

# A critical analysis on African Traditional Religion and the Trinity

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## Note:

This article represents a reworked version of aspects from the PhD dissertation (University of Pretoria, April 2013) entitled 'Church and society: The value of perichoresis in understanding Ubuntu with special reference to John Zizioulas', with Prof. Dr Johan Buitendag as supervisor.

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## Dates:

Received: 04 Feb. 2013  
Accepted: 25 Apr. 2013  
Published: 16 July 2013

## How to cite this article:

Manganyi, J.S. & Buitendag, J., 2013, 'A critical analysis on African Traditional Religion and the Trinity', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 69(1), Art. #1934, 13 pages.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i1.1934>

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To what extent do the resources of African Traditional Religion (ATR) contribute towards Christian theological discourse and benefit the African church? ATR is accommodated in the African Initiated Churches (AICs). The members of these churches aim to be Christian without losing their African identity. ATR is a religion that was practised throughout Africa before the arrival of the Western missionaries. The core premise of ATR is the maintenance of African culture and its main feature is loyalty to the ancestors and the accompanying rituals that express this loyalty. This study addresses the appropriateness of ATR's resources in terms of their contribution to the doctrine of the Trinity. When the early church worshipped God the Father and God the Son (Jesus) in the presence of the Holy Spirit, a tension developed. The questions of monotheism versus polytheism and the nature and position of Jesus within the Trinity were put forward and addressed. The doctrine of the Trinity is uniquely Christian and includes the belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God who alone mediates between God and men. There is, on the other hand, an understanding that Africans worship one Supreme Being and venerate ancestors as intermediaries to the one Supreme Being, without clear roles being ascribed to Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. This article enquires whether the process of Africanisation and contextualisation consciously or unconsciously downgraded Jesus Christ as Mediator who came to reveal who God is and to reconcile humankind to him.

## Introduction

It is an accepted position that the African Initiated Churches (AICs) were formed as a result of the search for a unique African identity and culture. This is the popular assumption amongst many African theologians of which Maluleke (1994) is one example. African identity and culture are preserved in African Traditional Religion. The notion of Ubuntu or communion in ATR is based on the conviction that African life is lived within a community. This study will reveal how Africans within ATR relate amongst themselves and with their ancestors. African Christians continue their veneration and worship of ancestors whilst upholding a Christian identity.

For Erickson the doctrine of the Trinity is what defines the Christian faith: 'Among the religions of the world, the Christian faith is unique in making the claim that God is one and yet there are three who are God' (Erickson 2006:347). Christian theologians accept that this doctrine is at the heart of the Christian faith. Throughout its history, the church has confessed and proclaimed that it worships one God, yet in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The focus of this research is exploring the relationship of the three Persons within the Godhead, and the manner in which that relationship influences Christians within the Christian church in Africa.

## An African approach

There was a common perception in missionary circles that Africa had no prior religion, and hence, was a 'dark' continent. This view and the actions flowing from it were regarded by Africans as using 'the gospel to declare the superiority of Western value systems [and] using this claim to justify European conquest and exploitation of Africa' (Goba 1998:19). Missionaries were not only perceived as turning Africans away from their culture, but were also understood to be undermining African culture by being arrogant, in the sense that they compared African culture to their so-called *superior* culture. Consequently, missionaries were regarded as part, or agents, of the colonising of Africa.

Maimela (1991) claims that the indigenous counter-movement was all about the resistance against domination. He declares that:

it is this kind of resistance to Western culture and religious imperialism that led to the breakaway of the so-called African Independent Churches from the white denominations in the 19th century. (p. 7)

Moila (1991:37) believes that 'Western Christianity had failed to meet the African aspirations.' He continues to say that it created a serious vacuum in their lives. Moila (1991:37) claims that Western Christianity 'has taken from Africans a religion which was functional and useful in their lives.'

## African traditional religion

The faith in ancestors continued to be practised by many African Christians. According to Choon and Van der Merwe (2008:1299), this phenomenon and practice is an 'attempt to preserve good relations with the departed kin.' The practice and the involvement in ancestral rituals should be seen as religiously motivated. Choon and Van der Merwe (2001:1300) state that 'ancestral rituals [are] intrinsically a form of worship.' However, Seoka (1997:5) argues that the rituals and the practices within ATR should not be regarded as the worship of ancestors. Seoka (1997:5) claims that the motive for such an interpretation is to 'exploit and deliberately misconstrue, so as to promote Western religious practice.' Mtetwa (1996:23) goes further and states that 'the use of Western theological and anthropological categories in articulating African rituals and philosophies has to discontinue, precisely for their capacity to distort and confuse.' In the Roman Catholic Church there is the practice known as the veneration of the saints. Mtetwa (1996:23) does not feel comfortable with the use of the term 'ancestral veneration' because it is a foreign term that has neo-colonial connotations.

Both Mtetwa (1996) and Seoka (1997) prefer the use of African terms like *ukuhlabela amadlozi* or *gopaasa badimo*. These terms are used by Mtetwa to explain the ritual of slaughtering an animal. According to Seoka (1997:5), in African religious practice ancestors are serviced, but not worshipped – thus Africans talk of *umsebenzi kababa* or *umama*, meaning that the entire event is called *umsebenzi* [a service] of remembering or thanking the ancestors but with an approach that is similar to worship. The term service is also used for going to church – being called *church service*. In pouring down the beer or water on the ground, Africans communicate with their ancestors, asking for blessings and good fortune.

Mbiti (1969:178) also discusses the use of the term worship. He notes that the word itself does not exist in many African languages. Zulu (2002:476) argues that to worship a human being in the real sense of the word is foreign to Africans. He adds that the word *ancestor* denotes a human being, and Africans worship God alone. Mbiti (1969:178) disputes the use of the term worship, yet he accepts that in the worship of God, in some cases, sacrifices and offerings are directed to one or more of the following: God, spirits and the living dead (ancestors). It is not only offering and sacrifices that are directed to spirits and the living dead, but prayers and invocations are also made.

Turaki (1999:162) comments that, due to the distance between the Supreme Being and Africans, those who follow ATR turn to the 'lesser' beings, that is, African divinities and the ancestors. In the post-exilic period the Jewish nation sensed a distance between them and God, and began to recognise other beings that were closer to God than themselves.

To use African terms like *badimo*, *izinyanya*, *swikwembu* or *abaphansi*, is to use terms that are stronger than the term ancestors. Anyone who speaks South African languages knows that the word *badimo* refers to the gods. The same

can be said about Shangaan because in this language God is *Xikwembu* (singular) and the ancestors are *swikwembu* (plural), meaning 'the gods'. These terms are related and are used by Turaki (1999:80), reflected in the title of his book *Christianity and African gods*, referring to ancestral spirits. The ancestral spirits are part of the African divinities.

Kiernan (1995:22) explains that the living communicate with the dead by regular sacrifice and invocation. Kiernan (1995:23) claims that 'the type of an animal to be slaughtered varies according to economic circumstances which will be accompanied by a beer or grain offering.' These rituals 'revive relationships within the community and between the living and the ancestors' (Mndende 2006:161). It is also a way to revive the relationship between the physical world and the spiritual world.

Chidester in his work *Religions of South Africa* (1992) is one of the few who has written in detail about the process of ancestral ritual. Dealing with the event in whatever way or form there had to be a diviner who in other African languages may be referred to as a *sangoma* or a 'traditional healer'. Chidester (1992:9) explains that 'the person is a specialist expert in communicating with the ancestors and who may also be able to pass on a message to family members.' When an animal is killed, the sacrifice has to be chosen by the ancestor or one that may be acceptable to them. The animal has to be killed by the eldest man in the lineage. There are specific parts of the animal that symbolise something. Chidester (1992:9) explains that 'the bellowing of the sacrificial animal is crucial to the ritual because that cry opens up communication with the ancestors.'

The families in most cases have a hut, a room or an altar where they communicate with the ancestors. If it is a house, Chidester (1992) says that:

it is in that room or hut where ..., a piece of fat from the slaughtered animal is placed by the ritual elder on the fire, to be wholly consumed for the ancestors. (p. 10)

Chidester (1992) wrote his work from research carried out in the Eastern Cape, but the order may differ from one family to another and may differ from a Xhosa-speaking family to a Tsonga-speaking one. The differences may be based on emphasis or points of departure, such as the act of killing the animal and its accompanying rituals. The Zulus, for example, put the skin of the slaughtered animal on their wrist for protection and good luck. The meat is shared amongst the family members in a festive communal meal, and sometimes the food is served with African beer.

Chidester (1992) adds that the ritual concludes with the burning of the bones of the animal. In some African families or nations there is the cutting of hair to symbolise a new beginning. In Shangaan families the ritual is accompanied by a celebration of dance and the sound of drums to welcome the spirits of the ancestors. During the dancing and the noise of drums someone becomes possessed with ancestral spirits and begins to act in such a way that the audience is alerted that a certain spiritual presence of an ancestor is about to

communicate with the gathering. Those who work with that particular person or family member put some garments on that person that are symbolic for the occasion and the possessed person then dances and sings. The song that the person sings to the audience reveals who the ancestor is that has possessed the particular member. After dancing to that song the possessed person speaks and the audience is aware that they are communicating with someone from the dead.

The question of worship is also discussed by Chidester (1992). To him:

the answer to this question has turned to large extent on what might be understood by 'worship', but some commentators argue that ancestors were not worshipped but were treated with the same kind of attention that was owed to living elders. (p. 11)

But no one can deny the fact that sacrificial offering to the gods exists, which is a ritual that has been practised from the earliest history of the human race. In Acts 14 at Lystra Paul prayed for a sick person who was healed, and the people brought some oxen to offer sacrifices for Paul and Barnabas, because the people regarded them as gods – the gods Jupiter and Mercurius. It is also known that in ancient times some of the kings were elevated to the position of a god, as reported by Moila (1987:23). In Egypt Moses was regarded as one of the gods by the Egyptian priests because of the miracles that he performed. In a ritual of sacrificial offering there are some activities or symbols which are interpreted according to each nation, clan or family. This is also hinted at by Chidester (1992) when he says that:

in the history of religions, sacrifice has been interpreted in a number of different ways, depending upon which aspect of the ritual has been emphasised like in the passages of life, just after the birth of a child or giving a child a name, or for circumcisions. (p. 12)

Whatever the event by the family whether it is called *ukuhlabela amadlozi* [sacrificing for the ancestors] or *gopaasa badimo* (same meaning), the activities are loaded as activities that signify worship.

According to Mbiti (1969:1), 'Africans are notoriously religious so much so that religion permeates permanently into all departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it.' Mndende (2006:161) is in agreement with Mbiti (1969) when he acknowledges that:

religion is part of the fibre of society; it is deeply ingrained in social life, and it is impossible to isolate and study it as a distinct phenomenon; therefore when members of a family clan gather together in a sacrificial ritual for the ancestors that is a religious activity in honour to an ancestor or ancestors. (p. 161)

It may be regarded as a service to the ancestor or remembering them but all the activities within that event make it a religious event. The slaughtering of an animal, the pouring down of beer or water and the dancing, all are done with the focus on the ancestors.

Another point to be considered is the position of the ancestors between human beings and God. First, Moila (1989:23) gives us some names that are used by Africans in reference to God.

In addition to the known names like *Modimo*, *Xikwembu*, *uNkulunkulu*, Moila includes others, such as *Kgobeans*, *Lebepe and Khutsoane*. These names are largely used by the people who speak Northern Sotho, especially those who are from Sekhukhune. Moila further explains that *Kgobeane* comes from *Kgobe* meaning son of *Kgobe*. He says that it is not clear what *Lebepe and Khutsoane* mean. God is also known as *Mnopa-Batho* [the Creator of humankind] and *Motlhodi* [Creator or Initiator]. According to Moila these names that mean 'Creator' are an influence from Christianity. Moila and most African theologians and scholars are in agreement that the ancestors have a position of power higher than human beings which is closer to that of God. Donders (1986:11) says that the African ideas of God as the Creator are not the same as the Christian ideas about God as the Creator. Africans believe that human beings came out of a hole in the ground; maybe this is the reason why sometimes the ancestors are being referred as 'the ones from below' or 'the ones from the ground'. When praying to the ancestors Africans pour water, beer or blood on the ground and claim it is for the ones from the ground. For this reason Moila (1989:23) correctly points out that to worship God as Creator in Africa is an influence from Christianity.

From the discussion above it is arguably true that Africans believe that they originate from sources other than God. This may have some implications for the relationship between God and the African people. Turaki (1999:86) is aware of the fact that even though Africans generally have an awareness of and belief in the Supreme Being, the truth is, this Supreme Being is not known to have been exclusively worshipped by traditional Africans. Africans are aware of the existence of the Supreme Being, but being aware does not mean Africans have a relationship with God the Supreme Being. A person may be aware of other political parties but this does not mean that he or she votes for those parties. Africans are aware of the Supreme Being, yet he is too remote or transcendent. According to Turaki (1999:162), the reason why God is remote 'is that human beings ha[ve] done something which offended God.' There are some scholars like Turaki (1999:162) who argue that Africa never had altars or temples built for this Supreme Being. Some argue that, since Africa has names for God, worship directed to the Supreme Being exists. But the means to approach the Supreme Being is through what Turaki and others call *intermediate directions*. Mbiti (1969) asserts that:

it is a widespread feeling among many African people that man should not or cannot approach God alone or directly, but that he must do so through the mediation of a special person or other beings. (p. 68)

Mbiti (1969:68) explains further that 'the living dead occupy the ontological position between the spirits and human beings and between God and human beings.'

Although Africans are notoriously religious in all that they do in life, being religious does not reveal much about God, but more about Africans and their rituals. It seems Africans do not question the reality of God, because it is a given. The question is never asked, therefore the answer is not provided.

Without the question of the reality of God, a vacuum is created. Discussions of who God is and how to relate to him are lacking. In African languages there are names for God or the Supreme Being, but there are no historical events that inform the names Africans have for God. There seems to be no revelation of God in history. But maybe Africans are not looking in the right direction. Africans perceive a distance between them and God or the Supreme Being. The ancestors are closer to the African people, whilst the ancestors are regarded to be closer to God. It is not clear what the implications and functions of the closeness of the ancestors to God are. When Africans offer sacrifices and prayer to the ancestors, which suggests that the ancestors have the ability to hear prayers, but it is not clear what the prayers mean to the ancestors. This implication is revealed in Khathide (2003) who observes:

deeply committed Christians faithfully attending church services on Sunday, praying to God who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, but in time of need or existential crisis, they turn to the local Shaman (*Inyanga*) for healing, to a diviner for guidance and to an exorcist, traditional or spiritual that is, for deliverance from spirit oppression. (p. 14)

Once more the words of Khathide (2003) suggest the closeness of Africans to their ancestors rather than to God or the Supreme Being.

So far the evidence suggests that Africans have a closer relationship with the ancestors than with God or the Supreme Being. The involvement of ancestors in African life may imply that God has a lesser role in influencing African life. Yet some perceive that ATR is a preparation for the Gospel. This is the historical background of Africans who moved out of the missionary churches to churches that accommodate their African culture. It is as if they were going back to what they were before encountering Western missionaries, but they were going back as Christians. Yet it is not clear whether Africans justify ATR using the categories and resources from Christianity, or the other way round: whether they interpret Christianity using the ATR resources and categories of thinking. This raises the question of the relationship between Jesus as the Mediator and Africa.

## Jesus in Africa

Maluleke (1994) asserts that:

Jesus in Africa needs to be understood to refer to how black and white Christians in the light of past discrimination, racism and artificial separation, can come together as participants in a largely homogeneous culture perceive and proclaim Christ. (p. 56)

On the christological debate Maluleke (1994:57) says 'in Africa, Christ is the healer, liberator, ancestor, mediator, elder brother, the crucified one, head and master of initiation and the black messiah.' At the end of his article one senses that Maluleke has not gone far enough in saying something about the identity and the role of Christ in the African worship of God. Perhaps he should have explained further how Jesus is 'the healer, liberator, ancestor, mediator, elder brother and the crucified one.' In 1997 Maluleke published an article titled 'Will Jesus ever be the same again? What are the

Africans doing to Him?' It seems that in Africa Jesus must be taught how to be an African. This begs the question whether there is still room for him to transform African life. Maluleke (1997) points out:

when the question of the relation between Jesus and Africans is raised, it is often in terms of what Jesus has done for Africa and Africans – or at most what He has done with them. (p. 13)

In response he puts forward a view of how Africans have appropriated him. But does Jesus need any appropriation or is it human teaching that needs to be appropriated by their relationship with him? Maluleke (1997:14) indicates that 'Africans have done a lot to Jesus, perhaps as much as He is supposed to have done to them.' But it seems here the discussion is about what Africans have done to Jesus. There is a need for African theologies to focus on what he has done for Africans! African theology has focused persistently on the evils of Europeans and their culture against the culture of Africa. This has been done consciously or unconsciously at the expense of God's revelation and relationship with Africans through Jesus Christ.

Maluleke (1997:14) makes the assurance that there is only one Jesus who cannot be duplicated. In other words, the Jesus who is being presented by Africans is the same as the one Paul of Tarsus preached when he said 'I preach Christ and Him crucified.' But can an African theologian say 'when a person is in Christ he is a new creature. The old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new' (2 Cor 5:17, KJV)? In African theology it seems that when Christ is in Africa, he becomes one of the ancestors. If Christ becomes one of the ancestors, what is the position of God the Father? If Jesus becomes an ancestor to the people, does the Father become an ancestor to the Son? If that is the case, then there is a question about the position of the Holy Spirit. Somewhere the boundaries of the Christian faith are tested.

## Jesus as an ancestor

Mbiti (1971:132) cites expressions that are often used by African people when they speak of dying, namely: 'going to one's Fathers', 'going home', 'be taken away or be received', 'departed'. 'Going away' in an African worldview implies going to the spiritual world, because the spiritual world is as real as the physical one. Amongst other things, Mbiti (1971:132) claims that 'there are mountains, rivers and trees; those who have died as babies continue to grow; God is the Originator and Sustainer of all things', and this includes the living dead and the spirits. At the point of death a person becomes part of the 'living dead' and joins other members of his or her household who have preceded him or her in the spirit world. This person would from time to time visit the family. Mbiti (1971:132) states that some may see the person and some may not. Those who are lucky enough to see the person are the elderly. However, the revelation of God is not based on luck but on grace and is for all generations and age groups. Luck suggests that only a few can 'see', depending on how lucky they may be, but the grace of God is for all.

.....  
1.Kings James Version.

There is no fear whatsoever concerning the presence of the person. The person does not inform the family about the world of the spirits. After three to five generations, when no one in the family is there to recognise him or her, the living-dead person changes and becomes a spirit.

According to Mbiti (1971):

the understanding of African Christianity is that since Jesus died and was seen by some walking the streets of Jerusalem, he is regarded as living dead. When Jesus died on the cross He went to meet others. (p. 153)

Those who accept Jesus and partake in the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist are to be joined with the spiritual world. Water baptism is symbolised as death – ‘the sacramental death when baptising a person is regarded as the doorway into the New Testament world of the spirit’ (Mbiti 1971:153). Mbiti further explains that the saints commune with God and the whole of heaven. The Christian practice of sharing the Eucharist, eating the body of Christ and drinking his blood, is regarded to be the same as Africans sharing their meal with the living dead (ancestors). In Christianity the two worlds of the living and the living dead overlap in Jesus Christ, and the goal is to transform and emulate the numerous African traditions that are associated with Jesus.

Beyers and Mphahlele (2009:38) began their work by relating to what an ancestor is, whilst Afeke and Venter (2004:47) explain what African views concerning ancestor veneration are. But the concern here is about Jesus as an ancestor. In the work of Afeke and Venter (2004:47) he is seen as ‘the supreme ancestor’. Some even go further and say ‘Jesus is the greatest of all ancestors’ (Afeke & Venter 2004:47). Since a person according to the beliefs of ATR becomes an ancestor after death, and Jesus continued to speak and eat after his death, this qualifies him to be an ancestor. Christ, by virtue of his incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension into spirit-power, is seen as the Supreme Ancestor by some African theologians (Afeke & Venter 2004:47). The suggestion is that ‘African Christians be encouraged to communicate with their ancestors within the context of the Eucharist.’ During the Eucharist ‘Christians can pray to the greatest of all ancestors’ (Afeke & Venter 2004:52). It is believed that human beings have Jesus as their ancestor and, similarly, Jesus has God. Christ and those who died are united as one family.

Mogoba and Meko presented a paper at the Theological Society of South Africa in June 2007, titled: ‘Saints, martyrs and ancestors: An African reflection on the communion of the living and the dead.’ Their suggestion is that African Traditional Religion has enriched Christianity rather than threatened it. In ATR God is understood to be an intangible, invisible phenomenon able to penetrate and defuse things. God is extremely great and far removed from humankind and therefore ancestors act as mediators between them and God. This poses the question as to why God sent his Son to die an incredibly painful and shameful death in order to bring humankind back to him, when there was such an easy way, namely through the ancestors.

## Talk about trinity in Africa

The African perspective of the Holy Trinity is formulated without a clearly defined role and position for Jesus Christ. The human context plays a significant role when doing biblical studies, so sin is not viewed in terms of the Africans standing in a relation to God; the focus is rather the wrongs that were perpetuated by colonisers and oppressors upon Africans. Maybe this is the reason that not many African theologians attempt to discuss the triune God. To make up for this lack, this study will turn to a brief investigation of three theologians, namely Ogbonnaya (1994), Nyamiti (1996) and Kombo (2009).

### Ogbonnaya: Communitarian divinity

The work of Ogbonnaya (1994) is titled *On communitarian divinity: An African interpretation of the Trinity*. He applies his mind to the community which is the basis of relationships for Africans and he makes some links with the plurality of God within the Trinity. According to Ogbonnaya (1994:1) ‘communality, relationality and fundamental interconnection underlie the African mode of seeing and being in the world.’

Ogbonnaya approaches the Trinity from the position of ‘many’, as in community. The challenge he faces is what kind of community to focus on. He picks up the concept of relationship from interacting with other scholars. Ogbonnaya (1994:2) speaks of ‘rural communities where personal relationships are characterised, explained and guided by traditional rules.’ There are face-to-face relations that are spontaneous. There are also some who view community as events that join people together, not social groups. Individuals may be connected by the spirit, Ogbonnaya says (1994:4), pointing to a common human nature. There is no community without the past and the future. Historical events are shared by the community that anticipates a common goal for the future, paying attention to an African-centred perspective on community and interpretation.

Ogbonnaya (1994) contends that:

it can be seen in terms of levels of activity to be part of the community as understood from an African-centred perspective and there had to be an experience of belonging which is a primary activity. (p. 6)

Ogbonnaya (1994:8) further acknowledges that ‘in the context of African people they are surrounded not by things but by beings the metaphysical world is loaded with.’ The implication is that all of humans’ activity and realities of life are connected with spiritual beings. In the African context the relationships go beyond the material world. There is recognition of the extended family and the community, but the relationships transcend geographical boundaries. African life is lived in daily recognition of the ancestors. These relationships between human beings and their ancestors are recognised as openness to the divine. Ogbonnaya (1994:9) further explains that the community is not just a state but a process of being in the world, a process that includes the past, the present and the future. He states that it is within the context of the community that revelation takes place.

Ogbonnaya (1994:13) in his discussion of African divinity introduces a debate about 'the one and the many.' On the nature of the African concept of God the question is: '[D]oes ATR conceive of the divine as an absolute, singular, personalistic God (monotheism) or ... is [it] conceived of in separatist (polytheistic) terms?' Based on the African concept that says: 'I am because we are, and since we are therefore I am', Ogbonnaya (1994:14) states that 'the divine in the African context [is] a community of gods.' Whilst it is true that there are two predominant positions in the debate, Ogbonnaya (1994:14) believes there is a third option. The first position deals with monotheism, the second deals with polytheism. He draws out a third which he calls a *community of gods*.

Ogbonnaya (1994:19) argues that there is no such thing as 'monotheistic radicalism in ATRs'. He regards any African who holds the monotheistic position as being influenced by the West. He believes that those scholars with Western influence accept the concept of God as absolutely personalistic and they continue to speak of the high or great God. It is clear that Ogbonnaya does not believe that ATR follows the worship of one God. He considers the term monotheism to be foreign to ATR. He is dismayed with many African scholars who try to present the existence of an absolute monotheism of a singular personalistic deity in ATRs. He attacks the idea of the Supreme Being because it has a reference to one Superior Person. The use of the name Supreme Being can be used for any other being based on experience and it does not reveal the character of God. Some kinds of experiences may cause a name change for that Being. Ogbonnaya (1994:18) believes that the greatness of any particular God depends on the experience of the individual addressing that God. He reflects on names like Supreme God, Most High God, Father of all and Great Ancestor, that are employed as a means to prove monotheism.

This idea of a Supreme God has a negative influence on the worship and recognition of other gods. It seems to be unable to relate and communicate feelings. Since names like Supreme God 'can convey an idea of a God who is incapable of having children or incapable of being in close familiar relationships', such a one cannot be truly God, according to Ogbonnaya (1994:20). He continues to say that 'a god incapable of working within a community of beings of similar substance would be highly suspect.' From the African perspective to be alone is regarded as a sign of being cursed. Therefore, it is ATR's belief that God cannot be alone or singular because he has to have a community. In trying to avoid the word polytheism Ogbonnaya (1994:20) uses the term 'a plurality of gods'.

If ATR recognises the worship of other gods, is this not the same as polytheism? According to Ogbonnaya (1994:21) 'polytheism is that which separates the divine nature into many disparate parts.' He also suggests that the term polytheism is a Western concept. For Ogbonnaya (1994:21) the use of the terms monotheism and polytheism does not do justice to ATR. Because monotheism and polytheism are inadequate, Ogbonnaya (1994:23) introduces a third category, namely 'divine as community', as a more adequate way of

conceiving of and explaining divinity in African contexts. He further explains that 'divine communalism is the position that the divine is a community of gods who are fundamentally related to one another and are ontologically equal.'

According to the information so far given the two terms, monotheism and polytheism, are inadequate and cannot do justice to and be used within ATR. The names that are used, such as Supreme Being, Holy One, and Father of all cannot properly define the African understanding of God and have come about as an influence from the West. To move from monotheism and polytheism the term that seems to define the African understanding of God is divine communalism. By bringing in the concept of communalism, Ogbonnaya attempts to bring an understanding of the relationship amongst the gods and the gods with humanity. Ogbonnaya (1994:24) indicates that 'plurality is not in opposition to the concept of oneness but it is inclusive of all of the gods.' He admits that amongst the gods there can be one who seems to take prime position, but whoever it is must be regarded as part of the many, not in isolation. He says a god does not cease to be of the same nature with other gods, even if that god has been chosen to represent the rest, because one god is inextricably related to the other gods by virtue of a shared divine nature.

The divine community may sound attractive but it may not mean anything. In polytheism the gods are many but their identity seems to be known. Time and space is not enough to deal with gods from the ancient Near East and their names. The three monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) have an identity for their God, but the divine community seems to have unidentified gods. Ogbonnaya (1994:26) claims 'that there may be a great god among the gods, is unquestionably African, but that this god is the only true god, is not African.' The question is, who are the others, what are their names, and what is their historical revelation?

Africans also accept the concept of oneness but it is in the context of others. The names used for the recognition of one amongst the many is, *Mulungu, Nzambi, Nkulunkulu, Modimo, Xikwenbu* and so on. Ogbonnaya (1994:26) is concerned that the views as to how these two concepts (one and many) are related to each other have not been thoroughly examined. For him the oneness is the power which he calls 'a single all-pervasive power'. Ogbonnaya (1994:26) also maintains that the ancestors are never considered gods. Who then are these gods in Ogbonnaya's divine community?

### Nyamiti: Ancestor and descendant

At this point it is appropriate to bring Nyamiti (1996:38) into the discussion, because he also discusses the doctrine of the Trinity from the perspective of the African Traditional Religion's concept of ancestors. We will mention a few points about the cult of ancestors in Africa, even though there is no uniform system of beliefs. Nevertheless, the cult belongs to the majority of the African people. Nyamiti (1996:39) claims that the reason Africans desire to have many children is

'because by naming a child after the name of an ancestor, the spirit continues living within that family.' The link between the living and the dead is the continuation of the relationship, because no one can be an ancestor of a family that they are not related to. By death an ancestor enters the life of sacred superhuman status, but the power of the ancestor is only linked to the family where the living enjoy the benefit of the dead, as long as they keep on venerating that ancestor.

Nyamiti (1996:44) is of the view that 'the concept of ancestors conveys the understanding that the worth of any human or religious value transcends time and place.' Drawing from African culture Africans live their lives linked and connected to one another beyond the limitation of time and space. Nyamiti (1996:44) urges that 'Africans should be taught to consider any authentic cultural values from any African society as belonging to him or her.' Nyamiti (1996) seems to put more emphasis on African culture than Ogbonnaya (1994). He speaks of African theology founded on common cultural elements, but that does not lead to uniformity in African theology. Scholars will always have different approaches in their theological reflection.

The question is how does one link God and the ancestors? Ogbonnaya focused on the community of divinity, but Nyamiti focuses on the family and culture. In a family, one is born within a relationship. Since there is communication amongst individuals within the family, Nyamiti (1996:48) argues the same for the divine family, namely that 'the communication being through begetting, the only form of mutual contact between these two persons is that which takes place through the Holy Spirit.' Nyamiti (1996:48) states further that 'both the Father and the Son begets Him [*i.e. the Holy Spirit*] through [*spiration* (term used by Nyamiti to denote the act of breathing)] and communicates Him to each other as an expression of their mutual love.' Those who love each other give themselves to one another.

Another point that distinguishes Nyamiti (1996) from Ogbonnaya (1994) is the acknowledgement of one Supreme Being, which contrasts with that of the community of the divine favoured by Ogbonnaya. Nyamiti (1996) reveals the closeness of the ancestors to the Supreme Being. This is also in contrast with Ogbonnaya's position who does not accept that Africans worship their ancestors. In addition, Nyamiti (1996) argues that, owing to their superhuman condition and nearness to the Creator, the ancestors are sometimes considered mediators between the Supreme Being and their earthly kin, with the result that the living relatives only turn to the Supreme Being as a last resort. The living receive benefits from their ancestors, such as protection from sickness, long life, great wealth or many children. In return the ancestors demand loyalty from the living relatives in the form of prayers and rituals. In some communities the Creator is regarded as an ancestor.

Applying the category of the relationship between the living relatives and the ancestors, Nyamiti further explores the relationships within the Trinity. Nyamiti (1996:49) says that

the Father and the Son communicate the Holy Spirit to each other with ancestral gifts and oblations as a token of their mutual love, homage and gratitude. He says that God the Father is, analogically speaking, the ancestor and ancestress of his Son and the latter is his true Descendant.

### Kombo: African names

Kombo (2009:133) starts his article by investigating the work of Idowu, Mbiti and Setiloane. He also inquires about African gods before the arrival of missionaries. He argues that the missionaries ignored the African pre-Christian experience of God. This approach brought questions about the relationship between the African God and the Christian God. He introduces the notion that ATR prepared Africans for the acceptance of Christianity. When the Bible was translated into African languages, local names were used for God. According to Kombo (2009:133), the true significance of this kind of conceptualisation is that the God of the African pre-Christian tradition has turned out to be the God of Christian worship. He juxtaposes it with the way YHWH took the name of the Canaanite god EL. When YHWH took the name EL, He was able to penetrate the Semitic world. Similarly, in Africa God utilised the African world and their worldview by taking on names like *Modimo*, *Nyame*, *Nyasaye*, *Ngai*, *Mulungu*, *Xikwenbu* and so on. It is unclear, however, whether Christianity was a way to help Africans to discover the God of pre-Christian history or whether it made Africans repent and turn towards the God of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Kombo (2009:133) concludes that when Africans use African names for God, its trinitarian character is accepted and in this way the African God is Christianised and the African religious heritage obtains a Christian meaning. Just like Nyamiti (1996), Kombo (2009:135) recognises monotheism in Africa. He notices that pre-Christian Africa had a form of monotheism that has been called primitive monotheism or diffused monotheism. But he denies the concept of polytheism. Kombo (2009:136) maintains that 'pre-Christian African religious consciousness had no place for polytheism, meaning that there was no worship of many gods.' His argument is based on the fact that no temple was ever built for an idol or image worshipped in Africa. He adds that spirits are spirits of the people who have died, not of gods.

Kombo (2009:136) proposes 'a modified monotheism where Christ and the Holy Spirit shall be situated in the centre of primitive monotheism.' Kombo's standpoint is similar to the Western evangelical position. He does not adopt too much terminology and categories from African Traditional Religion such as ancestors and other divinities, but recognises the role and position of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Africans in their worship of God continue to experience God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

All scholars writing from an African perspective interpret the Trinity in an African way. So far three different approaches have been discussed, namely, (1) Ogbonnaya recognises the Trinity as a community of divinity and rejects both

monotheism and polytheism; (2) Nyamiti recognises God as the ancestor who has an ancestral relationship with his son, whilst (3) Kombo explores the African names employed for the divine in African languages and claims that in those names the Trinity is implied. All three avoid using Jesus as a means towards the doctrine of the Trinity. Kombo (2009), who can be regarded as a new approach to the debate, even tries not to involve the ancestral category whilst providing a very insignificant space for the incarnation.

The focus now turns to the closing discussions of the three African theologians. Beginning with Ogbonnaya, one realises that he is strong on the matter of the relationship within the community. Ogbonnaya (1994:68) discusses the term *dispositio* and considers it 'closer to the African concept of intergenerative interconnection based on a never-ceasing belonging within the community that fosters a continual and unbroken communication.' Ogbonnaya (1994:68) regards *dispositio* as a reference to the internal relation between the various dimensions of a person – the body, soul and spirit – which are in continuous interaction with one another. The explanation of the word *dispositio* suggests the incarnation rather than the Trinity, because it is the internal relation between the various dimensions of a person: the body, soul and spirit. But, if the dimensions of a person are only body and soul due to the dualistic approach of some of the church fathers, what about the spirit?

Using African categories, Nyamiti regards the Father as an ancestor who begets a Son, thus calling him a descendant, and the Holy Spirit as a gift from the Father to the Son. Nyamiti (1996) argues that:

all this is due to the fact that in the African mind, ancestorship and descendancy are necessarily and immediately connected with sacredness; an ancestor is always conceived as one who is in a superhuman state which enables him to have a sacred or mystical relationship with his earthly kin. (p. 50)

From what has been pointed out concerning the relationship between the living family and the departed ancestor, the implication is that one of them has to be in the world of the living and the other one in the world of the dead. If God the Father is regarded as an ancestor, he had to die first. In reality it is the Son who died. The relationship of a descendant and the ancestor suggests a form of hierarchy which was the position of the heretics in the early church. During the time of the church fathers when the Holy Spirit was regarded as a gift or an oblation, as an expression of the love between Father and Son, it made the Spirit just a property or an object to be used. Then both the Son and the Holy Spirit lose their position of equality with the Father, which the Cappadocian Fathers advanced.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Gregory of Nyssa (n.d.) writes that 'the three persons are in closest consequence and union with each other, before all creation, before all the ages, before anything whatever of which we can form an idea' (in *On the Holy Spirit: Against the Macedonians*); see also Gregory of Nazianzus who says: 'This is my position to worship God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, they are regarded as three persons in one Godhead, undivided in honour and glory and substance and kingdom' (in *The fifth theological oration: On the Holy Spirit* – Oration 31); lastly, Basil states that 'the Holy Spirit is inseparable and wholly incapable of being parted from the Father and the Son' (in *De Spiritu Sancto* 16.37) and in *De Spiritu Sancto* 16.38 explains the fellowship of the Spirit with the Father and the Son.

Towards the end of his study Kombo (2009:139) discusses the incarnation: God endured to become man and to suffer: 'The uniqueness of Christ must mean that He is not just a *friend, liberator, elder brother, king/chief, healer, master of initiation* and so on; Jesus is God' (2009:140). Actually, Kombo's work is only African because of his title *The Trinity in Africa*. He has moved from the approach of Jesus as an ancestor and liberator to Jesus as being God according to the Scriptures. Kombo departs from the African position that says that salvation and deliverance belong to God. He declares that the Bible states that salvation and deliverance belong to Christ. If Kombo would be one of the Cappadocian Fathers, he would use the Father rather than just God and he would hold that salvation belongs to the triune God. It is true that Jesus is God, but he is God within the Trinity united to the other two Persons of the triune Godhead.

To say that God is a spirit is first and foremost scriptural. Kombo (2009:141) explains that pre-Christian Africa also perceived God as a spiritual being without a material body. The African conceptual framework has spirits as a special category (Kombo 2009:141). The challenge is an adequate interpretation and translation from the English to the African languages of words like *spirit, wind* and *breath*. In English wind is not the same as spirit. *Moya* is the word used by most South African languages. The spirit is *moya*, the wind is *moya* and breath is *moya*. The Holy Spirit is also called *moya* but they add Holy (*Oyingcwele, Okwetsima*) to qualify it. There is also the challenge of how to convey the meaning of Holy, because it is similar to pure.

## The African response to the creeds

The creeds are officially a product of the church and are therefore part of Christian tradition. The African Christian community of faith needs to take ownership of the creeds, especially the Nicene Creed. Historically the debate on the nature of Jesus Christ, his position and relationship with the Father, began here in Africa. When the debate started to emerge around 311 CE, Arius, Bishop Alexander and Athanasius were in Egypt. Even when the Nicaean debate continued beyond 325 CE, Athanasius spoke from Egypt in Africa. In addition, it has been stated that the term Trinity came from one of the sons of Africa, Tertullian. The question is what resources and categories of thinking can African theologians use?: 'We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible' (Wilhelm 1911).

African theologians and scholars like Moila (1989), Kombo (2009) and many others use African terms for God like *Xikwembu, unKulunkulu* and *Uthixo*. It is assumed that these refer to the God of Christianity. Although Mbiti (1969) and others have testified that Africans believe in that God, the debate is on how Africans relate to him and how close he is to Africans and how they perceive his involvement in their lives. Some like Ogbonnaya (1994) have a problem with the term Supreme Being because to them it is not African. In response it must be stressed that Christians relate to God the

Father through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. There is unity and plurality, yet to worship any other deity within this oneness will violate the holiness of the triune God.

The challenge may be in the words *we believe in one God*. The title of Turaki's (1999) book is *Christianity and African gods*. The title itself highlights the challenge for Africans to talk about their belief in one God. The term Supreme Being may suggest other beings close to this Supreme One. This may also be the reason why Ogbonnaya (1994) says that the concepts of monotheism and polytheism are inappropriate in the African context. In the context of community and Ubuntu, which is an African concept, one suspects that negative aspects are attached to a single Supreme Being. The concept of Ubuntu cannot imply to be outside others or to be in isolation. Turaki (1999:250) concludes that 'the fundamental difference between ATR and Christianity lies in the belief of the plurality of gods or divinities accompanied in religious practices.' He continues to argue that the concept of the hierarchy of beings is contrary to the biblical and Christian theology of the triune God. To approach the oneness of God as a unity in plurality may be fitting, but the question will still be the nature of the members who form that plurality.

The Father Almighty may fit into the discussion of Nyamiti (1996) about ancestors and descendants. One cannot be a Father without any relationship. Nyamiti (1996:43) puts forward that the link between the living and the dead is a continuation of a relationship, because no one can be an ancestor of a family that they are not related to. The challenge is how to apply that to the 'Maker of all things visible and invisible'.

Chidester (1992:6) and Turaki (1999:116) give evidence and provide reasons why God cannot be regarded as the Creator in the understanding of ATR. According to Turaki (1999:116) 'many traditional African myths and legends attribute the creation of the world, nature and humans to a lesser being.' He says that the myths and creation stories repeatedly make mention of a lesser being and how this lesser being contributed to the making of the world to be less than perfect. Human beings in some parts of Africa are believed to have come from a hole in the ground and not through an act of creation. But the notion of visible and invisible reality does exist within the worldview of African people. When and if an African accepts God the Father as the Creator, it is easy and possible to link God with the visible and invisible reality through the ancestors. Africa has an active link with the invisible world. The challenge is to explain how the ancestors and God the Father relate in that invisible world. When God the Father began creation, the ancestors were not there yet, but the Father was with the Son and the Holy Spirit: 'And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only begotten of the Father' (Wilhelm 1911).

There are several ways that we may follow to persuade Africans to be more open to Jesus Christ as a means of relating to God the Father. Through the historical event of Jesus Christ as a human being, the best of both the worlds of the divine and the human were brought together, that is, the visible and invisible; eternity and time; heaven and earth. As

a human being Jesus tasted African life in his infancy and experienced the rituals of circumcision and baptism.

An African is used to talking with the ancestors. Similarly, the New Testament records that Jesus talked to his Father and prayed to him. Whilst on earth Jesus was heard and seen by Peter, James and John talking to two individuals who once lived their lives on earth – Moses and Elijah. Kudadjie (1995:77) argues that 'sickness and healing are one area where the practice of spirituality is very often evident both among Christians and traditionalists.' Physical sickness is often seen as an indication of the ill health of the inner being. The same logic is found in the gospels. In Mark 2:1–10, instead of healing the man who was sick, Jesus, 'when He saw their faith said "your sins are forgiven".' Jesus was not only concerned with the man's physical body, but with his entire being and his environment. Again the similarity with Africa can be observed in Mark 7:31–37 where Jesus heals a man that was deaf and dumb by putting His finger into his ears and spitting, after which he touched the man's tongue. Then Jesus said: 'Ephphata' [be opened]. Cunningham (1990:21) explains that 'the Westerner finds in the use of saliva something unhygienic and repugnant.' Saliva consistently has negative connotations in Western culture. In African culture, on the other hand, saliva has positive value. In traditional African society saliva is used by healers to symbolise authority and power.

Another factor that may bring Africans closer to Jesus Christ is sacrificial offering. Chidester (1992:12) points out that 'in the history of religions, sacrifice has been interpreted in a number of different ways, depending upon which aspect of the ritual has been emphasised.' Africans have been involved with ritual and continue to be today. According to Chidester's explanation, sacrifice can involve the killing, offering, expenditure, or consumption of something with highly charged symbolic value. That value may lie in the having, the being or the consumption of that object. In Jesus, Africans do not just have a Priest but they also have a Lamb that was offered as a sacrifice. He understands the penetration of a sharp object into his body and can also communicate better about the function of the blood. The real challenge is about the next line of the Nicene Creed:

... of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made, both in heaven and on earth. Who for us men and for our salvation came down and was incarnate and was made man. He suffered, and the third day he rose again, and ascended into Heaven and He shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead. (Wilhelm 1911)

This part speaks about the relationship between the Father and the Son and about the nature of the Son in relation to that of the Father. The church fathers held that God the Father, the Maker of all things visible and invisible, had to be above his creation in nature and substance. They believed that the Creator could not have the same substance as the created order, for his nature should be superior. Therefore, if Jesus was not created, he is not part of creation but part of the Creator. And if Jesus is part of the Creator, he should be

'of one substance with the Father, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made.'

Theologians like Ogbonnaya (1994) may argue the point of the same substance from the position of 'divine as a community.' The emphasis may be on the relationships within the community, especially on the concept of Ubuntu. Ogbonnaya's conception of the 'community' includes human beings, African divinities and the Supreme Being. What is lacking is the category 'being of one substance with the Father.' It would be an uphill challenge for Ogbonnaya to attempt to bring the other divinities to the level of 'being of one substance with the Father.'

In the discussions about the concept of God in relation to ATR, it is clear that it is never mentioned that the divinities are part of the process of creation. It is accepted that God as the Supreme Being is the Creator; therefore, it can be assumed that other divinities are just part of creation and therefore cannot be spoken of as 'being of one substance with the Father' for only Jesus is 'Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made'.

Ogbonnaya is too general and broad in content, whilst Nyamiti deals with family relationships, especially between a father and a descendant. In Nyamiti (1996) God the Father is an Ancestor and the Son Jesus is a Descendant. Nyamiti (1996) regards the Holy Spirit as the love and the gift between the Father and the Son. By analogy one can speak of a shared surname or clan name. In a family a father may have descendants who are girls or boys. The concept compares better when the father has only one descendant who is male. In this category there was a time when the father was alone or was still a boy without a wife, because within a family the father needs to have a wife to have a descendant. Nyamiti ignores the fact that there can never be a descendant without a mother or a wife.

Kombo (2009) does not attempt to deal with relationships and substance within the Trinity but focuses on the language that is used by Africans when talking about God. He claims that in Africa God has names like *Nyasaye*, *Ngai*, *Xikwembu* and many other names. He concludes that these African terms of identity for God were also used for the Son and for the Holy Spirit.

The challenge for this view is also regarding the following term: 'who for us men and for our salvation came down and was incarnate and was made man.' The question is how does *theology from below*, which puts more emphasis on the horizontal approach based on the African context interpret the coming down of Jesus for human salvation?

## Contextualising salvation in Africa

In this article the theological approach to the teaching of salvation in Africa is similar to that of the teaching of the Trinity in Africa. After the identification of the mistakes and the attitudes of the missionaries from European and other

Western cultures, an attempt is made in order to introduce an approach that is not influenced by Western culture, but by being African in approach and content. Brand (1999) points out that:

although soteriology, or the doctrine of salvation, has always occupied a central place in Christian theology, the shape of soteriology has changed many times as Christianity's centre of gravity shifted to a new cultural context. (p. 193)

Jesus told his disciples to be his witnesses from Jerusalem to all of Judea, to Samaria unto the end of the world. The gospel moved away from the Jewish context where it was influenced by Judaism. Then the nature and position of Jesus Christ needed clarification for the Gentile world, outside of the Jewish context. Similarly in Africa, the Western missionaries had to consider a new cultural context. Brand's (1999:193) understanding is that the doctrine of salvation 'entered into the ways in which it is being conceptualised in new contexts which are often vastly different from a more traditional Western approach.' In addition, Maimela (1990:43) says that 'the concept of salvation and how it should be understood is not as simple as we might suppose.' He states this because throughout the history of the church, theologians in different situations have proposed a variety of understandings of what salvation means.

### The concept of salvation

According to Brand (2002:58) 'the definition of salvation is challenging, for the word is ambiguous.' The reason, Brand claims, for this ambiguity is the use of words such as 'happiness, well-being or beatitude' to refer to certain states of being. Frelich (1994:11) emphasises that 'salvation represents all that was purchased at Calvary.' He continues to say that it covers every phase of our needs and reaches from eternity to eternity. He explains that there are present and future aspects to salvation; it is not only about going to heaven, but also about life today in the now.

Salvation in Christianity seems to be expressed by means of several processes that take place from the moment a person becomes a Christian. This idea is represented by Horne (1991:ix) when he says 'the salvation planned, executed, and applied by the Triune God is manifold in nature.' He says it is comprehended in a series of biblical concepts: *election, calling, regeneration conversion, justification, adoption, sanctification and glorification*. Brand (2002:58) states that 'salvation can be the equivalent of reconciliation or sanctification or liberation.'

When it comes to Christianity in the African context, according to Brand (2002:59) 'the concept of salvation had to be stretched beyond the confines of conventional Christian usage in order to encompass elements from widely divergent religious frames of reference.' He argues against the suggestion that it is a concept unique to Christianity. Salvation is often taken as a key to the very heart of all religions and views of life and as a fruitful basis for comparisons between them. Brand (2002:60) explains that 'the word salvation does not have its origin in Christianity for Christianity found its roots

in Judaism.' Jesus was a Jew; he came to fulfil the Jewish Scriptures and he responded according to the Scriptures. The name Jesus is derived from the Jewish name Joshua. According to *Easton's Bible Dictionary* (1993), Joshua is a Hebrew name which means 'Jehovah is his help or Jehovah the Saviour.' In many passages in the Old Testament God is regarded as the saviour:

the Lord is my rock, in Him will I trust; He is my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my high tower, and my refuge, my saviour, to save me from violent men. (2 Sam 22:3, KJV)

Israel knew their God as a saviour and a stronghold. In the days of trouble, the God of Israel regards himself as a saviour, as in Isaiah 43:11: 'I even I am the Lord, and besides me there is no saviour' (cf. Is 45:21; 49:26, KJV). The understanding of Israel from the Old Testament is that God is the saviour. The New Testament introduces Jesus as a saviour, 'for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord' (Lk 2:11, KJV). The early church also testifies that God has exalted him to his right hand to be 'a Prince and a Saviour', to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins (Ac 5:31).

Brand (2002:60) may be correct in suggesting that 'the word salvation does not have its origin in Christianity.' However, in Christianity the word salvation found the most perfect definition in Jesus and there is no better story that defines and explains the word like that of Jesus the Saviour.

### Salvation from below

Brand (2002:89) opposes the views of theologians who concentrate on the 'sins of the sinner'. Instead, Brand proposes an approach that concentrates on the victim of sin. This view seems to be moving away from the Christian tradition which declares that all human beings are born sinners. Brand (2002:89) claims that God takes the side of the victims, who are the poor and the oppressed. He recognises the role of Jesus in salvation, but instead of emphasising the repentance from sins in general, Brand (2002:92) holds that 'the repentance that is preached must be named: it is repentance for our share of the guilt for the suffering and oppression in South Africa.' If the point of departure is those who are victims of sin, then how does one view the issue of sin in relation to suffering? For Jesus suffered and died for both the poor and the rich, both the oppressed and the oppressor.

### African worldview to salvation

A lot has been said about the holistic approach from an African perspective. Maimela (1991) adds to that discussion that:

[An] African is made fully aware that the individual's life and the pursuit of life are not attainable in isolation and apart from one's fellows because life is communal and is possible only in a network of mutual interdependencies between an individual and his or her community; life in Africa and for an African is viewed as a pursuit of the maintenance of relationships. (p. 4)

As stated in many ways and forms, these relationships include extended family, clan or tribe, ancestors, God and nature.

An African is introduced to these relationships through a process that is called 'rites of passage' (Cox 1998:x). These rites and rituals are subdivided, as illustrated by Cox (1998:x), 'according to the functions they perform for the faith community.' Here are the subdivisions:

- life cycle rituals
- crisis rituals
- calendric rituals.

As a person goes through the process of development, they pass through certain phases of life and relationships. The development begins from the moment of conception and continues after death. According to M'Passou (1998:16), 'a ritual must be performed as soon as a woman is pregnant; the elders in some communities like the Swatis go to the kraal (*Esibayeni*).' There at the kraal the elders communicate with the ancestors to ask them to safeguard the foetus. Then the event proceeds through the introduction of an *inyanga* [traditional healer] where the pregnant woman is given *muti* [African herbs] to give her strength to cope with the challenges of being pregnant. There are also ceremonies that are associated with the birth of the child and the naming of that child. M'Passou (1998:18) further mentions rituals like the burial of the umbilical cord. This is where the child undergoes ritual washing and cannot be touched by other people for a period after that. After a month another ritual is performed where the child is introduced to the larger community and relatives. Africans need to realise the impact of these relationships and accept being part of them. Maimela (1991) adds that:

within these highly charged and dynamic communal inter-relationships, for better or worse, an African cannot avoid experiencing and being influenced by the activities of the individual existence of his or her fellows who shape, mould and channels his or her life's fortunes in certain directions as much as he or she in turn also shapes and influences their lives through the manipulation of certain supernatural forces or spirits. (p. 5)

An African continues living life as part of a community, not in isolation as an individual. Life is lived in connection with those that are alive in the here and now, but also with an awareness of those who have died, yet who are also present in the here and now. Maimela (1991) points out that:

when an African suffers disappointment or frustration, success or failure, when a beloved one falls ill or loses children in succession, he or she is apt to look for the cause, in a context outside that of physical cause and effect. (p. 5)

The reality of life for an African is that there is never a separation of physical from spiritual. To the traditional African there is no coincidence or accident. Nothing happens by chance. This is the reason Maimela (1991) mentions that the traditional African lives his or her life through the manipulation of certain supernatural forces or spirits. The forces and spirits are also manipulated by the witches and sorcerers with evil intent or by medicine men and women to arrest and cure illness.

When an African lives life outside his or her community and becomes an individual, he or she becomes exposed to forces

and spirits that can bring misfortune upon his or her life, as Maimela (1991:6) points out: 'the traditional African is a victim of anxieties that are born out of the foal of evil spirits and malicious persons, especially witches and sorceress.' He continues to say that against the background of appalling terror and deep revulsion against witchcraft, the traditional African is likely to call every premeditated act of enmity, hatred, evil speaking or any other act directed towards the destruction of the life of others witchcraft and therefore evil, sinful in the highest degree in God's sight. Maimela (1991:6) argues that 'evil spirits and witchcraft are the greatest injustice and sin against a community.' Brand (2002:73) adds the category of wrongdoing and affliction as a form of small evil.

Brand (2002:104) suggests that 'salvation is to be understood as wholeness.' He further argues that:

evil is constituted by whatever detracts from such wholeness of black people, or the powerlessness of black people in a social order designed to deprive them of the full humanity that God intends for them. (p. 104)

Imperialism and apartheid were perceived as systems that were designed to deprive Africans of the full humanity that God intended for them. Salvation needs to meet the concerns of the African people, as Munyika (2004) explains:

the primary concern of ATR is to realise an ideal life, for in ATR healing and cleansing was meant to restore all kinds of broken relationships whether between the individual and the community or with the world of the spirits of which God is supreme. (p. 246)

One needs to realise that Munyika's (2004) definition is based on ATR whilst Brand's (2002) definition is derived from Liberation Theology or Black Theology. Brand stresses the evil of systems that were meant to oppress and to deny blacks their full humanity, whilst Munyika (2004) puts emphasis on relationships. Maimela (1991:10) may be regarded as consolidating the two views in saying that salvation is understood in terms of relief or help in a time of trouble in this life. He further explains that 'salvation is expressed in acts such as healing, driving away evil spirits, empowerment of the individual self, the promotion of fertility and success in life's ventures.'

There are some concerns about the definition of salvation within the Christian faith outside of ATR. According to Maimela (1991:10) 'the salvation offered through ATR is one which speaks to the heart of the African in a way that nothing else does.' He explains further that any:

religious understanding of salvation which is preoccupied with the spiritual, as the Christian faith often does, will remain inadequate to meet the needs of the African world, especially if that salvation does not hold promise also for happiness and prosperity, here and now. (p. 10)

Brand (2002) suggests that:

by widening the meaning of salvation to include more than atonement wrought by Christ on the cross, African theologians wish to open the way towards a recognition that ATR was already to some extent salvific, even before the advent of Christianity in the continent. (p. 105)

Brand's (2002:106) point of departure is the claim that the word salvation did not originate from Christianity, and therefore he concludes that 'Christianity came to fulfil rather than to replace the religio-cultural heritage.'

Munyika (2004:247) comes from a position that says 'religions without Christ cannot know the grace of God as shown in Christ, though they may have knowledge about His governance.' He further explains that outside Christ there is indeed a self-manifestation of God, and therefore knowledge of God, but it does not lead to salvation, to a union between God and humankind.

According to the creeds, Jesus came down for the sake of salvation and was incarnated specifically for that reason. It implies that the church fathers believed that who Jesus was, could not be compared to any person on earth. He came to fulfil a purpose that no other human being was qualified to accomplish. The church fathers understood human beings to be sinners by birth, and no human can save another, because all are sinners, and the punishment of sin is death. The incarnation was God's means to make Jesus the only human being who could attain salvation for all of humanity. They believed that Jesus was with God the Father from eternity and that he came down for our salvation. There was no need for Jesus to be born, for he was already there from eternity. He was made human for the sake of salvation.

Jesus took pain and suffering as a means to salvation. He took the form of a servant and became obedient until his death on the cross. The church fathers' understanding was that Jesus suffered for all of humanity. They lived their lives in between the times of what already had happened and something that is anticipated to happen. African ancestors' graves are still closed and their bones are still in their graves. The grave of Jesus is empty because after three days he rose and ascended into heaven. Christian worship is to thank God for what he has done through Jesus Christ and also to anticipate what God has prepared for the church in the future, for Jesus shall come again.

The African approach is not to build a pie in the sky. According to *theology from below*, sin is about the hardship of the African people through systems of oppression. African theologians advance a concept of salvation that must respond to the context of the African people. The challenge is about the agent or agents of that form of salvation. The question is directly linked to the relationship between Jesus and African ancestors. To accommodate the ancestors whilst being aware of the cross can be problematic. However, Jesus' suffering on the cross is appropriated by some Africans not as an agent to forgive or to remove sins, but as a symbol of liberation from systems of oppression. The incarnation and the suffering of the Son of God were about the love of God and that love produced salvation. When God in Jesus became human, he was starting at the root of the problem, not the fruits thereof. Human suffering in whatever form is as a result of sin. By becoming human, Jesus was penetrating every level of human life from conception to death. The church fathers perceived pain and suffering as a result of sin, due

to mankind's disobedience to God. *Theology from below*, on the other hand, views systems of oppression and all forms of corruption which undermine human life as a result of sin.

The ancestors may be part of the 'life cycle rituals', 'crisis rituals' and 'calendric rituals', but they cannot be brought into the oneness of God. They may play a vital part in creating a harmonious life for Africans, but they cannot share the same substance with God. Therefore, salvation is only through the Lord Jesus Christ who became human, suffered for salvation and who is coming back to be the judge of the living and the dead.

## Conclusion

African Traditional Religion has a space to exist within the Christian faith, yet the approach to worship differs. ATR as a religion existed outside Christianity before the arrival of the missionaries and it can still continue to exist outside Christianity today. The apostles and the entire church believe that the only way to God is through Jesus Christ and that there is no other name to salvation except Jesus (cf. 1 Tim 2:5, KJV: 'For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus'). To bring in the ancestors violates that belief. A new examination of the position of ATR within the Christian faith is essential.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

This article is reworked version of aspects from the PhD dissertation of J.S.M. (University of Pretoria) with J.B. (University of Pretoria) as supervisor.

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