophets are said to have provided healing to people in need. The Syrian army general Naaman was one of those who was healed because he followed God's instruction through the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 5:1ff.). The same prophet is also said to have raised the Shunamite woman's son from the dead (2 Kings 4:36f.). Moses is said to have prayed for food from heaven which God provided for his people. All these are healing ministries performed by God either directly or through the prophets.

Jesus Christ reached out to people through the healing ministry. He is said to have cured many people; some were healed because Jesus Christ took pity on them, others as a result of their faith or their relatives' faith. Jesus used different methods to heal those who were sick and in need of assistance: the blind; the deaf; the dumb; the paralyzed; etc. The disciples emulated Jesus. Peter and Paul were prominent in healing people and James taught how best to practice the gift of the healing ministry (Jas 5:13ff.). God intends for humankind to be liberated from miserable physical and spiritual conditions.

The healing ministry in the Lutheran church in Nigeria

People question whether traditional healers are true Christians. I am convinced that such questions arose because of how first generation African Christians referred to people with these types of gifts. Another reason might be because some show certain syncretistic tendencies in their Christian life. The truth is that these people were given special gifts to cure people from different diseases and to counsel people in order to alleviate their worries.

The Bible shows us that there were other healers during Jesus' time, and that the disciples continued their work after Jesus' death. There were some who accused Christ saying, "He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons" (Lk 11:15). From their discussions with him it becomes evident that there are those who could manipulate powers from the spiritual realm and put these to their own use. Jesus neither condemned this outright nor encouraged people to patronize them. Neither do I. On various occasions the apostles encountered magicians and soothsayers, but they triumphed in the name and by the power of Jesus (Acts 8:9ff).

Sickness and spiritual oppression are not endemic to the people of Palestine; they are universal problems. Since time immemorial they have been the worst problems afflicting Africa. God's relation was not restricted to people in the Middle East. Africans also had cures for their physical and financial diseases. This suggests that before the advent of Christianity on the continent, there were traditional healers in Africa. They were endowed with the ability to diagnose sicknesses and prescribe medicine. People endowed with such gifts are herbalists, witch doctors, diviners, sometimes blacksmiths, etc. Some of those practicing the healing ministry are traditional priests. They have a dual responsibility: leading traditional worship and diagnosing and dispensing drugs to those who are sick. They not only tackle people's physical needs, but also their spiritual problems.

John S. Mbiti contends that for African society medicine men are the greatest gift to and most useful source of help. There is a medicine man within reach of every village in Africa. He is the friend of the community, is accessible to everybody at almost all times, and plays an important role at many points in the individual's and the community's life.¹

Mbiti's statement shows how important the man endowed with the healing ministry was in every African community. The average medicine man is believed not only to have the power to diagnose and cure diseases, but to see beyond the ordinary. As such, he could advise or counsel people wherever necessary.

One becomes a medicine man either through inheritance or lay training. It can also be a gift from the spirit/gods or God. If you are endowed with the ability to gather herbs or other things for medicinal purposes, you may pass your knowledge on to your child or to those you confide in. There are those who train their friends and relatives. An example of this is Njidda Midalah who revealed to me that he had been trained by a friend to fix people's broken bones. He is now one of the traditional leaders in Fa'a Gaya among the Kilba people in Nigeria.

Francis Rugange is a renowned healer in the village of Mbamba where Bronnum Lutheran Seminary is located. He told me that in his second/third year at the seminary God gave him the ability to gather herbs and the power to effect healing in the lives of people. My child was taken to him when he had a dislocated collarbone and Francis Rugange was able to help him.

A former colleague of mine, Mallam Dan Baki, also received such a special gift. One day, while working on his farm, the Lord revealed to him ways

of healing by opening his eyes to enable him to see beyond the ordinary. He could detect witches and wizards and knew when people were suffering as a result of their influence, or when evil spirits were tormenting people. He dispensed medicine for such problems and assisted whenever possible. People came to him from all over in order to receive assistance. The Lutherans Rugange and Dan Baki are members of the Lutheran church in Nigeria. They are two among many who practice the art of healing, either on a small or large scale. Even among the ordained clergy there are those who have such gifts.

Previously there was a certain stigma attached to people with such gifts. They were not thought to be Christians and called native doctors, a term associated with some devilish acts. Everyone with this title was believed to have a special affiliation with the evil spirit. These days, people are beginning to realize that this is not necessarily the case. They are more enlightened and might seek out their help. When I was in seminary, my junior brother fell sick. It was a peculiar sickness: one evening he went to bed feeling perfectly well and when he woke up the next morning he was unable to walk. He remained paralyzed for months, and all Western means of healing failed. I knew of a man at Jada who was said to possess certain gifts. He was a diviner and medicine man. After consulting my professor, I went to this man for help. He identified the cause of my brother's illness and gave me some herbs which my brother was to drink and to use for bathing. Already on the first day that my brother used this mixture, he began to feel better and after some weeks, he could walk once again.

The Nigerian government recognizes the importance of traditional herbs and has issued licenses for some of them. Traditional healers and diviners have formed their societies and government hospitals refer cases to them on their own accord or upon the request of those hospitalized.

The Lutheran church is challenged to acknowledge people with such special gifts and to recognize that these people were given such gifts by God in order to help others in times of need. They are to use these gifts in order to give glory to God, not for their own self-glorification. Some people who possess special gifts are feared, revered and even venerated. God, who bestows these gifts, is not recognized as the means through which these gifts are exercised. Some claim special powers and misuse their gifts to cause havoc by inflicting different illnesses on people. This shows that they do not know how to use these gifts properly. The Bible clearly states that every gift should be used to glorify God, not the devil. Those with special gifts will be held

accountable for them. As Christians we receive these gifts free of charge. We should use them so that through them also others feel the love of God. There needs to be proper Christian teaching on how people who possess extraordinary gifts should conduct themselves within the congregation.

Practitioners must be discouraged from going beyond the powers and abilities bestowed upon them by God. Numerous cases are reported of people joining secret societies in order to have the power to perform things according to their own ways. They claim to be Christians, but actually their faith is attached to the worship of the devil. They end up being syncretistic in their belief. As Christians, we are warned against worshipping two masters. Our loyalty should be to Jesus Christ alone. If we are given a means of healing, let us consider it as a divine ministry for which we are accountable.

Conclusion

The Lutheran church has come of age. As true Lutherans let Luther guide our judgement. The Bible should be our standard: whatever it condemns, we should say no to; whatever it encourages, let us encourage the same. Diverse healing ministries were used and encouraged in the Bible. Today, in virtually every society, there are different types of healing ministries through which people receive help for their various problems. The challenge is to be able to discern which one is done in accordance with God's will and approval, and to encourage those people.

The healing ministry is a ministry of joy. Whoever is cured from ill health or whose problem is solved is a happy person and will remember and honor God for the grace bestowed. Enlightenment should be given to those who possess these gifts as to how they can best use them to the glory of God and themselves.

Notes

¹ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969).

Spirits: The Biblical View

Monica J. Melanchthon

Introduction

The subject of this paper is one that I have not explored before and with which I am therefore not very familiar. Having grown up in an urban setting, ghosts and spirits were beings I only heard of from childhood peers seeking to scare me. Yet, in recent years, while working in Chennai, a city with a significant Christian population, I have come across many students and Christians from mainline churches, who believe in spirits and approach Christian diviners and faith healers in moments of distress. Many of my students have shared with me firsthand experiences of encounters with spirits, most often bad ones. On one occasion a student had exhibited unusual behavior during her period of study at the seminary. Many students, including herself, believed that it was a case of possession. Administrative efforts to have her cured with the help of modern medicine and psychotherapy failed. Eventually, a group of concerned students gathered every midnight over several weeks and prayed, some in “tongues” and others in their own languages. As part of the efforts to help, men and women, mainly from the Pentecostal tradition, were also brought in to pray. One of them declared that the spirits (bad ones obviously) lingered outside the hostel to repossess the individual if she were to become weak. It was eventually acknowledged that it was the sustained efforts of the students and their prayers that healed the student concerned. Although many would not publicly acknowledge the experience as one of possession, they would in confidence maintain that it was so.

More recently, during discussions following a seminar on theological education in which the need for a shift in emphasis, and the need to train students with skills to respond to social concerns and issues was stressed, one member was overheard as saying that the majority of Christians living in rural areas were having to deal with spirit/demon possession. He maintained that the church was growing on account of the efforts of those working in the rural areas to cast out demons and hence theological institutions should train students in the art of exorcism.

The origin of the belief in spirits and demons can be traced to the so-called tribal religions and thought forms, which endorsed the belief that even such inanimate objects as trees and stones have their own spirit which they venerate. Every tree or stone, every snake or wild beast, may contain some spirit or other, and ancestors return to live again in whom they choose. Support for this view is found in many communities. The spirits are sometimes localized but in other cases they have a wide provenance. Trees and stones are therefore inhabited by the spirits. Various natural phenomena are also often attributed to spirits of one type or another. Thus, it is believed for example that smallpox was the manifestation of the power of a spirit.

Natural disasters are believed to be caused by angry spirits that needed to be placated. This belief has resulted in the development of protective taboos by which individuals protect their lands, crops, or homes. Even more important is the strong belief in ancestral spirits and their influence on the individual, family, clan and tribe as a whole. Sacrifices are therefore offered to the ancestors as well as various other spirits.

At the same time, one cannot but be impressed by the fact that among many, there is always some reference to God as the center of the supreme authority which controls the world. God is of course ubiquitous and can be invoked to take an active interest in human affairs. That is to say, God is thought of as a vindicator, the relative who is prepared to expose himself/herself to any risk in order to protect a weaker member of the family.¹ It is therefore generally assumed that God created and rules the world. God is a God of justice. Because God is also believed to be situated remote from everyday events of human life, the spirits are approached to intervene and intercede on behalf of the community or individual. The spirits are regarded as being more responsible for day-to-day life. The average individual is bewildered by the physical factors of life; sickness and death are factors of great significance.

I do not seek to refute any of these stances or undermine the experiences of individuals. I do not intend to prove or disprove the existing belief in spirits. I would, however, like to highlight the fact that such a belief system is existent within the membership of our churches. Existing practices of the church (mainline) do not allow for the expression of such beliefs nor are attempts being made to find ways to help those struggling to understand this in the light of the increasing influence of Pentecostal and Charismatic groups which endorse such a belief. This essay seeks to understand the phenomenon of spirits as it is expressed and understood within the biblical and deuterocanonical traditions.

Who/What are spirits?

Spirits are beings of the invisible environment active for good or ill in human affairs. Gods may be spirits and spirits may grow into gods, but usually their powers rank them below the gods and above humankind. The idea of a human soul separate from the body was the model for the conception of a non-human spirit. This idea was probably the most fruitful of all the adventures in humankind's interpretation of the world. It split the universe into two, making possible the dualism of spirit-matter, soul-body, this-world and other-world.² It transformed the real gods of nature of the early religions into special beings and released them for limitless growth in the unseen realm. It made possible all the various forms of belief in afterlife existence and in ages of frustration and furnished a safe haven for values unattainable on earth.³

The belief in spirits is not only characteristic of the religions of preliterate peoples, but also of those of early civilizations namely, Egypt, Babylon, Iran, Greece, Rome, India, China, Japan and also in Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity. A host of spirits are said to work with and against humankind. Their activity was seen in all startling or unusual happenings. The good spirits could fulfill human desire, bring luck, fertility and protect from dangers. Sometimes a spirit could be persuaded to take up its abode in a material object and be a constant companion as the beneficent power of a fetish. Evil spirits were blamed for the dangerous and devastating moods of nature, for sickness, pestilence, death, possession and nightmares making it difficult to distinguish between ghosts and spirits. Ancestral souls care for the welfare of their families like good spirits.

Higher religions acknowledge spirits, which are usually specialized and named according to their activity or weal and woe. Sometimes a name applied to a class of spirits merges the vague multitude into one who becomes a god or a powerful devil. Since spirits are not human, they take on any form imaginable. Spirits are usually classified according to their dwelling place, sky, air, earth, underworld, water, forests or mountains. Good spirits are treated as lesser gods. Demons are to be held in check by powerful charms.

The biblical perspective

The Hebrew Bible uses the term *ruach*, which is derived from a verb meaning "to breathe" or "to blow," nearly four hundred times. The noun may be

translated as “breath,” “wind” or “spirit.” The Greek word *pneuma* is used just as frequently and may mean “breath,” “wind,” but most frequently “spirit” associated with God, the human being or the other spiritual beings.

Both the Hebrew and the Greek term cover a wide range of meanings and speak of an “incorporeal, sentient, intelligent being, or the element by virtue of which a being is sentient, intelligent, etc.”⁴ Spirit involves life, but is not necessarily associated with material form, and thus the Bible often describes as “spirit” some incorporeal being which has direction, purpose and power.

The Hebrew Bible

In the Hebrew Bible, the term *ruach* is used to describe the invisible and transcendent nature of God. God is by nature spirit, while human beings only have spirit. God is also the source of all other spirits (Gen 2:7; 6:3; Ps 104:29; Job 34:14–15). Sometimes the expression “spirit of God” is itself used to refer to God or to express some of the divine attributes. It is used to refer to the vital principle in God’s creatures (Ps 104:29–30). It is in this sense with regard to human beings it has the meaning of “soul/spirit” (Ps 76:12).⁵ Sometimes it appears as something additional to soul, a source of strength (1 Sam 30:12).

Apart from expressing God’s fundamental nature and dynamism and an aspect of human existence, there is a sense in which, in the Hebrew Bible, spirit is used to refer to entities which have a separate existence and can act on human beings. Some are good, while others are bad. Sometimes good spirits from God are depicted as descending suddenly on people and making them act on the spur of the moment (1 Chr 12:18). At other times, they are depicted as charisms residing in and guiding persons charged with special functions (1 Sam 10:1, 5–7; Isa 42:1; 61:1). Very often investiture with the spirit produced phenomenal changes in the person concerned, i.e., the judges who had great courage and wisdom in Israel (Judg 3:10; 6:34; 11:29) and Samson who had great strength. In two instances we learn of personal, transferable spirits through which power and authenticity were imparted, such as the spirit of Moses (Num 11:25) and the spirit of Elijah (2 Kings 2:9, 15).

As entities distinct from God, some spirits in the Hebrew Bible may be described as evil in the sense that they invite people to evil actions (Gen 6:1–4; Lev 16:6–10, 26; Isa 34:14; Job 6:4; Ps 91:5). From 1 Kings 22:19–23, however, it appears that sometimes evil may just be a function rather than a characterization of the spirit concerned.⁶ But little was made of this idea in Hebrew

thought until the late post-exilic period. Then the belief developed that there existed not only numerous evil spirits or demons, but also a leader for all these evil forces. This leader came to known in Jewish thought by several titles, though the most common designation was Satan. As a result of this of thinking, the idea developed that there were armies of demons under the leadership of Satan or the devil doing battle with God and God's allies. But the word Satan (accuser, enemy, adversary) could refer to the function of a spirit that tests and accuses people before God. Apparently, any of the "sons of God" could be charged with this function. It could also be a proper name referring to an evil spirit as in 1 Chr 21:1. Another comparable proper name we find is Azazel, the wilderness demon, on whom the guilt of Israel was laid according to the rite of the Great Day of Atonement (Lev 16).

In his Dictionary entry on "Spirit of the Dead," J. Tropper analyzes the use of the Hebrew term *'ôb* occurring seventeen times in the Hebrew Bible.⁷ Despite scholarly consensus that the term relates to necromancy and consultation of the spirits of the dead, Tropper maintains that its precise meaning and etymology are still disputed.⁸ Having established that it is a genuine Hebrew term, which strictly speaking occurs in this form only in the Hebrew Bible, Tropper goes on to describe the many expressions for the deified ancestral spirits among other Semitic cultures of ancient West Asia, particularly in Ugarit and Akkadian, which are comparable in both form and content. It is well known that both at Ugarit and in Mesopotamia the spirits of the dead were the objects of cultic veneration.⁹ Ancient West Asian literature is replete with instances of spirits, which could be summoned or sent back to the netherworld by means of magical incantation. There existed in Mesopotamia an entire series of incantations, the object of which was the expulsion of malign spirits of the dead. There is a related series of specifically necromantic rituals so that the people could "see" them, could "speak" with them and, with their help, "make a decision" in difficult situations.¹⁰

Nine of the seventeen occurrences of *'ôb* (translated as ghosts) are used with the parallel term *yidde'onîm*, familiar spirits, and accompanied by verbs and expressions such as "to apply oneself" (Lev 19:31; 20:6), "to seek out" (Lev 19:31), "to have recourse to in order to inquire of" (Isa 8:19; 19:3) and "to whore after" (Lev 20:6). Mentioned mostly in the context of foreign cults, other gods and idols, the terms are identified with their physical cultic representations, namely things capable of being produced (2 Kings 21:6; 2 Chr 33:6) and destroyed (1 Sam 28:3; 28:9; 2 Kings 23:24). The numerous *'ôb* are

branded as mere products of human artifice and lifeless material in the many pronouncements against idolatry. The manufacture of such cultic images is associated with the introduction of cultic idolatry and the destruction of these images with the elimination of idolatry. It is typical of the perspective of Deuteronomic history that the “good” kings such as the young Saul (1 Sam 28:3,9) and King Josiah (2 Kings 23:24) sought to eliminate the *’ôb* cult, whereas the evil kings like Manasseh (2 Kings 21:6) promoted the *’ôb* cult. Equating ancestor cult with idol worship is a clear indication that the ancestors were the objects of cultic veneration by their descendants. In accordance with the dictum in Lev 19:31, anyone who followed the practices of the ancestral cult was “cultically” unclean.¹¹

Five occurrences of the term imply necromancy and deal with the direct interrogation of the dead. The verb “to inquire/ask” functions as a *terminus technicus* for directing inquiry to the ancestors (Deut 8:11; 1 Chr 10:13). 1 Samuel 28:7 tells us that there were specialists who invoked the dead; and in the specific case recorded in this passage, it was a woman, the “mistress of the *’ôb*.” The existence of such a profession shows that the invocation of a departed spirit was considered a dangerous venture requiring knowledge of certain rituals. According to 1 Samuel 28:8, the necromancer was able to divine by the *’ôb*. The statement is ambiguous and could be understood to mean that the mistress of the *’ôb* functioned as the medium of the ghost, so that the voice of the dead sounded through her.¹²

Two occurrences of the term *’ôb* suggest fortune telling. According to Leviticus 20:27, there are people who have an *’ôb* in them and thus serve as medium for the *’ôb*. Such people were considered capital offenders in Israel and subject to death by stoning. The voice of the *’ôb* is described as “softly whispering” and “murmuring.” Hence the assumption that in later Israelite history the phenomenon of necromancy was transformed into mere fortune telling by means of a medium and thus losing its connection with the ancestral cult. *’ôb* divination thus came to be equated with the divinatory activity of “vtriloquizing” a phenomenon widespread in the Hellenistic cultural sphere.¹³

We can conclude that in the Hebrew Bible the term *’ôb* primarily signified the deified spirit of the ancestor and subsequently the cultic representation of the ancestor, the ancestral image. It can designate the phenomenon of the veneration as such as well as the necromantic practices it involved. The term later came to be associated with the divinatory or soothsaying spirit in general. Basically all the attested occurrences of the term except for Job 32:19,

emphasize that such divination was incompatible with the monotheistic cult of Yahwism. Such activities were therefore considered “foreign” in the sense of “Canaanite” (Deut 18:9–12) and thus punishable by death (Lev 20:27).

Inter-testamental literature¹⁴

During the centuries immediately preceding the coming of Christ, the concept of “spirit” was elaborated in various directions among Jews. It was during this period that a vast hierarchy of heavenly powers came to be envisioned, referred to as angels or spirits (1 Enoch 15:4–10).¹⁵ Hellenistic influences led to a greater contrast between spirit and body.¹⁶ Some scholars suggest that exposure to Iranian dualism led to speculation, especially at Qumran, about the perpetual conflict between the two spirits (or angels) of light and darkness, of righteousness and evil.

The apocryphal book of Tobit, likely to have been written in the first quarter of the second century BCE, links sickness and death with demons. The author also notes in passing the ineffectiveness of physicians to meet human needs. Thus Tobit’s blindness, caused by sparrow droppings, could not be cured by the physicians whom he consulted (Tob 2:10), but the cure was affected by the same means—the entrails of a fish—as drove out the demon (Tob 6:7, 17; 8:1–3; 11:8–14). It is not by chance that the name of the man/angel who guides Tobit to visit his kinfolk, to claim his bride, to drive off the demon that caused her first seven husbands to die on their wedding nights, and brings him home and enables him to cure his father’s blindness is Raphael: that is God heals.

1 Enoch 6–11 tells the story of the cohabitation of the fallen angels with beautiful earthly women, and the consequent corruption of humankind through the angels teaching humankind charms and enchantments (1 Enoch 7:1; 8:3) and disclosing the eternal secrets which were to have remained in heaven (1 Enoch 9:6). The warning to Noah of the destruction of the race is followed by instructions to Raphael to bind the wicked angels and to prepare them for eternal judgment, even while proclaiming to earth that it will be healed (1 Enoch 10:4–7). What differentiates the outlook of 1 Enoch from that of Tobit on the matter of demonic powers is that Enoch depicts the fallen angels as adversaries, not merely of human beings but also of God. They have sought to wrest control of creation from God, but their doom in fire, torment and prison is sure (1 Enoch 10:13–14).

Jubilees which probably dates from the middle of the second century BCE, manifests kinship with both Sirach and Enoch. With Sirach, Jubilees shares the notion that medical remedies, especially herbs are part of the created order and have been revealed to the chosen ones among God's people (Jubilees 10:10–14).¹⁷ Like Enoch, Jubilees represents the fallen angels, and especially their leader, Mastema, as the instruments that wreak destruction and ruin on disobedient humanity. God, who alone can control these demonic powers (Jub 10:6), removes most of them from earth, but leaves some behind to perform their evil work as instruments of God's judgment on humanity (Jub 10:7–8). The kinds of acts they perform are detailed in Jubilees 48, where the plagues that came upon Egypt were the direct actions of God (Jub 48:5–7), while Mastema enabled the Egyptians to harass Moses and the children of Israel. Then a striking statement is made, “the evils indeed we permitted them (i.e., Mastema and the Egyptians) to work, but the remedies we did not allow to be wrought by their hands” (Jub 48:10). The dualistic outlook of Jubilees, like that of the New Testament writers, is provisional, not absolute. Human ailments and disasters are performed by the demonic powers, but are permitted by God to happen. Ultimately, the powers of evil will be overcome, and the final and eternal restoration of the creation will occur.

New Testament and Qumran¹⁸

It is the New Testament, which specifically states that “God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth” (Jn 4:24). It is the New Testament which has the developed doctrine of the Holy Spirit; but the Hebrew Bible, in spite of its rich anthropomorphisms in speaking of God, implies frequently that God is spirit, and speaks of the Spirit of God as manifest in activity in nature and in the lives of human beings in a variety of ways.

The Bible also speaks of creatures, which are spirit or spirits, created by God and subject to God but not having corporeal form. Their existence and their influence on human life are referred to in a number of places (1 Kings 22:21; Job 4:15; Lk 24:39; Acts 23:8). They may be good spirits ministering to human beings (Heb 1:14), or they may be evil (Judg 9:23; 1 Sam 16:14ff.; Mt 10:1). Human beings may be subject to the spirit of God, or to the one who is described as “the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience” (Eph 2:2). False teachers are those who are led by “deceitful spirits” (1 Tim 4:1),

and because of the existence of such it is necessary for Christians to “test the spirits to see whether they are of God” (1 Jn 4:1).

In the New Testament as in the Hebrew Bible, we meet evil spirits as personified entities. These are demon, *daimonian/daimon*, devil, *diabolos*, and Satan, *Satanos*. Demons have the general designation “unclean spirits,” *pneuma akathartos*. They possess people and afflict them with severe diseases. They disseminate error among Christians and seduce them from the truth (1 Tim 4:1). *Daibolos*, slanderer, false accuser, and *Satanos*, adversary, are used interchangeably in the New Testament to refer to the prince of demons. In Matthew 12:24, Beelzebul appears as a proper name for the prince of demons and in 2 Cor 6:15, another proper name *Belial* is found. He also inflicts diseases (Lk 13:16).

The idea that demons could invade human bodies and personalities and cause mental illness, physical disease or other specific problems such as deafness or blindness is clearly reflected in the New Testament where Jesus is characteristically shown as one who exorcises demons (Mt 8:28–34; Mk 5:1–20; Lk 8:26–39; Mt 12:22–32; Mk 3:22–27; Lk 11:14–23).¹⁹

According to Pimental, the language of purity and defilement is an important aspect of the exorcism stories of the Gospel of Mark. Although it appears to use demons and unclean spirits synonymously, an examination of Mark's accounts of exorcisms suggests that the latter is what he meant. The nearest parallel we have to the assumption of the synoptic gospels that unclean spirits enter and influence human beings are the Dead Sea Scrolls. They too use the language of purity and pollution in this context. The Dead Sea Sect believed that the battle between good and evil was being fought in the spiritual realm between the spirits of light and those of darkness. This cosmological battle has important consequences for the psychological struggle between good and evil going on within people.²⁰

The War Rule Scroll of Qumran is concerned primarily with the cosmological battle:

Thou hast created us for thyself [...]. And the Prince of Light Thou hast appointed from ancient times to come to our support; [all the sons of righteousness are in his hand], and all the spirits of truth are under his dominion. But Belial, the Angel of Malevolence, Thou has created for the Pit; his [rule] is in Darkness and his purpose is to bring about wickedness and iniquity. All the spirits of his company, the Angels of Destruction, walk according to the precepts of Darkness; (1QM 13).²¹

In the Community Rule this war between the two spirits is seen as also being fought within people:

He has created man to govern the world and has appointed for him two spirits in which to walk until the time of his visitation: the spirits of truth and falsehood. Those born of truth spring from a fountain of light, but those born of falsehood, spring from a source of darkness. All the children of righteousness are ruled by the Prince of Light and walk in the ways of light, but all the children of injustice are ruled by the Angel of Darkness and walk in the ways of darkness (1QssS 3).²²

Pimential maintains that by careful observance of the purity rules, the community at Qumran believed they were preparing for the final battle. This meant withdrawal into the desert to protect themselves from contamination by the wicked that are under the dominion of Satan and will be destroyed by the rule of God at work through the dominion of the community. Both the Pharisees and the Qumran community tried to establish a sacred realm (or dominion) which provided protection from the spirit world already at work in the wicked. It is against this background that the term “unclean” is to be understood in the Gospel of Mark.²³ In all exorcism stories (Mk 1:23–28; 5:1–20; 7:24–30; 9:14–29) the term “unclean spirit” is used. A distinction between the unclean nature of spirits and the holy nature of Jesus is being made. The end of the old world and the beginning of the new could only be pictured as the destruction of the unclean. Even the members of the community were not immune to the influence of the spirits of falsehood and so they looked forward to eschatological salvation.

The apostle Paul understood the “principalities” and “powers” to be evil forces in this world (Rom 8:38; *cf.* Col 1:16; 2:15; Eph 3:10; 1 Cor 10:20). In some of the later New Testament writings, however, the place of the demons began to give way to the centrality of the leader of the demonic forces, namely Satan or the devil. Thus in the fourth gospel there are no references to demon possession or exorcism. The devil has become the instigator of evil (Jn 13:2).²⁴

1 Peter 3:19 mentioned the “spirits in prison.” Much effort has been expended to define and identify these spirits. Four views have been identified.²⁵

- The first is that they are Noah’s human contemporaries who refused to heed Noah’s preaching while, by delaying the flood, God gave them the opportunity to repent.

- Others believe that the preexistent Christ preached through Noah to Noah's contemporaries, and that they rejected the message hence ending up as "spirits in prison" which is what they are now.
- They are angelic beings, although they could also be human spirits. But they are fallen angels (watchers) as known especially in the Enoch traditions (*cf.* Jude 6; 2 Pet 2:4) which claim that the "sons of God" (Gen 6:1–4) descended to earth and mated with women of the earth and taught humanity evil practices which attained high proportions by the time of Noah. These "sons of God" were therefore responsible for the corruption of humanity, which led to the flood. Subsequently they were confined in a prison, which 1 Enoch locates beneath the earth and 2 Enoch locates as the second of the seven heavens.
- The spirits are not watchers but evil spirits derived from them. According to 1 Enoch the watchers are no longer active in the world, but the spirits of their children, the giants, became the evil spirits who continue to promote evil in the world until the last judgment. These spirits would be the evil spirits often mentioned in the gospels. Christ's proclamation of his victory in order to receive their submission would be more relevant.

The idea that there are evil forces in the world that manifest themselves in various ways is still valid. How one articulates this idea may change from one culture to another. However, demonology was a part of the culture of the New Testament world and should be interpreted and understood against that background.

Conclusion

Where do these spirits come from? In the Hebrew Bible it is clear that they come from God and are under God's control, though it does appear that sometimes Satan did act without reference to God (1 Chr 21:1). Even so, such actions would appear to be within the divine plan.

It is striking how rarely the Satan notion is expressed in the Hebrew Bible. It would be safe to conclude that in the true religions of Israel, the figure of the heavenly Satan is not of central importance and that there is no rigid

consistency in the conception of this figure in different times and circles. But the Hebrew Satan embodies the threat to humankind from the world of God. Whether as prosecutor of ethical faults or as a demonic and destructive principle, it is firmly anchored in the plan of salvation.²⁶ The positive and non-dualistic integration into the divine government is the distinguishing feature of the Hebrew view as compared not only with the Persian ideas but as also with those of post canonical writings. Consultation of the dead and divination practices were condemned by law and those who offered such services were punishable by death. Such practices were equated with idolatry and characteristic of cults that worshipped the “no gods.”

The New Testament takes the existence of evil spirits for granted. They constitute a kingdom in opposition to God’s kingdom. It was Jesus’ mission to destroy this kingdom and establish God’s kingdom.

While I am not sure if I can take any definite position on the issue of spirits, I will say that the possibility of the existence of a realm of spirits, whether good or evil, contributes to people’s ability to cope with suffering and pain in the world. I also think that such a belief contributes to our need for God because it is our belief that only God can subdue these spirits. I think one needs to employ what a colleague of mine calls “intelligent faith”²⁷ to be able to discern and respond to the so-called realm of the spirits.

Notes

¹ Harry Sawyerr, *God: Ancestor or Creator? Aspects of Traditional Belief in Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone* (London: Longman, 1970), p. 3.

² A. Eustace Haydon, “Spirits,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1945), p. 731.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ F. Foulkes, “Spirit,” in *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975) p. 504.

⁵ The word “soul” reflects a complex of ideas which go back to Greek philosophy as something distinct from the body and immortal. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the word “soul” is the translation of the Hebrew word *nepes*, which cannot be signified by any single word in modern languages. It means life, self, the seat of appetites and emotion.

⁶ Justin S. Ukpors, "Pluralism and the Problem of the Discernment of Spirits," in *Ecumenical Review* 41 (1988), p. 420.

⁷ J. Tropper, "Spirit of the Dead," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), col. 1524–25.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Inter-testamental literature is literature that was generated in the period between the Old Testament and the New Testament in the second and first centuries BCE. They are the many extra biblical books written for special groups and sects that were gradually excluded from consideration as inspired books, and sometimes thought of as dangerous and heretical. While some of these books are termed "apocrypha" meaning "hidden" from public readings or acceptance by the synagogues and churches (Protestant canon), and deuterocanonical (Catholic canon), others are called "pseudepigrapha" or "false writings" for not having been part of any canon of Scripture.

¹⁵ The book of 1 Enoch is a pseudepigraphical book written in the middle of the second century.

¹⁶ Howard Clark Kee, *Medicine, Miracle & Magic in New Testament Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 23.

¹⁷ The book of Jubilees is another pseudepigraphical book written also in the second century.

¹⁸ The scrolls and documents found in the caves around Qumran have become one of the most important archaeological discoveries of the twentieth century. The scrolls are traditionally believed to have been the work of the Essene community, a sect that emerged during the first century CE in response to the influence of the Hasmonean and Roman governments upon Judaism. Among the many scrolls discovered at Qumran are biblical texts in Hebrew, a good number of commentaries on the Prophets in Aramaic and several special documents, which belong to the Essene community's way of life such as the *Community Rule* also known as the *Manual of Discipline* (IQS), and the *War Scroll* sometimes titled the *War of the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness* (IQM).

¹⁹ Paul J. Achtemeier, "Demon," *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), p. 236.

²⁰ Peter Pimental, "The Unclean Spirits of St. Mark's Gospel," in *Expository Times*, 99 (1988), pp. 173–175.

²¹ Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York/London: Allen Lane/Penguin Press, 1997), p. 177.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Achtemeier, *op. cit.* (note 19), p. 237.

²⁵ Richard Baukham, "Spirits in Prison," in *ABD*, vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 177–78.

²⁶ Gerhard von Rad, "OT View of Satan," in *TDNT*, vol. 2, p. 75.

²⁷ Dr Jacob Thomas.

The Inclusiveness and Exclusiveness of the Gospel of Christ in the Light of the Many Asian Spiritualities: A Lutheran Perspective

Wilfred J. Samuel

Diversity and plurality

Diversity and pluralism in terms of spirituality, race, religion, culture, language, worldview and tradition are characteristic of most Asian countries. It is within such a context that the Lutheran church in Asia is called to live out faith positively and to interact meaningfully. In most of Asia, Christianity remains a minority religion and is therefore required to face diverse challenges. The most demanding of these would be the need to maintain trans-religious and trans-cultural communication. According to Charles Springer, “[the] relation between religions is not only an academic concern. [...] Consider the fact that we live in one world.”¹ Hence we need to approach the matter of the inclusiveness and exclusiveness of the gospel with seriousness. We need a response that is pragmatic in its approach, practical in its application and consistent with the gospel.

Asia is unique in that for most, if not all, of its citizens, religion is more than a mere sociological phenomenon and system of faith adhered to due to heritage. Religion is life and people are willing to give their lives for the sake of religion if a situation demands it. Such religious fervency, be it in Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism or Taoism, is generally derived from their understanding of and respect for their respective Holy Scriptures. It also emanates from the awareness and conviction that the divine revelations contained therein are authentic, authoritative and inalienable. Asian Christianity would therefore be in agreement with Morris Inch, who said, “The low view of the Scripture strikes at the heart of the Christian faith—at the person and work of Christ.”²

Further, inclusive and exclusive claims are common to all religions in Asia. To be exclusive is not to be misconstrued as “exclusion” or “sectarian”; rather the religion understands itself as “unique” in its nature. In this context, “fundamentalism” may be defined as the respect for and love and uncritical acceptance of the Holy Scriptures as divine revelation. “Fundamentalism” in this sense is different from extremism. In each Holy Scripture of the living religions in Asia there are exclusive claims, i.e., implicitly unique claims to the truth, as well as elements of love and hope. These particular claims apply to a particular religion. The inclusive claims are doctrinal precepts, religious values or socio-ethical norms common to many religions and therefore usually helpful for dialogical purposes.

In such a pluralistic situation the Lutheran church in Asia needs constantly to be reminded of the sensitivities surrounding the inclusiveness and exclusiveness of the Christian gospel. It must pursue avenues conducive to the expression of love, peace, justice and solidarity while fully realizing its objective namely, communicating the gospel and accomplishing its missional task. We may quote Luther at this point: “Then let it be your chief work to proclaim this [the gospel] publicly and to call everyone into the light into which you have been called.”³

Presenting the gospel in a balanced way (in agreement with its exclusive and inclusive claims) requires, first of all, clarity concerning the relationship between gospel and culture. Secondly, in order to avoid religious extremism the witness of the Lutheran church amidst other spiritualities must be expressed with love, sensitivity and a high level of respect and mutuality. Fundamentalism, as mentioned earlier, is not to be defined as something negative and to be feared. Christian fundamentalism is a return to the basic teachings of the Scripture (love God and love your neighbor) without intending to promote extremism. Hence, preaching the inclusiveness and exclusiveness of the gospel constitutes both sharing and caring. Sharing the goodness would certainly require that the church does not become judgmental. Caring is to speak a language of love. Such is indispensable for religious coexistence and a true expression of the gospel message and what church and cross symbolize in Asia.

The inclusive and exclusive God

Affirming the legitimacy of diversity and pluralism within the sociocultural and religious contexts of Asia requires, first, an affirmation that diversity is part of God’s expression in creation. Secondly, the same plurality affirming God remains inclusive

and exclusive. Inclusive in terms of God's love for God's creation (Jn 3:16), exclusive because God has set clear boundaries for creation concerning the way in which to commune with God. Since we note that God is both inclusive and exclusive, it becomes necessary that God's followers recognize and apply the inclusive and exclusive principles of the gospel of Christ in the right manner, purpose and context.

- The gospel of Christ is inclusive in that it is about sharing salvation and God's love. "The gospel is preaching God's deeds. They are the deeds and works we have often mentioned namely, that by the power of God Christ has swallowed up death, devoured hell, drunk sin to the dregs, and placed us into eternal life."⁴ Christ is for all.
- The gospel of Christ is exclusive in that we uphold its claim namely that Jesus is the incarnate Word, Savior and Son of God (Jn 17:3).

Understanding the inclusive and exclusive claims of the gospel from an Asian perspective

In the first place the gospel of Christ is truth, and the truth is about God's offer of grace to all people (Jn 10:10) in and through Jesus Christ. In his commentary on Psalm 19:1, Luther uses the expression "the proper" work of the gospel to describe the task of proclaiming the grace of God, the Father, to all. We could summarize the gospel message as in John 3:16 as follows:

- The inclusive aim of the gospel is that the gift of salvation offered in and through Christ, as a matter of grace, is for all people. The invitation to follow Christ is unambiguously inclusive (1 Tim 2:4).
- The exclusive aim of the gospel is that it is only through Christ's atonement that anyone may be saved from sin and inherit eternal life and salvation (Jn 3:16).

The gospel radically inclusive and positively infectious

As Luther states, the gospel in its entirety is about comfort.⁵ In being radically inclusive the gospel focuses on preaching grace and comfort offered by

God through Christ. The radical inclusiveness of the gospel is characterized by its universal nature:

- Universality of Christ: such universality is confessed and proclaimed with love irrespective of racial, religious and cultural boundaries. Christ is an open invitation for all. The invitation is offered with love and in peace (Jn 17:13).
- Universality of the hope in Christ: such hope introduces the individual to the mystery of God's kingdom and its socio-religious and ethical implications. The love principle predominates in the expression of this kingdom's value system and people are directed positively to infect the world with such spiritual values as peace, love, equality, solidarity and justice.
- Universality of the knowledge of Christ: such knowledge could be complemented by general revelation and common grace. People of other faiths could help augment and enhance our knowledge concerning spirituality, morality, culture, etc. through the knowledge and revelations in their faith.
- Postmodernism and the unique nature of the gospel: one of the struggles in dealing with the exclusive nature of the gospel is how to avoid the separatist notion with its discriminative language on the one hand while, on the other, being cautious about the postmodernist all-inclusive approach.

Postmodernism

In this context some elements of religious postmodernism might be:

- Giving importance to personal opinion and specific truth as opposed to standard doctrinal or religious teachings
- Rejection of absolute truths and sometimes the promotion of relativism
- The need for practicality in relationships in order to promote friendship and mutuality rather than to focus on the abstract issues of religion
- Inclusiveness or tolerance with regard to moral values and variety in lifestyles

- Absolutistic appreciation of reason
- Value progress in life as a vital goal rather than the focus on life hereafter.

Some sections of Asian Christianity have shown strong reservations and resilience against postmodernist precepts. Such spirituality is often critiqued by some and at times even suspected of promoting extremism and separatism. In order to uphold evangelical spirituality while avoiding extremism and separatist attitudes the following questions would have to be carefully examined:

- Does the gospel of Christ support the claim that the church has a book that claims to be the only true Word of God and to be authoritative over all other religious scriptures?
- Does the gospel of Christ support the claim that our Savior is the only way, the only truth and the only life without any other option or route?
- Does the gospel of Christ support the claim that salvation can be attained solely and exclusively through Jesus, the Son of God?

For postmodernists and universalists to answer yes to the above three questions would simply be admitting separatist notions. Yet, for evangelicals to answer no to the above three questions would mean categorically rejecting biblical authority and evangelical faith. Hence what should our direction and attitude be?

Today we hear that as a matter of spiritual, social and moral responsibility towards our fellow human beings, we should apply inclusive language and observe a neighborly attitude. What is expressly implied here is the need to avoid any form of discrimination against anyone on the grounds of race, religion, gender, sexuality, etc.

But, can we avoid the risk of becoming offensive while maintaining the exclusive claims of the gospel within a religiously plural Asian milieu? I guess it is possible with Luther's wisdom to note that the strength of the gospel lies in *beneficium* not *dominium*. Preaching the exclusivity of the gospel also requires that we exercise love and sensitivity. Speaking on neighbor love Luther writes:

[...] a true Christian lives and labors on earth not for himself alone but for his neighbor, he does by nature of his spirit even what he himself has no need of, but is needful and useful to his neighbor.⁶

Does the inclusive claim of the gospel offend some?

Paul's frustration with the book of Galatians is indicative of the fact that the inclusive claim of the gospel could be offensive to some. Paul sums up by making the statement: "if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed" (Gal 1:9). The inclusive claim became offensive to the Judaizers who could not reconcile themselves to the fact that the Gentiles had been admitted into the kingdom, hence they perverted the gospel and preached the insufficiency of "Christ alone." Paul directs us to respect and maintain the inclusive claim of the gospel.

Does the exclusive claim of the gospel offend some?

The exclusive claim of the gospel confronts universalism and the "New Age" concept of religion namely that all religions lead to God in different ways and that all ways are equally good and right. It is in this context that we need to raise the question, Does the gospel teach that Christ is one of the good options or the only true option? We could probably say that Paul was not simply teaching Christianity because he thought Christianity was good, as if it were a good option among many other relevant options, but because he believed Christ to be the only true way. To some this may be too radical and separatist a statement. But this claim is not about the superiority of Christianity but *beneficium* and *leitourgia*. The credibility of Jesus and the exclusive nature of the gospel of Christ are best expressed by making the church and Christ relevant to the context through *beneficium* and *leitourgia*.

Praxis of the inclusive and exclusive gospel

The inclusive gospel

The inclusive nature of the gospel is expressed in accomplishing the task of "being and becoming" salt and light of the earth (Mt 5:13–14) and in fulfilling God's will as witnesses of his love. The inclusive nature of the gospel draws Christians away from an egocentric ecclesiology and spirituality into an empathetic christocentric koinonia of service. Leslie Newbegin notes that,

It is never enough for the church simply to be there and to say come. There has to be a movement of *kenosis*; one has to be willing to go, to become simply the unrecognized servant of men, where they are in order that there, perhaps in quite new forms, the authentic substance of the new life in Christ (gospel of Christ) may take shape and become viable.⁷

The inclusive gospel

- Provides a platform for fulfilling the diaconal task in a relevant manner
- Celebrates the variety and gifts found in the different spiritualities/cultures as affirming generosity and the goodness of God
- Allows for prayer, healing and reconciliation through dialogue with other spiritualities
- Promotes solidarity, mutuality and peace in society. Inclusiveness of this nature epitomizes the cross as a symbol of faith, hope and love.

The gospel is inclusive in its process of contextualization. Contextualization or indigenization is the process or attempt by which the gospel is made applicable, understandable and relevant to a particular context.

These are inherent positive values and spiritual elements in other spiritualities. Hence the process of contextualization remains inclusive in order to maintain a perceptive balance in understanding spiritual elements, namely from the perspective of the general revelation of God against a non-Christian background. Thus we adhere to the call to maintain openness towards inter-faith dialogues and a willingness to learn from other spiritualities.

The exclusive gospel

Although we reject the *possessio*⁸ approach in gospel contextualization, we nevertheless guard against the tenets of the gospel becoming lost in the process of contextualization; there are elements of the gospel that need to be stated only in biblical terms. By this we also affirm that the gospel is neither above nor below culture but transforms culture without losing its unique elements.

Conclusion

Within Luther's Christocentric thinking the inclusiveness and exclusiveness of the gospel have to be looked at from the point of justification by faith in Christ alone, which Luther would call gospel centeredness. Thus to him scriptural interpretations must favor Christ as the Lord; and lordship implies that Christ makes those who belong to him become like him: agents of love.

But in maintaining God as God (*Gottheit*), Luther adopts a more inclusive view namely, that God is Creator and Preserver of all. Here the commandment to love God the Creator (of all) translates into the command to love all of his creation. "For Luther God's sharing of himself is the highest expression of the fact that God is God."⁹ Hence, while maintaining the exclusiveness of the gospel, namely that Christ is the only way, we do not hope to demean other spiritualities, but translate the exclusiveness of the gospel into the service of love for God's creation.

Notes

¹ Charles R. Springer, *Christianity and Rival Religions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 3.

² Morris Inch, *Doing Theology Across Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), p. 20.

³ Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Luther's Work—The Catholic Epistles*, vol. 30 (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), p. 65.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), p. 129.

⁵ Helmut Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Work—Church and Ministry II*, vol. 40 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958), p. 82.

⁶ Walther Brandt (ed.), *Luther's Works. The Christian in Society II*, vol. 45 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), p. 94

⁷ Leslie Newbegin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), p. 121.

⁸ *Possessio*: the gospel possesses the context since there is nothing good in it.

⁹ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), p. 75.

In Dialogue with Indigenous Peoples in Asia on Ancestors, Spirits and Healing

A study document to be discussed and complemented

Introduction

In the shadow of Mount Kinabalu (the resting place of souls), the highest mountain in East Asia, seventeen Indigenous and non-Indigenous Christian theologians, both women and men from Asia, gathered at Sabah Theological Seminary in Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia. From 15 to 19 September 2004, they met for an LWF study seminar on “In Dialogue with Indigenous Peoples in Asia on Ancestors, Spirits and Healing.”

The immediate objectives of the study seminar were to,

- Analyze expressions and practices of Asian spiritualities, promoting interfaith dialogue, research and study on ancestors, spirits and healing
- Discover and examine the implications of Asian spiritualities for the Christian faith and particularly for the Lutheran identity and holistic ministry
- Prepare the study document “In Dialogue with Indigenous Peoples in Asia on Ancestors, Spirits and Healing.”

The midterm objectives are to,

- Discuss the study material and study document in the congregations and training institutions in Asia
- Receive feedback from congregations and training institutions so that the follow-up group can complete the study document

- Present the revised Asia document at the LWF global consultation on “Spiritualism as a Global Challenge to the Church,” in January 2006. This global consultation will elaborate the final document, *Spiritualism as a Global Challenge to the Church—Theses and Guidelines*.

The long-term objectives are to,

- Reach an increased awareness within churches of the need for a correct understanding of Asian spiritualities through interfaith dialogue leading to mutual empowerment, reconciliation, the restoration of relationships and the reclaiming of cultural identity.
- Promote the celebration of humanity and mutual empowerment and to learn from one another, affirming the plurality and not the uniformity of spiritualities and practices.
- Identify helpful and healthy approaches and attitudes to ancestors, spirits and healing that might aid us in collaborative work, finding a common platform/ground on which to work together, for example in the area of herbal and traditional medicines, friendship and collaboration on mutually beneficial projects, sharing of resources and medical assistance, struggling for justice and peace.
- Recognize the challenges for an holistic ministry of churches in Asia, considering that even if not accepted by all churches, a number of Indigenous practices are already (re)-incorporated into the daily lives of some members and in some Asian Lutheran congregations.

Equip the church to help those who believe in spirits within its fold.

The seminar participants formulated this study document in order to facilitate a dialogue in congregations and training institutions in Asia on the above objectives. You are kindly asked to submit your comments to the coordinator of the Asia follow-up group, Dr Wilfred J. Samuel, Sabah Theological Seminary, P O Box 11925, 88821 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, e-mail: wilfredjohn@stssabah.org or wilber@tm.net.my

Perspectives on and possibilities for dialogue

One of the many factors that have contributed to the growth of Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal Christianity in Asia is its rather successful adaptation of the gospel to the cultures of the so-called Third World through its particular attention to the supernatural, spirit healing and similar characteristics. It has very ably brought Christianity closer to the religions of the Indigenous Peoples. We need to acknowledge that it is the neo-Pentecostal movement that has drawn the attention of institutional churches to the phenomena of Spirit and spirits. This has resulted in many attempts to articulate a theology of the Spirit and its functioning within and outside the church.

Nonetheless, there has been some hesitancy on the part of the institutional church to grapple with the more popular understandings and perceptions of spirits and their perceived presence and functioning in the world. Despite the presence of many who believe in the world of spirits within the Lutheran church, it has until now failed to address the needs, fears and questions raised by such a belief. Instead, the paranormal and the supernatural have been explained away as figments of the imagination or psychotic behavior. Yet, experience and research have shown that there are many within the church, Indigenous and others, who strongly believe in the presence of spirits, good and bad, which influence their lives in many ways. As long as the church fails to address this issue, more and more of its members will find reasons to approach neo-Pentecostal communities and other such channels to help them.

Dialogue has been hindered by our preconceived ideas and stereotyping of the Indigenous Peoples as being “backward,” “primitive,” “irrational” and “uncivilized.” But the church needs to recognize the image of God inherent in the Indigenous People and to respect and accept their beliefs and customs. The New Testament witness calls our attention to the conversion experiences of Peter (Acts 10:9–21) and Paul (Acts 17:16–24), who in their encounter with people of other faiths, recognized their religiosity and spirituality, appreciated and dialogued with them, and were transformed and edified by the encounter. Scripture too calls upon the church to love and serve the neighbor and to “do to others what you have them do to you” (Mt 7:12).

The Christian faith compels us to engage in conversations with Indigenous Peoples. Genuine and authentic dialogue between the church and Indigenous Peoples is possible only in an environment of mutual openness and recognition of the need for such dialogue. This would require,

- Understanding and accepting Indigenous Peoples and societies

- Refraining from being judgmental, compassionate or humble in our assessment of Indigenous culture and practices
- Observing some kind of protocol when initiating the conversation
- Respecting the genuineness of their traditions and practices. This involves an openness to change, a willingness to be corrected and changing overt or latent colonialist, triumphalistic and spiritually arrogant attitudes and behavior
- Responding to queries in ways that show our genuine acknowledgment of the Indigenous Peoples as spiritual peoples
- A willingness to learn and adopt positive elements and practices found in Indigenous culture, to nurture relationships and to be generous in our offerings and gestures to assist in the empowerment of the church and the Indigenous Peoples.

It is essential that the Lutheran church equip itself adequately to address this issue. A better understanding of Indigenous culture and practices will provide insights into the various types of Asian Indigenous spiritualities impacting members of the church.

Who are the Indigenous Peoples of Asia?

Indigenous Peoples of Asia are pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies distinguishing themselves from other sections of the prevalent societies. Today they form the non-dominant sections of society. In accordance with their cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems, they are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence. These groups are identified variously as the aborigines, tribal communities, Dalits, *Adivasis*, (*adi*-original, *vasi*- inhabitant [India]), the *Bhumiputras* (Malaysia), the *Lumad* and *Katutobo* (growing from the womb of the earth [Philippines]).

These Indigenous Peoples are foundational communities integral to Asia, whose values and cultures are inextricably linked to the identity of the countries and

region as a whole. But Indigenous Peoples have been victims of doctrines, policies and practices that have advocated the superiority of peoples or individuals on the basis of national, racial, religious, ethnic or cultural differences that are racist, scientifically false, legally invalid, morally condemnable and socially unjust. For long, they have been the objects of fear, baseless presuppositions, overt and covert prejudices, false images and apathy on the part of the church. Hindrances posed by governmental regulations have discouraged the church from approaching and engaging Indigenous Peoples in conversation.

In the recent past, the cultural wealth, knowledge, practices, ability to maintain harmony between people and nature and diversity of these peoples have been acknowledged and their struggles for land and other rights have led to an awareness of and theological reflection on ecology. Certainly, most discussions on land and ecology have almost always been portrayed as issues of Indigenous and traditional rural peoples. It is also true that most of the well-known ecological struggles and campaigns for land are centered on them. It is essential that we understand what within the Indigenous culture, worldview and humanity enables the Indigenous Peoples to maintain such an harmonious relationship with people and nature. It is known that the perspective derived from their spiritualities has led to a sound and healthy attitude toward others and nature, which in turn has been translated into right actions.

Indigenous spiritualities

For some, spirituality is a way of life, a way of relating to people, nature and spirit(s). It is holistic, that is, it is connected to or in tune with the divine through body, mind, heart and soul. For others, spirituality is becoming aware of the indwelling divine that energizes and activates a person to relate to the struggle for harmonious relations both with the community and nature. For still others, spirituality is cosmic interwovenness, the breath that interweaves every human and living being. Thus, spirituality is a desired way of transcending all barriers and boundaries in order to relate to all spheres of life—the individual, family, community, society and cosmos.

Asian spiritualities are conditioned culturally, socially, economically and historically. They are similar to each other in that they emphasize an holistic and intimate relationship with the cosmos wherein the belief in spirits and veneration of ancestors become visible through religious practices and rituals. Beliefs involve fear and awe of supernatural spirits both good and bad, the use of placatory animal sacrifices

in festivals, the pursuit of purity and pollution through caste, tribe or clan systems, the offering of blood libation to the lesser deities or spirits and observing auspicious and inauspicious times in order to achieve a good and fulfilled life.

Asian spiritualities are a celebration of life and life affirming. In the classical religious traditions, human life is replete with contradictions and polarities. In Indigenous spiritualities, the dichotomy of the sacred and profane, life and death, does not exist and, further, life is a continuity of life-death-life. That is, the departed continues to live/visit and communicate.

Asian spirituality is not only life integrating but a life lived fully here and now. Such spirituality is also influenced by such values as honesty, simplicity, respect for the other, politeness and hospitality.

Spirits are present in everything in nature and therefore life continues without interruption. Indigenous spirituality stresses the mutual relationship that exists between human beings and nature, and the belief that everything is the dwelling place of the spirits and demons. This characteristic feature of Indigenous culture has resulted in the understanding that every element and aspect of nature has a spiritual value and is spiritually significant. Such a belief influences the understanding of life and practice both positively and negatively. It regulates life and affects every action and chore. The ways in which these spirits are or are not treated, result in either positive or negative consequences for the individual and the community. A violation of ethical laws would almost always result in harm or suffering. With the belief in the presence of spirits in every element of nature, the Indigenous Peoples have inculcated respect and love for nature. By instilling fear of the spirits nature has been honored and is protected from violation and abuse.

Asian spiritualities are communitarian and egalitarian: community consciousness is central to the Indigenous Peoples. Individuals have a role to play and the duty to safeguard the welfare and well-being of the community. Equality of all members is the essence of the community's consciousness. This is expressed in the performance of rituals and celebration of festivals. Further, the communitarian nature is replete with opportunities for women to contribute to the enrichment of the community. For example, from ancient times until today, in many Indigenous communities in the Philippines, women have played a significant role as the *babaylan*, woman priest and ritual functionary. She may also be a *babaihon-datu*, leader of the community, which is indicative of women's leadership in the community.

Asian spiritualities are struggle-centered and change-oriented. The spiritualities are grounded in people's concrete life situations: in the experience of colonization;

acute poverty; very limited access to education; political powerlessness. Understanding life as being a human being-nature-spirit continuum, emerging out of a yearning for the divine, involves the aspiration to live in dignity, freedom and harmony with spirit(s), people and nature. As such, spirituality is a struggle against all forms of prejudice, oppression and injustice and hence, change oriented, which is immediate and here and now. Their spirituality is a critique of the dominant religious ideologies that consider the Indigenous worldview as being inferior and superstitious.

Dialogue about the belief in ancestors, spirits and healing as a challenge to the churches

The Indigenous Peoples of Asia hold beliefs of spirits and ancestors; spirits are real beings to Asians. There are good spirits and evil spirits (demons, ghosts) and an overwhelming awareness of the spirit(s)/divine. The encounter with it/them can happen at any time or in any place; therefore, everything is a possible site or medium for a possible divine encounter with spirits. This results in the belief that everything is precious and auspicious and therefore there are rituals and practices of communication with spirits and ancestors.

What are some of our insensitive acts affecting the ecological balance and resulting in the breakdown of the harmonious relationship between nature and human beings?

Every place in nature is a dwelling place of the spirit(s). Disturbing and disrupting harmony is nothing but an act of violating the bond of human being-nature-spirit continuum. Therefore, refraining from unnecessary exploiting nature and its resources is of paramount importance. Environmental concerns take precedence over consumerism and exploitation.

Is this Western definition adequate in your church context? Social context? In your region? On your continent? Does this definition raise important issues for you?

Most Western-oriented theologians tend to dismiss empirical evidence of spirits in the Bible as being myths, unscientific, or superstition. Some missiologists explain the spirits phenomena as a kind of worldview while others do not.

Most Asian Christians do not have difficulties talking about their experiences with spirits. This is because Asians “live” with the reality of spirits and their different manifestations. Studies have shown that in Malaysia, for example, the importation of Western science and technology has not eliminated the belief in and the experience of the invisible and transcendent world also some among intellectuals in the Indigenous, Chinese and Indian communities.¹

In Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity there is a revival of the pursuit of transcendent, supernatural experiences, especially among the middle classes in Asia.

For the Malaysians the Indigenous beliefs toward the magical and spiritual realms [...] did not vanish or become repressed into the nether regions of unconscious with Westernization; on the contrary, they were transformed and reworked into structure of organized religion and continue to thrive.²

We watch movies that depict spirits in different manifestations, documentary programs about shaman/women contacting the spirit of the dead, we hear about spirits and even see their influence on people around us. Some of us even experience this first hand.

Is this type of fear an issue in your region and social or church context? If so, what effective ways have you found to help people who are troubled by such fears? How can we differentiate between this type of “reality” and that of persons suffering from “mental illnesses” who experience similar fears / “phobias”? Are there helpful psychological interpretations of the meaning(s) of such fears?

Healing relations with the ancestors

Most Indigenous Peoples believe that the spirits of the ancestors can communicate with the living, *hatod*. There are common beliefs that the spirits of the dead return to visit the living at some point after death, (3, 7 or 100 days). There are certain ceremonies/rites to remember, to pay respect or to venerate the spirit of the dead and to bid farewell to the departed souls. Some, like the Chinese, visit the cemetery every year. Some Indigenous Peoples practice this after they have become Christians (e.g., the Rungus and Murut).

Some Christians continue the practice of remembering the dead, but have eliminated those rituals which could be thought of as venerating the dead. Opinions among the pastors even within the same church remain divided.

Most Asian Christians believe that after death, the souls go to God and do not interfere or communicate with the living in any way.

However, there are Christians who fear that the spirits of the ancestors come to haunt them or to take revenge on them if they did not have a good relationship with the dead during their lifetime, or feel that they have not fulfilled their responsibility toward the dead according to the Indigenous beliefs.

We need to enter into conversation in order to clarify these phenomena. Bible study is essential to gain spiritual insights, the confidence in Jesus Christ to overcome these fears and to be assured that Christians cannot be demonized. As Christians we do not need to fear evil spirits. Although they may disturb us or tempt us, they cannot harm us because, as followers of Jesus, we share in Jesus' victory over evil spirits/Satan, "for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 Jn 4:4b).

How can Indigenous Christian groups formulate their own ways for such occasions as honoring their ancestors without worshipping the dead? What about ceremonies to commemorate the dead where the demand is made on the younger generation to settle their obligations to the dead which they have not yet fulfilled (these include the money they still owe, such as bride price and other debts and duties)?

Prayer is a powerful means to overcome such fears. In such cases we need to pray for the spirit of discernment to resolve the problems of guilt and for forgiveness.

A Malaysian pastor recounted that in his first year of ministry a villager had reported having seen a giant dark person in his house. He accompanied him to the house and prayed on the spot where this apparition had been seen the night before. The apparition never manifested itself again. After this, other people also requested such prayers.

In Asia, most Christians do not encourage such monetary payments because of the burden this places on the living. Moreover, Christians are encouraged to forgive debts as well as personal offenses (*cf.* Mt 18:23).

Are there other ways of including respect and gratitude for ancestors in church life and rituals?

Remembering the ancestors is not against the teaching of the Scriptures. The Israelites were taught to remember their ancestors and therefore lists of ancestors are found throughout the Bible (Gen 4:1–2; 25–32; 10:1–32; 11:10–32; Ex 1:1–7; the longest list being in Num 1:1–47; the genealogies of Jesus in Mt 1:1–17 and Lk 3:23–38 continue this tradition of ancestral lists). The recollection of God's deeds among the Israelites' ancestors is common in the historical books of the First Testament as well as the Psalms. This is done systematically in two Apocryphal books, *The Wisdom of Solomon* and *The Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach*, Sirach 44–50, *Hymn in Honor of Our Ancestors*, (Enoch, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Josiah, Elijah, Hezekiah and Ezekiel) and Wisdom 10–19. The tradition is continued in Hebrews 11:1–12:2 where we read in 12:1: “we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses [...]”

Healing: What is an appropriate understanding of the casting out of evil spirits for Christians in Asia?

Jesus' proclamation of the imminent coming of God's kingdom and the liberation of people from all forms of oppression is the primary focus of his healing ministry. Thus his casting out of demonic spirits in the gospels is a sign of the presence and power of the kingdom of God (Lk 11:20, Mt 12:28). Our ministry is to proclaim and practice the healing work of Jesus Christ.

How do we effectively discern the work of the Holy Spirit and the evil spirits? From an Indigenous perspective, possible signs of possession by an evil spirit, include abnormally violent action, abnormal sickness, evil manifesting itself in dreams.

Is exorcism a relevant matter in your area/region/situation? How do you deal with this? What is your church's view on this matter? If the church's view/position does not seem to help those suffering from such phenomena as “demon possession” what approach(es) would you suggest?

If symptoms are unclear, people are referred to doctors or hospitals or are prescribed herbal or modern medicine. But when these fail, people will go to a pastor or a *bobolizan*.

In our societies, and especially among Indigenous Peoples, exorcism is being practiced mostly to drive away evil spirits which hold an individual, family or community in bondage. Jesus also drove away spirits which reduced

a human to a nonentity. This is one of the special practices of the *bobolizan*, who will bring healing and communal and social harmony by discerning and driving away evil spirits, or giving good advice.

Are these relevant/important issues in your church? If so, how do you deal with them? In your view are these things all a matter of “luck” or “chance”? Are they a matter of human responsibility (effort or lack of effort)?

Holistic healing as liberation

From the Indigenous Peoples' perspective, healing is understood in different ways: physical, spiritual, mental, psychological, emotional, etc. On the one hand healing is understood as reconciliation with those forces that oppress and dominate the vulnerable. On the other, it is a liberation from the oppressive forces that control and subjugate human beings and God's creation. It can also be seen in terms of the restoration of friendship and establishing a sustainable relationship between humans and God, among humans and with God's creation. Healing is holistic with a special emphasis on the relationship with mother earth and animals. Healing is a process which does not take place overnight.

How can the church live out this understanding?

In Indigenous spiritualities, awe, wonder and fear lead to the worship or propitiation/appeasement of the spirits.

What moves you to worship God? Do awe, fear and wonder have a place amidst all that motivates you to worship God?

Worship is the channel to communicate with the spirit(s) in order to seek favors as well as to appease and to reconcile. Indigenous Peoples are not overly concerned with complex doctrinal reasoning or elaborate rituals but rather with the implementation of their belief system. In other words, events are interpreted mostly as experiences of the divine/spirits. In worship, they use simple and down-to-earth rituals and practices to meet their needs, some of which are blood sacrifices, offerings of grain, wine, fruit and betel leaves. In other words, local and easily available and affordable resources are offered. The community meal comprises sharing the sacrificial offering and reinforcing community consciousness and solidarity. The offering symbolizes the overcoming of evil as well as being a token of gratitude.

What is the significance of “offering” or “sacrifice” in our worship?

Such Indigenous forms of art as painting, music, dance, song, the way of narrating myths, etc., though simple, reflect a clear understanding of the meaning and purpose of the various stages of life as well as life in its totality in relation to the spirit(s). These methods and means of communication not only challenge, but also transform the view and way of life. They provide possibilities for varied and creative ideas for liturgy, ritual and healing worship in the church.

A striking feature of these Indigenous communities is the spiritual and ritual status of women. In almost all the communities we have heard from, the ritual experts were almost always women. This is a feature, which is on the decline as these communities become increasingly “modernized.” Women ritual experts and women priests not only took care of the ritual needs of the community but were also the custodians and nurturers of tradition and other forms of knowledge, such as traditional beliefs and practices, medicine, social norms, etc. This role and status of women in Indigenous communities have facilitated the participation of women in community matters, and the appreciation of women’s contributions. This is most definitely a challenge for the church which has not adequately acknowledged the dynamism and potential of women.

How would women enrich the ritual and worship life and ministry of the church? Reflect and then share your experiences which validate and amplify the above proposals for inculturation.

Psychological difficulties and societal stress are now recognized as causes of sicknesses as well as personal and relational difficulties. On the other hand, some believe difficulties experienced in money matters, marriage (e.g., Muslim—Christian marriages), business, etc. are also the work of evil spirits. In other words, these spirits are now manifesting themselves in different ways. The best answer is Bible study and other forms of spiritual training. In this regard, human sin is often the cause of human difficulties at all levels of society.

What are some of the cultural expressions that have potential for transforming the individual’s view and way of life?

The Indigenous way of life is guided by a rather simple set of “do’s” and “don’ts” which require little interpretation. The communitarian way of life provides for the care of the elderly, orphans, strangers and widows. Respect for el-

ders, sharing, honesty and transparency, forgiveness, relationality and accountability to other members of the community are essential features of Indigenous morality and ethics. Offenders and violators are corrected and disciplined by and within the community through a process that enables the individual to acknowledge guilt, repent and be reformed. Such values and processes challenge the church and society.

What processes do you have within your church that enable individuals to own guilt and be reformed and accepted back into the community?

The injury inflicted by humans on their relationships with one another, on nature and the cosmos as a whole, either due to violent behavior or the violation of the ethical laws, is in need for healing. It is not just limited to the Indigenous Peoples, but the whole of God's creation.

Identify the areas in your own personal, community and societal life where healing is necessary . Identify the causes that give rise to disharmony and stratification in your own context.

Healing is necessary in personal life, family life, community life, in society (ethnicity), among nations and religions. Injury is caused especially to the marginalized in our communities—women, children, people of the land—either because of human greed, oppressive systems and structures, or class and caste distinctions. Systems, structures and class and caste distinctions are human made. While they are supposed to serve human relationships, they are normally exploited by those in power. Because of this, some sections in our society are never able to enjoy their rights and privileges. Humans have caused destruction to God's creation, the mother earth, natural resources, animals, etc., either because of irresponsible stewardship or exploitative greed or both. These are some of the areas where healing is necessary.

Healing is the will of God, because when God created the whole world, God saw it was good (Gen 1:31). When the relationship between humans and God was broken, God wanted this relationship to be restored and for humans to live in the right relationship with God, one another and God's creation. In the early chapters of Genesis, salvation is seen as liberation. In our society, humans are suffering from different sicknesses in all realms of life, either due to ignorance, innocence, exploitation or other factors. Due to a fatalistic attitude (e.g., *karma* in the Indian

context) some people make only very little effort to be healed. Many accept suffering as either being God's punishment or God's will. They prefer to live with sickness and look for a better tomorrow or a better life in their next incarnation. Others use the name of God to oppress and suppress the weaker sections of God's creation. There are those who are not healed due to their ignorance. Healing aims at enhancing life and facilitates an harmonious, dignified life.

Identify the reasons why some people do not want to be healed. Identify the attitudes and approaches of people and systems and structures in our church and society that hinder the healing process.

Because of our prejudices, excluding attitudes, traditions, ideologies, identities, worldviews, lack of respect for and understanding of others the healing process is not taking place in our individual lives, communities, societies and the whole of God's creation. Moreover, dominant religious ideologies hinder the healing process. We are not able to accept those who are different. We hesitate to open our hearts and ears to listen to what others say to us. We look at others from our own perspective and with our own expectations. We fail to recognize that plurality is a gift from God, which will equip us to live in harmony and neighborliness. While we feel that there is nothing we can learn from others, there is in fact much we can learn from one another for our own mutual enrichment and empowerment. We tend to impose our own thoughts and philosophy on others, which is a big hindrance in the process of healing.

Can the church learn from these leaders and their practices? Could they be practiced in the church? How important is dialogue in the healing process?

Self realization and answering questions such as, Who are we? Who are we with? What is the purpose of God in our lives? mark the beginning of the whole healing process. Once a Chinese pastor said, "God reform the whole world, but begin with me." It is important for us to know what people expect of us and not to impose our own expectations on others. The process of healing can only begin when we accept and respect others as they are, by listening to and being willing to learn from them. This demands being sensitive to their needs and problems and challenges us to become involved in their struggles. Community and society are in need of healing because of our systems and struc-

tures which dehumanize and marginalize people. Indian theologian M. M. Thomas challenges us to address the so-called “demonic forces of second nature” in our churches and societies, such as unjust systems and structures, rigid laws and practices that marginalize and oppress some sections. Healing takes place through the practice of love. Dialogue is an important process in healing as can be seen in our life together in community.

In our churches and church-related institutions, healing is taking place through pastoral care and counseling, hospitals, Christian education, protecting people, solidarity with the victimized and marginalized, the rehabilitation of addicts, caring for people with HIV/Aids and participating in the struggle for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. In our societies, especially among the Indigenous Peoples, exorcism is being practiced. In society, healing is also done by the local leaders (charismatic, both within the church and outside). This is a very close to the Indigenous role of the *bobolizan* (Rungus) the spiritual leader who through healing by driving away evil spirits, or giving good advice, brings communal and social harmony. Among the Indigenous Peoples, the *bobolizan* also bring physical health through herbal medicine.

Identify the areas where healing is necessary; where healing is taking place; how healing is taking place; where healing is not taking place and why not; how you as a member of the church can meaningfully contribute to the whole healing process.

Notes

¹Raymond Lee and Susan Ackerman, “Sacred Tensions: Modernity and Religious Transformation in Malaysia,” in *American Journal of Sociology* 104:3, pp. 934–936.

²*Ibid.*

Ancestors, Spirits and Healing in African Religion: Challenges to the Lutheran Ministry

A study document to be discussed and
complemented

Introduction

Representatives of African Religion and Lutheran churches from many countries in Africa entered into dialogue at the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) study seminar on “Ancestors, Spirits and Healing in African Religion: Challenges to the Lutheran Ministry” from 27 to 30 September 2004, in Johannesburg, South Africa.

After two days of dialogue on study papers, the participants worked in groups to produce this study document. Training institutions and congregations are requested to discuss this document and to send their reactions and inputs to the coordinator of the African follow-up working group, Dr Sylvester Beyanga Kahakwa, Tumaini University-Makumira, P.O. Box 55, USA River, Arusha, Tanzania, e-mail: skahakwa@yahoo.com by 30 September 2005.

Based on the responses, the working group will revise the study document which will be presented at an international consultation in January 2006. This consultation will receive all the regional study documents and produce a concluding study document on “Spiritualism: A Global Challenge to the Church.”

You are therefore invited to participate in this ongoing study program which has the following objectives:

- To increase awareness within the Lutheran churches in Africa of the need to understand the concepts of ancestors and healing in African Religion in their respective contexts
- To discover and probe the implications of African spirituality for inter-faith dialogue, Christian faith and particularly Lutheran identity in Africa.

African spirituality

While there are many definitions of spirituality, the study group chose to work with the following definitions and descriptions:

- Spirituality is our connectedness to God, to our human roots, to the rest of nature, to one another and to ourselves. It is the experience of the Holy Spirit moving us and our communities to be life giving and life affirming. Throughout the so-called Third World, spirituality is celebrated in songs, rituals and symbols that show the energizing Spirit animating the community to move together in response to God.
- Spirituality is a cry for life and for the power to resist death and the agents of death. It provides the strength to go on, for it is the assurance that God is in the struggle. It fulfills the quest for self-discovery, self-affirmation, and self-inclusion, so that the whole human community can live fully as human beings created by God.¹

This study deals with ancestors and healing in African Religion both from the traditional religious perspective, consisting of the belief in ancestors and nature spirits, and the African Lutheran perspective.

Basic beliefs in ancestors from the perspective of African Religion

In our understanding, ancestors are “departed” parents, members of a family or a clan who maintain a relationship with and care for the living. They have

special capabilities because they no longer experience the limitations of human beings. Therefore, they are able to mediate between the Creator and the living. The spiritual status they have reached is diversely interpreted. Some African people believe that the ancestors are still parents and not divinities. Thus they are not worshipped but only venerated. There are some Africans who believe that ancestors have reached divine status and can therefore be worshipped. Others deify only the most meritorious ones and consult the rest. Still others see the priests as higher than all the ancestors, therefore they only consult them.

The ways of referring to ancestors in African languages point to some fundamental beliefs and principles:

- Death means a transfer of life from a physical to a spiritual condition. So the dead are not dead, they are within and around the homestead as parents who are still maintaining their parental role. Hence, they are believed to be involved in family affairs.
- The communion between the living and the ancestors never ends. It goes on forever.
- Ancestors are clothed with supernatural power from the Creator. Therefore, they are capable of protecting the members of their family, clan and community wherever these members are.
- Ancestors have needs just like their surviving descendants. It is the responsibility of the living to meet the ancestors' needs. Failure to do so can result in retribution, which could be in a form of sickness or misfortune.

The presence and manifestation of ancestors in the family, clan and community

Ancestors continue to interact with the living through dreams, appearances, visions, sounds, incarnations as animals such as: birds, butterflies, bees, snakes, lions, etc. Sometimes messages are received from them through diviners, mediums, medicine persons or priests.

The role of ancestors

Ancestors perform many roles, for example:

- Unifying families and people, caring for each other, empowering, blessing, rewarding, inspiring
- Protecting families and clans from diseases, evil, enemies, even war
- Mediating between people and the Divinity
- Enforcing discipline in case of social values being corrupted
- Facilitating holistic healing.

Nature spirits and African Religion

Nature spirits and the living

Some African communities believe in the existence of nature spirits as shown in the following stories.²

In our ethnic group, when a boy turns twelve he has to make a bow and go hunting. When I was twelve, I went to the top of the mountain to get a bow for myself. I carried with me a cutlass. I found a tree, but when I tried to cut the tree, I failed. I put the knife down and tried to break off a branch. When I turned around and reached out for my knife, it had disappeared. I looked again at the place where I had put it. The knife jumped and hit me on my forehead. I ran away leaving everything behind.

Normally there are no whirlwinds during the rainy season. Once, when I was coming back from a nearby village at night, I heard a whirlwind coming towards me. I thought that it would pass me by. To my surprise, it followed me until I entered my room; then I heard it retreat. The next day I told the story to my evangelist. He said it was a nature spirit, *yahawala*. It happened again one day. I was returning home when at the place where I had met the whirl-

wind the other day, I saw a pig coming towards me. To my surprise the pig did not make the noise pigs usually make. When I gave way to the pig, it ran into me. So I ran away. This happened at night; again I was told that it was a nature spirit in the form of a pig.

The above stories illustrate that in the African worldview, nature spirits seek to establish relationships with the living in order to possess them or to make them their agents or executioners. When the solicited person resists the offer, s/he might undergo severe attacks in the form of physical or mental hardship. In order to find relief, the person must appease the offended spirit by offering a sacrifice.

If the person accepts the offer, s/he becomes the agent of the spirit with supernatural powers. This category of people is very much feared in Africa.

Nature spirits and the ancestors

Some African communities believe that nature spirits and ancestors are related to each other. They say that some ancestors get their power from nature spirits because some nature spirits are categorized as divinities; therefore they are placed higher in the hierarchy than ancestors. In cases where evil nature spirits attack the living, the ancestors and evil nature spirits fight one another. As protectors of the family, the ancestors oppose the evil nature spirits.

Ancestors and spirits from the perspective of African Christianity

Ancestors

Many African Christians share the belief in the existence of ancestors and nature spirits. But is this acceptable from the Christian point of view? In the past, most missionaries and theologians believed that all ancestors and spirits were agents of Satan, and should therefore be eradicated as quickly as possible. Yet, belief in ancestors and spirits is also found in monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

Some African Christians believe that the African belief in ancestors and spirits made it easy for Africans to grasp the Christian concept and worship

of God and that this was among the factors contributing to a positive response to Christian conversion. In some cases, utterances through mediums encouraged Africans to convert to Christianity. According to Luke 8:28, the utterances of spirits were among the divine signs of identifying Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah and the Son of God: "When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me'."

African churches have different views about the place and role of ancestors. Some churches accept the status and role, others are undecided, and then there are those who reject them.

Some African theologians accept the status of ancestors, which include God and Jesus, but God and Jesus are "above" the common ancestors. Adherents of African Religion do not accept that ancestors are below Jesus.

Some church members have contact with their ancestors and so they accept the ancestors as the living dead, or more actively as *abazaire abahumwire*, parents who are resting,³ whom they commune with. However, resting means neither being inactive nor unconcerned, rather a special state of one's completion or graduation of earthly life, a mandate for ongoing involvement in and care of one's descendants. This concept could be viewed in the light of biblical portrayal, whereby resting does not mean sitting idle. Instead, it is viewing and confirming the work that has been done (Gen 2:1–3). While some Christians doubt as to whether this is a reality or merely a psychological problem, others do not accept these experiences because they look at them as satanic manipulations.

African Christians do not believe that the ancestors are gods. It is a deliberate and intentional distortion of a people's culture to say that Africans worship ancestors, deities, or individuals. Africans do not wish to equate ancestors with Christian saints; the comparison is dangerous and misleading. It smacks of mimicry. African Religion must be explained and practiced in its cultural context.

Some African theologians have identified God as an ancestor. According to Danquah, the Akan doctrine of God maintains that in Africa, God is perceived as the Great Ancestor, the Father Ancestor, who is the source of all, including all human ancestors. Thus, he is the proto-ancestor or super-ancestor *par excellence*. This is neither a replacement, nor the end of African Christians' recourse to their ancestors. Rather, each side continues to maintain its place and role in the African cultural religious context but in a new way.

Through the relationship with the Father Ancestor, Jesus Christ became our ancestor. Since he was the firstborn among many brethren, he becomes the Father's

only Son and the elder brother among many brethren. For Nyamiti, Christ as an ancestor has become our archetypal model of behavior, and therefore is superior to all African ancestors and all spiritual beings and other cosmic powers.

Nature spirits

Richard J. Gehmann stressed that the Western world is anti-supernatural and naturalistic and thus against the African and biblical views of the spirits.

Evangelicals who believe in the authority of the Scriptures will accept African and biblical views of the spirits as more than mere superstitions and imaginations, but as a reality. The Scriptures teach us about fallen angels and unclean spirits and how they are opposed to God and Jesus Christ. Therefore, to accept the reality of the existence of the spirits, is to accept the truth of the Bible.

The ancient world believed in spirits. This is found in the living literature of the Babylonians, Chinese, Arabs, Greeks, Jews, Persians, Indians, etc. In the Bible, God is sovereign over them all and thus separated from idolatry (Dt 6:4, Isa 43:10–12).

Africans believe that they are surrounded by the spirit world. On the one hand, they believe that both ancestor and nature spirits, the intermediaries between them and the Creator God, inspire them. On the other hand, Christianity is Christ centered, and Christian inspiration is from the Holy Spirit, with Christ as the mediator between Christians and God.

Africans who become Christians are torn because they fail to reconcile the differences between African beliefs, which are part of them, and Christian beliefs. This sometimes leads to syncretism. This is a challenge to the Lutheran church in Africa. As a solution, some African theologians are suggesting a christology that makes Jesus and the Holy Spirit ancestral figures.

It is therefore dialogue that enables us to understand and appreciate each other.

Questions for dialogue

When Grace's mother was about to die, she gave Grace her ring, which had Grace's father's name on it. The mother told her to wear the ring and every time she washed her hands and face, to remember her responsibility to take care of her brothers and sisters. Since her mother's death, Grace has been wearing her mother's ring. On January 6, 2001 she was woken up by a church

choir singing a song accompanied by loud trumpets. The words of the song said: "Listen you Samuel, listen." She still remembers the words and the tune of the song. Grace has written the song in her Bible. Her brother is called Samuel. Grace had been praying for her brother. He was drinking too much alcohol and had lost his job. Everyone was concerned about him. So Grace phoned him, told him what the song had said and that she thought that the song was meant for him. When Grace told her husband about the story, his interpretation was that Samuel must stop drinking alcohol. After one month, Samuel stopped drinking. Up to now he has not touched alcohol again.

Who gave Grace the song? Does this story mean that Grace's mother is in the spiritual world with God? What does this story say about the role of the ancestors? What is your reaction to the story of the ring and the mandate to take care of her siblings and that Grace believes that God has changed things since her vision? How do you define ancestors in your tribe? What kind of relationship exists between the living descendants and the departed parents? Should Christians communicate with their ancestors? What does the Bible say about relationship with the ancestors? What is the role of the ancestors in African families/clans? What influence do ancestors have in your daily life? How do you understand and define spirit? In your life, how do the spirits relate to human beings? What do you think about Rev. John S. Kenan's story? Do you have a similar story in your ethnic group?

Healing

From childhood, Nokuzola had dreams and visions about old people speaking to her. She was very close to her mother who was a member of the Methodist women's guild, *Manyano*. She would share her experiences with her mother but did not take them seriously. When she started teaching at one of the high schools away from her home area, she started menstruating a lot. She went to a doctor but it did not help. She went to see a gynecologist but still she was told that she had no problem in the uterus and that she was not anemic. The bleeding went on for six months. One day, an old woman who was her neighbor, called her and asked her what her problem was. She was instructed to go to her village and tell her mother about the problem. She did. She told her paternal aunt, because that is the cultural procedure. The aunt told Nokuzola's uncle who came to Nokuzola

and told her that she was not sick and that he was going to talk to the ancestors on her behalf. Her uncle also asked her whether since she started working as a teacher she had informed the ancestors about her job. She said that she had not but she was going to do it in December of that year during the school holidays. The day after she accepted to undergo the ritual, the bleeding stopped.

Then she went to University of Cape Town, historically a “white” university, to study for BA (honors) and MA degrees. After she finished, she registered for a PhD. At the time, she had a dream in which she was told to wear a traditional outfit for her MA graduation. While the letter of invitation to the graduation had called for formal dress, she decided to wear her traditional attire with African beads. Then she continued with her PhD. She had another vision of her PhD graduation in which she was wearing beads and carrying a stick of those who have graduated as *sangomas*.⁴ She even knew where she should go for her training. In the meantime she struggled to be motivated to work on her PhD. Through dreams she was told that if she did not accept her call to be a healer, she would not finish her PhD.

Nokuzola was the only girl in her family and very close to her father who died in 1992. After he died, her visions became very strong. Before he died, he had gone to the river and had come back with a stone. He was singing the Christian song, “Who will roll this stone for me?” He instructed all his children that when he died, this stone should be put next to his head and when any of the children come and stand on it and talk to him, he will respond. The stone was put in the cattle kraal until he died. Since then she goes to the grave of her father to talk to him and she feels him with her.

In 1996, she was invited to talk on National Television about African Religion. During the presentation she felt very good but, once off the air, she was feeling sick. Three days in a row, she dreamt of her father who had died telling her that she had made it in life and it was time to fulfill her calling. She still did not do it. She was resisting. As a result, she started getting sick again until she went for training to become a healer. Then she was healed.

Some people say that the story above is common to most Africans across the continent. Do you have similar stories from your own context? What is your personal assessment of this story?

Sickness and healing from the perspective of African Religion

Sickness refers to an imbalance within the human being, the clan and the community that needs healing. The causes are multiple and could be related to ancestral wrath, witchcraft or natural circumstances. Healing is restoring harmony and wholeness in humanity and its relationships: physical, psychological, social, moral, economic, political and spiritual. In order to restore harmony, people consult the ancestors either directly or through a healer.

Some methods of healing

A bishop from Nigeria narrated a story of how, some years ago, he and his aunt were sent to a diviner in order to establish the cause of a problem in their family. On reaching the place of divination, the priest wrote on the ground and asked them to place their hands on the writing. This was repeated over and over again for almost an hour.

Whenever the diviner wrote on the ground and the two of them placed their palms on the writing, the diviner tried to find a meaning. At last, the cause of their problem was identified. They were asked to go home and perform a certain sacrifice and when this was done, the problem was solved.

Two main categories of healing are used:

- Divination, which is used to identify other healing methods such as rituals, herbs, sacrifices, etc.
- Herbal healing where the healer just prescribes the herbs without divination.

Divination is an act in which people are moved by what they feel and believe to be their experience of the sacred. It is this dimension that brings the healer into contact with the sacred and the healer thus becomes an object that serves as medium of the sacred power.

Rituals are healing practices performed by the living for the spiritual world to establish harmony. Rituals can be performed at individual, family and community levels. Sometimes special rituals are requested by ancestors such as bringing back the spirit of someone who died far away from home. In these religious gatherings, the community acts out its various forms of worship.

Through these rituals, unity and healing are achieved. Most rituals are marked by a sacred communion meal, which brings spiritual healing.

Herbs are plants with healing properties. They consist of roots, fruits, tree bark, leaves, vegetables, seeds, etc. Herbs are prescribed by all healing systems around the world. Like other societies, Africans use herbs for healing sicknesses. In Africa, the herbs are given by a diviner or herbalist. Sometimes the knowledge of herbs is shared with the people of the community.

Sacrifices are special rituals of offerings made to the ancestors to ask for the healing of various things, for example: the land, the body, broken relationships, protection, etc.

Categories of healers

The elders, both men and women, play a major role in healing in African Religion. Owing to their wisdom and life experience, they are able to see when harmony is disturbed and if the ancestors are displeased. The elders are the advisors of the community. There is no general trend of gender differentiation as that depends on the roles played in a particular ritual. The paternal or maternal aunts, depending on the type of that particular society (patrilineal or matrilineal), also have special roles to play in the ritual performances of their clans. The paternal aunt plays a crucial role in the health of the brother's children in her clan, and the firstborn male plays a major role in the healing of his clan members.

A curse might be placed on someone by their parents or ancestors. Then the person confesses and discloses what the problem was. The elders will speak on behalf of the person and try to arrange a reconciliation.

Some healing activities are performed by firstborn males or females in a clan. These people, because of their birthright, play key roles in some family rituals.

A diviner is either male or female and uses divination to communicate with the ancestors or the Divine in order to understand causes of sickness and healing rituals or processes. Some examples of divination include: the reading of palms, dancing, falling into a trance, throwing bones or shells, prayers, reading of water, reading of a mirror, etc.

Herbalists heal by giving herbs without divination. They have the gift of knowing particular medicines revealed by the ancestors or given to them in

dreams. They might also learn about medicines from elsewhere e.g., parents, diviners, friends, colleagues, etc.

African healing has areas of specialization among the diviners and herbalists such as, setters of fractured bones; children illnesses; gynecological diseases; widowhood rituals; poisonous bites, etc.

Healing in the African church

Healing in Christianity is based on the Bible as part of God's mission. In Genesis 1, God created the world as a whole. In Genesis 3, sin came and destroyed God's plan for humanity. In the story of Sarah, God intervened and cured her from barrenness. During the period of the Exodus, God healed the Israelites who were bitten by snakes. In the prophets, God worked through the prophets and priests to bring healing. For example, God used Elisha to bring healing to Naaman. In the New Testament, Jesus' ministry included healing. The disciples and apostles too were sent to heal and to preach the kingdom of God (Lk 9:1–6; 10:1–12; Acts 3:1ff.).

When Christian missionaries came to Africa, they established hospitals. Most missionaries rejected African healing and also played down the gift of biblical healing systems, which were more in line with African healing systems. Hospitals concentrate on physical healing and leave out the spiritual causes of sickness, understood by African and biblical healing. Some of the reasons why African healing is rejected by Western Christians is because of its association with ancestors and spirits. Thus, some churches' approach to healing is conservative and limited and still does not accommodate alternative forms of healing. Yet, some Christians would go on their own for alternative healing without asking permission from their churches. Some do so because Western medicine is neither accessible nor affordable for the majority of the African people.

One of the reasons for the growth of African initiated churches and charismatic ministries in Africa is their response to the absence of spiritual healing in the mission churches. Many members from the mission churches are drawn to these churches and ministries to seek healing.

At the same time, some mission churches are accommodating these challenges and have included healing ministry in their services. Charismatic/Pentecostal spirituality is also found in some mission initiated churches in Africa because it resonates with African spirituality.

Conclusion

Jesus Christ is an example for all Christians. Jesus' ministry was holistic. It included physical and spiritual healing. Christianity transcends cultures. Wherever it goes it should be understood in the context of that culture. Therefore, if spiritual healing is central in Africa, it does not make sense that the church in Africa has mainly limited itself to Western healing systems at the expense of African ones.

Questions for discussion:

How do you understand healing in your own ethnic group and what does it include? Where does healing come from? Can God use a Christian to heal a non-Christian? Can God use a non-Christian to heal a Christian? Why not share your stories of healing with others? Questions regarding possible action: What could be done so that concepts of alternative healing are acknowledged and used in our churches? What could be done so that biblical gifts of healing are acknowledged and practiced in the church? (e.g., in special services that feature the prayer for the sick, laying of hands and anointing the sick in the name of the Lord according to Jas 5:13–16). Should Christians be allowed to use traditional herbs and traditionally acceptable methods as long as they can be used in the name of the Lord? (Ex 15: 26).

We hope that this document motivates the churches to commit themselves to working on this topic in training institutions and congregations so as to be able to make an important contribution to the international meeting that will take place in 2006.

Notes

¹ Various EATWOT members, "Spiritualities," in Virginia Fabella and R.S. Sugirtharajah (eds), *Dictionary of Third World Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000).

² Stories from Rev. John S. Kenan of Nigeria about the *yahawala*

³ *Abazaire abahumwirei*, parents who are resting, is a phrase in Haya. The Haya people live in northwestern Tanzania.

⁴ A *sangoma* is an African women healer.

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Throughout its history, the church has been confronted by different spiritualistic phenomena. The essays in this collection seek to provoke reflection and further discussion on how Christians can and should respond to the many forms and practices of spiritualism, and their adherents.

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