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**ANCESTORS IN AFRICAN RELIGION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE
ROLE OF ANCESTORS IN THE SOTHO AND NGUNI WORSHIP AND
RELIGIOUS ETHICS**

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ABSTRACT

Belief in ancestral spirits among the Africans has always aroused a hot debate among scholars of African Religion. To a great number of scholars this belief seems to have been exaggerated. The fact that Africans speak more about their ancestors than about God has led some scholars into thinking that God has no place in African Traditional Religion. They argue that God is not worshipped in African Traditional Religion. They maintain that ancestors are the ultimate objects of worship of the peoples of Africa. Similarly, they give the impression that Africans do not bring God into the problem of morality. In short, they say that God has no place in African ethics.

The study attempts to counteract these mistaken views. Firstly, as we acknowledge that a lot has already been said about ancestors in African Traditional Religion, the study will examine the writings on the subject of ancestors in an African worldview. The intention is to find out what Africans understand about the ancestors. Do they understand ancestors as gods? In African view, do ancestors substitute God insofar as worship is concerned? Is there any reference to God insofar as morality is concerned? What role do ancestors play in the ethics of the community? In going deeper into these questions and responding to them with sincerity, we will be able to establish the place of God in African worship and ethics. Since the belief in ancestors is found in almost all the peoples of Africa, we have limited our study to the Bantu-speaking peoples of Southern Africa, particularly the Basotho and the Zulus.

Secondly, as our topic indicates, the study concentrates more on the Sotho and the Nguni peoples of Southern Africa. It will explore their understanding of the ancestors

and the way these peoples relate ancestors to God. Thus it will present us with the big picture of ancestral belief among the Bantu of southern Africa and Africans in general.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

As the topic of the thesis indicates, the study is aimed at discussing the role of ancestors in African worship and religious ethics. In fact, the problem of the role that ancestors play in African Religion has been an ongoing debate. Generally, this ongoing debate revolves around two questions: The question of worship in African Religion and the question of ethics in African Religion. The first concern of the investigators is whether God is the object of worship in African Religion or whether ancestors are the objects? The second concern has the same connotation. It is asked whether African ethics is founded on God or on the ancestors.

Some foreign investigators claim that African worship and African ethics are based only on ancestors. They argue that Africans do not worship God. They say that people in Africa worship their own ancestors. They support this view by pointing out that in African Religion, God is regarded as far away. He is *Deus remotus*. He is God who is not interested in human affairs. Hence Africans do not pray to Him but they direct their prayers to their ancestors. In their writings they refer to ancestors as gods of African people. Some even regard ancestor-worship as the basis of African Religion. Without ancestor-worship they do not see any existence of religion in Africa. They even argue that religion of the Africans is nothing else but worship of their dead relatives. In other words, they claim that in African Religion worship is ancestor-centered. Despite many facts that prove that direct worship to God in African Religion

is as old as religion itself, these investigators still insist that God has no place in African worship.

The same investigators also maintain that God is not the foundation of African ethics. Applying the conception of the remoteness of God in African Religion, they argue that God cannot be the foundation of morality in African Religion. The fact that in their view, God in African Religion is believed to be less interested in human affairs confirms that He or She is not the object of African ethics. Accordingly, Africans believe that the ancestors are the objects of African ethics. They argue that in African Religion, ancestors are the ones who are feared for punishing the wrongdoers. Therefore, they are the foundations of African ethics. Hence they consider African ethics as ancestor-centred. In short, they maintain that African morality is not founded on God. It gives the impression that in their view, Africans' lives are not ordered according to God's influence. Africans live outside the realm of God. For, if their ethics is based only on their ancestors and without God's influence, it is a false or mistaken ethics. That is why in the last four centuries we have witnessed the Europeans under the flag of Christianity trying by all means to get rid of African ethics and imposing foreign Western morality on African people. In fact, Western ways and manners that were incompatible with African ethics were imposed on the people by being forced to abandon their own way of life. But are African worship and morality contrary to God's natural law? Above all, are they not based on God?

To begin with, it is the contention of the author that God does play a role in African worship and African ethics. From time immemorial, African worship and ethics have been based on God. Irrespective of how Africans worship, their object of worship has

always been God. Hence Africans regarded God as the ultimate object of their prayers. Their prayers are addressed to Him. In Africa, God is known as the foundation of morality. It may appear as if God's influence in African morality is strange to those who are foreign to African religious worldview, but it is not the case. God is seen as involved in man's moral life. Therefore, the claims that make God as if He were unknown in African Religion are not correct.

Samuel Mbiti, Gabriel Setiloane, Benezet Bujo, Laurenti Magesa, Bolaji Idowu, Axler-Ivar Berglund and many other scholars of African Religion do not share the view that Africans worship their ancestors and that African ethics is based solely on ancestors. In other words, they do not accept the view that in African Religion, God is substituted with the ancestors as some western investigators imply. Nonetheless, they agree that the role that ancestors play in African Religion is indispensable. The view that they share is that ancestors are ranked high in African Religion because of their closeness to God. Thus they are regarded as intermediaries insofar as worship is concerned and are believed to be the guardians of morality in African ethics. But in no way do they substitute God in African Religion. Hence our thesis will try to discuss the ancestors as intermediaries in African worship and African ethics.

1.2 THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

We must confess that there have been some misunderstandings among scholars on the issue of ancestors in African Religion. Taking into consideration that scholars who were busy investigating on ancestor beliefs came from different worldview, it is not

surprising to observe that some concluded the way they did. The study is aimed at discussing the role of ancestors in African religious ethics. As it is shown above, the role of ancestral beliefs in African Religion has been misinterpreted. The thesis is intended to redress this by clarifying the belief in the ancestors as understood in African Religion. In discussing the role that ancestors play in the worship and ethics of the Sotho and the Nguni, we will be able to confirm that the Bantu of southern Africa had a clear knowledge of God and that they believed that God was involved in their daily life. Thus contrary to the belief that God has no place in African Religion, at the conclusion of this paper, we will be able to identify how worship and ethics were directed to God through the ancestors.

1.3 LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The belief in the ancestors is found in almost every part of Africa. All the various tribal groups in Africa believe that the ancestral spirits have influence on the individual, the family, the clan and the tribe as a whole. In other words, the author acknowledges that many books have already been written about the ancestors in African Religion. Hence he is not introducing the new topic. He is aware that as the topic is vast he will not cover everything in his study. In short, he declares that he is not going to do an exhaustive study. Firstly, as we have pointed out, the belief in the ancestors is found in every part of Africa, so it is not possible to carry out an exhaustive and comprehensive study that can cover up all the peoples of the continent of Africa. If ever we attempt to do a study that cover up all the people of Africa, we will risk the problem of generalisation. For, even though there are some similarities in

beliefs among Africans, there are also differences and we must respect those differences. Secondly, the space that we have does not allow to making a thorough study on the beliefs of all the people of the continent of Africa. Therefore, we will limit our study to the Sotho and Nguni of southern Africa.

1.4 METHOD TO BE USED:

1.4.1 The Phenomenological Method

In carrying-out this study, the author intends to employ the phenomenological method. In his book *Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and its Interpretation*, Joseph Kockelmans explains that one of the main proponents of phenomenological method, Martin Heidegger, argues that the task of the phenomenologist is to describe, analyze and interpret the data of immediate experience. In explaining the meaning of the term 'phenomenology' Heidegger uses the Greek language. According to Kockelmans, Heidegger argues that a proper understanding of the phenomenological method can be achieved only when the constitutive elements, which comprise the term, 'phenomenology', are examined and the meaning is clarified. According to Heidegger, the Greek etymological elements of the term 'phenomenology' are *phainomenon* and *logos*. In his explanation, Greek *phainomenon* is itself derived from the Greek verb *phainesthai*, which means: that which shows itself. Hence phenomenon means that which shows itself or that which manifests itself. In other words, phenomenon is that which shows itself in the manner in which it is. *Logos*, on the other hand, is briefly described as a discourse. According

to Heidegger, discourse is here understood in terms of its root meaning *doulon*, making manifest that which the discourse is about or that on which the discourse turns. In short, phenomenology becomes the discourse on the phenomena (1967:280).

Contrary to Edmund Husserl and other phenomenologists, Heidegger advocated for hermeneutic phenomenology. He insisted in the importance and value of interpretation.

As a research method, the phenomenological method emphasises a return to the primary data as they show themselves. Taking Heidegger's explication of the meaning of phenomenology as quoted by Kockelmans, the method is meant to describe or analyse the phenomenon as it appears, as it is in itself, and not as it seems to be or as our mind would like it to be (1967:280). That is why "bracketing" is indispensable in phenomenologists view. For by 'bracketing' the observer or researcher is encouraged to suspend his or her prior knowledge in order to learn afresh the thing in itself. The phenomenological method furnishes the researcher with the knowledge from the things as they are given. It puts aside assumptions, prejudices, presuppositions, and prejudgments. It helps to avoid making bias and unfounded conclusions as it appeals to the things as they are in themselves.

Jane Howarth maintains that the phenomenological method is descriptive. According to her, one seeks to describe particular, concrete phenomena. She points out that phenomena are not contents of the mind; they all involve an experiencing subject and an experienced object (1998:343). In other words, phenomenology deals with reality. It does not depend on theorising only on that which exists in the mind only. The

knowledge that proceeds from the phenomenological research approach is not based on a mental theory but on reality.

Commenting on the phenomenological method, Thomas Manyeli writes: "It uses the approach of phenomenology which is a philosophical tenet according to which the world exists before any reflection begins, which concentrates on re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, which gives a direct description of the experience of people as *it is* and *was* and by no means as other people see it or interpret it or want it to be (1995:21). Like Heidegger and other phenomenologists who argue that the phenomenological method studies things, as they are themselves, Manyeli affirms that by this method we will be able to learn the religious phenomena of the Basotho and the Nguni as they are.

In his article, *Methodology for the Study of African Traditional Religion*, Ikenga Metuh cites Macquarrie who points out that Husserl states that phenomenology is a 'descriptive science'. It describes and distinguishes the phenomena given in consciousness without introducing doubtful presuppositions or infallible deductions. And commenting on this, Metuh shows that the phenomenological study of religion examines and describes the religious facts, the beliefs and practices as they present themselves but refrains from making judgments regarding the truths and truth-values of the various religious manifestations (1991:142).

However, as we have indicated in our discussion, phenomenology is not a unified doctrine. Its proponents interpret it differently. So it is our intention to use the comparative hermeneutical phenomenology in this present study. We will employ

comparative phenomenology because the study we are dealing with is a comparison between the role of ancestors in Basotho and Nguni worship and religious ethics. Thus the issue of sameness and difference will emerge in this study.

1.4.2 Justification of the method

As we have said above, the advantage of using the phenomenological method is that a researcher becomes neutral. Instead of judging, he or she approaches the study in a sense a believer would approach his or her religion. The study is intended to concentrate on the role of ancestors in Sotho and Nguni religion. The method will help the researcher to be able to come up with rich information on the issue, as it will be of great help to discover this religious phenomenon.

On the other hand, some scholars such as Eugene Casalis, Nathaniel Isaacs and many others did injustice by dismissing the religions of the Sotho and Nguni as superstition. Their writings were bias and full of prejudices. For instance, in writing about the Basotho, Casalis shows that he did not find monuments that express that there were any religious ideas among the Basotho (1965:237). According to David Chidester, Isaacs denied the existence of any religion among the Zulus (1996:120). Wherever they observed the signs of religions of the peoples of Southern Africa, these scholars denied that they were religions. They called them superstitions. And they often studied them in order to show that even if they can be called religions they are of the lower class compared to Christianity. Instead, in this study, the phenomenological method will allow the researcher to be a detached observer. That is, he will suspend his pre-given knowledge in order to learn the religion of the people as it presents itself

as it is, and not as he would like it to be or theorise about it in his mind. Thus the method is relevant to the study, because the researcher is going to investigate on the question regarding the “ancestors” phenomenon in the Sotho and Nguni peoples. On the basis of this method, the research is aimed at studying the phenomena as they present themselves, the researcher will be able to trace the Object of the Sotho and Nguni worship and ethics.

On one hand, as we have pointed out, comparative phenomenology brings to the surface similarities and differences existing among peoples. Such similarities and differences enlighten our understanding of unclarified religious practices of a society. They reveal significant meanings that are hidden. Comparison can give deeper and clearer insight of the phenomena (Manyeli 1995:23). Thus the phenomenological method is the appropriate method for the present study.

2. DESCRIPTION OF THE KEY TERMS

2.1 AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

What is African Traditional Religion?

Given the topic of our study, it is reasonable to say some few words as to what is meant by African Traditional Religion. The researcher's interest in revisiting the definition of African Religion is prompted by two things, namely, the question of the denial of the presence of religion in Africa and the hot debate *for* and *against* the use of the word 'traditional' in qualifying religion of the Africans. The fact that at one time African peoples were regarded as the people without religion and then later they were defined as notoriously religious raises the interest to see how their religion was defined. Besides, to some people it is not yet clear as to what African Religion really is. To use Laurenti Magesa's words: "The path to its understanding is often obscured by a conceptual overgrowth. It seems necessary, therefore, as a first task to clear away some bushes that impair many people's vision of the reality of African Religion" (1998:13). Hence the definition of African Religion in this study is very important.

In his book, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, Idowu writes: "All down the ages, peoples have worshipped without being preoccupied with finding names for their religions. It is the outsider, the observer, the investigator, the curious, the detractor or the busybody, who first supplied labels" (1973:136).

Surely, religion of the peoples of Africa was not an exception as this observation points out. We testify to the fact that African worship points to the times immemorial

but Africans never had a name for their religion. It was during their first contact with Westerners that their way of worship was investigated and then labelled with names. That is, European travellers and missionaries started asking and writing about religion in Africa. As we have shown above, in their first contact with Africans, the Europeans maintained that Africans had no religion. Due to two totally different worldviews that encountered each other, the Western investigators failed to see the existence of religion among the Africans. In the letters they wrote back home, they explained that they were surprised to find people who did not even have religious monuments, which manifested that they had any light of the divine. As we have pointed out, Eugene Casalis and Nathaniel Isaacs expressed this view among the Basotho and the Zulus, and many travellers and missionaries shared the same idea (Chidester, 1996). Religion of the Africans was later described as heathenism, paganism, animism, magic, witchcraft and many other similar names. In borrowing Idowu's words, the busybody travellers and missionaries concerned themselves with labelling African Religion by giving it names. Nevertheless, the majority of scholars, in the early twentieth century agreed upon calling religion of the Africans by the name of African Traditional Religion. As our statement points out, the name is still contentious among scholars. While others argue that the name African Traditional Religion is justified, some prefer that religion of the peoples of Africa should be simply called African Religion without qualifying it as 'traditional'. Then what is African Traditional Religion? And why do other scholars protest the use of the word 'traditional'?

2.1.1 Definition

In defining African Traditional Religion, Dopamu gives the following explanation:

“African Traditional Religion comprises the religious beliefs and practices of the Africans which have been in existence from time immemorial, and are still adhered to today by many Africans, which have been handed down by their forbearers” (1991:21).

While Omosade Awolalu writes,

When we speak of African Traditional Religion we mean indigenous religion of the Africans. It is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forbearers of the present generation of Africans. It is not a fossil religion (a thing of the past), but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living it and practicing it. This is a religion that has no literature, yet it is “written” everywhere for those who care to see and read. It is largely written in the peoples’ myths and folktales, in their songs and dances, in their liturgies and shrines, in their rituals and ceremonies, in their proverbs and pithy-sayings, in their symbols and arts...” (1976:275).

On the other hand, some scholars do not accept the use of the word ‘traditional’. They suggest that African religion must simply be called African Religion without the addition of the word ‘traditional’. In their view, the word “traditional” has its own politics, especially when it is referred to Africa. According to them, the word ‘traditional’ is connected to backwardness or primitiveness. And they argue that when it is applied to African Religion it implies that African Religion is inferior to other religions such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and many others, which are classified as World Religions (Kgari, 1998:15). Hence, it means that African Religion is backward and is a primitive religion. Thus in their view, the word ‘traditional’ has a

negative connotation. They also point out that when it is used in reference to African Religion, it has been used to describe religion of the Africans as if it was based on the past practices, which do not change with time. It has been used to denote African Religion as static. To them this word gives the impression that African Religion has no influence in life of the people. It implies that African Religion is not alive. It is not the way of life, as it does not concern itself with the lives of the people here and now. Thus they view the word 'traditional' as negating the fact that African Religion is a lived religion. It regards African Religion as a theory that does not exist in reality. For as 'traditional' it is understood to be a religion that has no impact on the lives of the people. So scholars who share the view that the word 'traditional' has negative connotation when used in reference to African Religion advocate for its abandonment (Kgari, 1998:17). As we have seen, they argue that it denotes that African Religion is inferior in relation to other religions.

Furthermore, they point out that the qualification 'traditional' in reference only to African Religion does not make sense as all other religions originate from certain traditions. Thus it is not clear as to why only African Religion has to be labelled 'traditional' while other religions are also 'traditional' or originate from certain traditions but they are not labelled 'traditional'. In this sense, the word 'traditional' makes it clear that it has political overtones, and its use has to be avoided.

But to a significant number of scholars, the use of the word 'traditional' seems appropriate. We can single out Idowu, Mbiti, Awolalu, Nokuzola Mndende and many others. They share the idea that the word 'traditional' is not used negatively when applied to African Religion. For instance, Mndende writes: "African Traditional

Religion is also 'traditional', not because it is fossilised, static and incapable of any adaptations to new situations and changes, but as a religion which originated from the peoples' environment and on their soil" (1994:14). As we have seen, Awolalu shares the same idea. In his view, African Traditional Religion is not a thing of the past. It is a lived religion which men and women of Africa practice (1976:275). In other words, it is the way of life of the peoples of Africa.

According to Dopamu, "the word 'traditional' may connote something that came into being long ago, something that belonged to the era of 'primitivity'. But as we have said, African Traditional Religion is 'traditional' not because it is fossil, static and incapable of adaptation to new situations and changes, but because it is a religion that originated from the peoples' environment and on their soil. It is neither preached to them nor imported by them" (1991:21).

In explicating this idea, Mbiti writes:

African Traditional Religion is not preached from one people to another. Therefore a person must be born in a particular African people in order to be able to follow African Religion of that group. It would be meaningless or useless to try and transplant it to an entirely different society outside of Africa, unless African peoples themselves go with it there. Even within Africa itself, religion takes on different forms according to different tribal settings. For that reason, a person from one setting cannot automatically and immediately adjust himself or herself to or adopt the religious life of other African peoples in a different setting (1975:13).

In other words, Africans are not converted into African Traditional Religion. Each person is born into it, lives it and practices it. It is part and parcel of peoples' lives. It cannot be rid off simply as foreign investigators thought. It is ingrained in their lives.

In short, it is written in the lives of the people.

Idowu maintains that the use of the word 'traditional' in qualifying indigenous religion of the Africans has no negative connotation. He firmly believes that when applied to the religion of Africa, it is not used in a negative sense. Idowu defines the word 'traditional' as meaning

'Native', 'indigenous', that which is aboriginal or foundational, handed down from generation to generation, that which continues to be practiced by living men and women of today as the religion of the grandparents, not only as heritage from the past, but also that which peoples of today have made theirs by living it and practicing it, that which they base the connection between now and eternity with all that, spiritually, they hope or fear (1973:104).

This definition implies that African Traditional Religion as a religion that is practiced today by the peoples of Africa is in continuity with religion that was practiced in the past. Hence it is not static, it develops with time. He maintains that African Traditional Religion is a lived religion. That is, contrary to the wrong conception that religion in Africa is not practical, Idowu argues that it is alive. It is practiced by living men and women of today. It permeates their life and activity. Hence it is part of the peoples' life. Mndende states "people firmly believe that during the ritual occasions the voices from the past speak to the present generation and influence their life" (1994:14).

Mba Uka also argues that the word 'traditional' does not refer to something that belongs to the past, to the archives, but as something that is undergirded by a fundamentally indigenous value system that has its own pattern, its own historical inheritance and traditions from the past (1991:42). In Uka's view, 'traditional' here does not refer to African Religion as something that is relegated to the past or not

alive, but as something that has connection with the past even though it is lived in the present. His point is that the past and the present are here related. In fact, to say that African Traditional Religion is traditional is to acknowledge its deep foundation.

Thus the term 'traditional' serves the purpose of distinguishing African Religion from other religions that have been brought to the peoples of Africa through missionary propaganda. It is an undeniable fact that the majority of the religions that were imported to Africa have taken root in the soil of Africa and deserve to be called religions of Africa. Therefore, it is rational to distinguish them from a religion that is indigenous in Africa. Thus the word 'traditional' serves the purpose perfectly. So we conclude that the word 'traditional' is used to qualify indigenous religion of Africa. And we must avoid any use of the word 'traditional' which is contrary to the use we have suggested here.

2.1.2 Can we talk about African Religion or Religions?

Looking at the question one might dismiss it as irrelevant to the study. But as we look at the history of the study of religion in Africa, we cannot turn a blind eye to the question of whether we can actually talk about African Religion in singular or only in the plural. Taking into consideration mistakes that were done by scholars who took the question for granted, it is an obligation for us to investigate in this study whether it is justifiable to talk about African Religion or in fact we have to talk about African Religions?

In quoting Mbiti we have pointed out that 'a person must be born in a particular African people in order to be able to follow African Religion in that group; and that religion takes on different forms according to different settings; and also that a person from one setting cannot automatically and immediately adjust himself or herself or adopt the religious life of other African peoples in a different setting' (1975:13). Looking closely at this, one gets the impression that there are many religions in Africa and that one has to speak about African Religions in the plural. Mbiti held the view that because of the different tribes that exist on the African continent with their diverse beliefs, we cannot speak about African Religion in the singular.

The propagators of this view argue that since each tribe has its own religion, which is different from that of its neighbours, we cannot speak about African Religion but Religions. They maintain that there is nothing common in religious matters that Africans share. On the contrary, we argue that they blind themselves from the truth. For, while the ways of expressing faith differ, African Religion *per se* (essence) is the same. And in his later works Mbiti realised this fact and accepted that we can speak of African Religion in the singular. Nevertheless, other investigators, especially European investigators persisted in the view that there is no African Religion but there are African religions.

In objecting to this view, Magesa cites Edward Smith, who wrote,

In spite of ...cultural diversities there is, I believe, an underlying identity in religion. I do not deny or minimize the differences you may find between the highly Yoruba or Baganda, with their hierarchy of gods, on the one hand, and the more simple peoples, on the other hand. But the difference is one of emphasis and development, not of essence.

There is sufficient identity to warrant our speaking of African religion (1998:27).

In other words, a reasonable number of scholars agree that we can refer to religion of the Africans in the singular, as the essence of the beliefs is the same. Above all, when we refer to Christianity we do not speak about Christianities, even though there are many different theologies according to the different denominations. For, while they differ in expressing these theologies they all share the same faith. Similarly with African Traditional Religion, people differ in expressing their faith but they share the same faith. Hence we can talk about African Religion in the singular while we are not denying the differences that exist between peoples. Hence like in other religions we are cautioned against generalising.

2.2 WORSHIP

One is tempted to ask: ‘Why is the word “worship” singled out as one of the key words in this thesis? And is it necessary to explain the definition of worship?’ Certainly, the question of the definition of worship is relevant in this study. In fact, scholars speak about ancestor-worship as the religion in Africa. The theory has been distorted and exaggerated when used in Africa. As it was regarded to exist among the primitive societies, some investigators imposed it on African Religion. Due to their prejudices against Africans, they depicted a god of Africans who is totally different from God as known in other religions. And this surely impacted negatively in their research in African Religion. For, they denied that Africans had any relationship with the real God. They even came with an idea that ancestors are the gods of Africa.

These views brought confusion in the literature of religious studies in Africa as generation after generation of scholars continue to propagate these mistaken views. For instance, the object of 'worship' in African Religion is not clear because other scholars say that it is God, while others argue that Africans worshipped their ancestors.

In other words, the use of the word "worship" in African Traditional Religion has brought with it some controversies. Idowu points out that the issue of worship in African religion became a controversial one because of the question of direct approach to God or his worship (1973:180). That is, it is maintained by some scholars that Africans do not worship God, while others hold the opinion that Africans worship God but their approach to Him is not a direct one. They direct their worship to God through their ancestors. In fact, this persisting debate originates here. Some scholars argued that rather than worshipping God, Africans worship their ancestors, while others reject the view and claim that ancestors are regarded as the intermediaries between God and men. Hence, it is important to see how the word 'worship' is defined generally and how the Africans define it in relation to African Traditional Religion. The other ongoing debate, which is also attached to 'worship' as we have briefly discussed, is on the issue of ancestor-worship. But here we intent to briefly discuss the term 'worship' and then to look at the controversial issue of whether God is worshipped in African Religion or not?

2.2.1 Definition

In the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, De Graeve writes, “in Anglo-Saxon, worship originally meant the state of worth, the state of being valuable or worthy. In the course of time, the word both as a noun and as a verb, acquired a considerable variety of meanings” (1966:1030). In these opening sentences, De Graeve shows that the word is not restricted to religion. Idowu quotes Farmer who argues that the English word ‘worship’ is an ambiguous term. He points out that the term ‘worship’ can be ‘His Worship the Mayor’, ‘The Worshipful Master’ of Freemasonry and ‘Your Worship’ used in addressing a judge, all showing that the word ‘worship’ is not confined to the specifically religious usage (1973:180).

Having shown that the word was used in other contexts, De Graeve turns to the term as used in religion and states:

“In a general way, ‘worship’ expresses the response of religious man to the Holy as he apprehends it: his attitude of submission, devotion, respect, and veneration, and the acts prompted by this attitude, his ‘Godward’ dispositions and activities. The Holy is experienced by homo religiosus as an invitation, an address, an Anspruch; his response to it, internally as well as externally, in private as well as in public manifestation, in a free and spontaneous expression, as well as in the form of a rigidly fixed ritual, is worship” (1966:1030).

Worship, in this sense, is strictly directed to the Supreme Being. As he argues, it is the response of religious man to God.

Moreover, De Graeve elaborates, “the function of worship is, in the first place to make the sacred present in the awareness of the worshipper or the worshipping community, as the power of being that safeguards, preserves, renews, or rejuvenates

existence, not only in man, society and mankind, but also in nature and the universe” (1966:1031).

According to Mbiti, ‘worship’ is a means of renewing contact between people and God, or between people and the invisible world (1975:54). Looking closely at Mbiti’s description of the term ‘worship’, one gets the impression that Mbiti wants to show that insofar as worship is concerned, there is a distinction between God and other beings of the invisible world, such as the ancestors and the spirits. In short, while we worship God, we do not worship our ancestors and the spirits. Worship is directed only to God. Hence ancestors are only venerated. We do not worship them.

In his writings, Mbiti insists on the point that Africans do not worship their ancestors. He notes that there is a clear distinction between worshipping God and venerating the ancestors in Africa. As we have pointed out, in his *Introduction to African Religion*, he states that worship is a means of renewing contact between people and God, or between people and the invisible world. He points out that African people are very much aware of the existence of the invisible world, which they see as a real part of the universe. In his view, they perform acts of worship to keep alive the contact between the visible and the invisible worlds, between men and God (1975:54). In other words, African people are aware of the hierarchy that constitutes the invisible world. That is, they are aware that only God is supreme. He comes before the ancestors. They are also aware that the visible world depends on the invisible world. In Mbiti’s view, Africans direct acts of worship to God who is seen as the ultimate cause of everything that exists.

In addition, Kenan cites Mbiti and argues that worship is used as a means of creating harmony in the world of humankind. He explains that when there is crisis people turn to God in worship. According to him, they need at such time to restore their peace, happiness and sense of security. He points out that if nothing is done, they fear that things will get worse. He concludes that 'worship' therefore, helps them to regain a sense of peace and religious harmony in their life and in the world at large (1997:45).

Taking what the authors we have seen above say, we can conclude that 'worship' is strictly directed to God. Hence it is not true that in African understanding God is not the object of worship. For, as Mbiti and many scholars of African Religion show Africans are aware of the superiority of God over creatures (ancestors and spirits included) and in no way could they worship creatures in His position. They honour their ancestors but do not worship them.

2.2.2 Worship of God in African Religion

One serious mistake which scholars made, especially foreign scholars, was that of denying that Africans believed in God (as known in history, that is, God, the Creator of heaven and earth and all the things that exist). They propagated the idea that the God of the Africans is not the same as the God known in the history of religion. In other words, they give the impression that God of the West differs from God of Africa. In literature we find the words like 'their gods' and similar expressions when referring to the Africans. As we have argued, this thinking impacted negatively on the research in African Religion and other religions which are not of the West. In short, new strange terms were applied to distinguish gods of these religions. God was

referred to as the sky-god, high-god and many other terms. And as to whether he was approachable, especially in African Religion, became controversial. In his book, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, Idowu emphasises this point. He writes, "one of the questions which has raised controversy about God in African belief is the question of direct worship to him or of his worship (1973:151). Idowu complains about some investigators who in his view rushed to the conclusion that God in African belief is not approached or worshipped directly. He argues that they generalise from particular piece of evidence which they do not altogether understand, or because they are deliberately blind to the truth. Idowu protests against this tendency which in his view has some malaise in it. For, while ancestor-worship is a universal phenomenon, some scholars exaggerated it with regard to Africa (1973:180). According to Idowu, Africans approach and worship God directly.

Even though scholars like Idowu strongly believed that Africans worshipped God, the view that actually Africans worshipped their ancestors spread among scholars and persisted. The majority of scholars based their argument on the relationship between God and man in African Traditional Religion. It was maintained that God was not worshipped because he was understood to be too far away and not interested in human affairs. Hence the ancestors and the spirits were worshipped in his place. According to this view, the worship of God was substituted with that of the ancestors and the spirits because they are believed to be active in human life and are feared. That is, scholars who shared this view that worship is not made to God defined God in Africa as *deus otiosus*, *deus incertus*, *deus absconditus*. He is regarded as God who is withdrawn from human affairs and who is not interested in what humans are doing. And he is regarded as a hidden God. According to these scholars, Africans had not yet

discovered God. They were still living in the dark. They had created their own gods. That is, they were idolatrous.

In his paper, *The Problem of God and Sacrifice in African Traditional Religion*, Justin Ukpong discusses the theory; found especially among foreign scholars, that according to the Africans, God is too distant and too good to need any worship of human beings. According to him, this theory implies that God is not worshipped in African Traditional Religion. According to Ukpong, the fact that the proponents of this theory also teach that God is approached only as a last resort, when everything has failed, proves that the theory needs to be re-examined (1983:202). That is, there is a belief among scholars that Africans pray to God only in times of dire need. This proves that the theory that Africans do not worship God is wrong.

It is an undeniable fact that God is the mystery which all humans do not comprehend fully irrespective of whether one is an African or not. As rational beings, humans are given the privilege to search for God. And whenever a person is alive he is still in his search for the better knowledge of God. He cannot understand God as he understands other things around him. But as we look closely at what scholars said about the question of God in Africa, we are given the impression that in other religions the search has reached its culmination; God is understood perfectly. He is not a mystery anymore. He is not a hidden God. Hence he is hidden only to the Africans. But we cannot accept this false assumption, for we know that even in other religions, people are not so clear about God. They are still struggling to understand him. He is still a mystery. So the problem of defining God in a clear and comprehensible language is

not particular to Africa. It is a universal problem. Hence it is absurd to conclude that Africans did not worship God because he was understood to be far away from men.

We maintain that God is worshipped in Africa. We have recorded African prayers which attest to this truth. And scholars who researched and discovered this truth note that the ancestors and the spirits are prayed to as intermediaries. They are asked to intercede for the living to God. That is, the ultimate object of worship in African Traditional Religion is God. Berglund testifies to the fact that God was worshipped among the Zulu but through the ancestors. In his book, *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism*, Berglund says, "many Zulus say that the Lord-of-the-Sky is approached through the shades" (1976:43). The shades indicated here mean ancestors. He states that one of his informants said, "if there is something we wish to be brought before the Lord-of-the-Sky we say to those who look after us, 'We salute you, you of our people, you who see the kings we do not see! We say to you, go and kneel on our behalf!'. Thus the Zulus do not regard their ancestors as equals to the Lord-of-the-Sky. They do not pray to their ancestors in order to give them what they need. But they approach them in order that they who are always before the Lord-of-the-Sky may pray on their behalf (1973:43). In other words, through their ancestors they worship *Unkulunkulu*.

In his article, *Zulu Christians and Ancestor-cult: A Pastoral Consideration*, Jabulani Nxumalo argues that in Zulu understanding only God is worshipped. He mentions that the people whom he interviewed did not use the *ukukhonza*, that is, 'worship', in relation to the ancestors: they rather spoke of *ukukhumbula* 'to remember' (1981:73). This indicates that ancestors are not worshipped but remembered. He quotes

informants of Berglund that emphasised that the living do not 'worship', 'ukukhonza', but only speak to their ancestors, *ukuthetha* (Nxumalo, 1981:73). Taking this piece of evidence, we can say that the Zulus did not worship their ancestors but they worshipped God, *uNkulunkulu*. Therefore, we can talk about the worship of God in African Traditional Religion.

In addition, in the Sotho-Tswana understanding, God is worshipped through the ancestors. That is, the ancestors are regarded as the mediators between God and the people. They are seen as the intermediaries, and prayers are addressed to them as channels between God and the people. Hence the one ultimately prayed to by Sotho-Tswana is *Molimo* and not *balimo*. Setiloane (1986, 1976) and Manyeli (1995) demonstrate this belief. In his book, *African Theology: An Introduction*, Setiloane asserts that Africans strongly resent the suggestion that they 'worship' ancestors (*badimo*). Setiloane writes:

They argue that the European word 'worship' does not convey the same meaning as that 'service' (tirelo) which they perform in relation to their ancestors. That 'service' which is rendered to (badimo) is in fact of the same quality and level as that rendered to one's parents while they are living. In Setswana: 'Re direla badimo': We serve (fulfill all proper duties towards, that is, provide them with the necessities of life, food, clothing, etc.) but 'Re rapela Modimo': We pray to God (1986:18).

In the similar tone, he shows that when Batswana asked for rain they addressed their prayers to the ancestors asking them to communicate their prayers to God. Setiloane tells us that in that occasion the chief used to officiate as the priest of the people. Setiloane states,

At the appointed day, the selected seeds of each crop were brought to the chief at his kgotla (the meeting place where cases of the village are worked out), and in the presence of the people, he used a whisk to sprinkle on the seeds water taken from the ritual rain-pots and legakwe (crystal stone) and lenaka la motse (village medicine horn) from his household. As he sprinkles he says, 'Badimo ba borra-rona re rapeleleeng pula' (Badimo [ancestors] of our fathers pray for rain on our behalf). The people answer, 'Pula!' (Rain) (1976:73).

What we need to note here is that in the prayer that is recited, *badimo* are asked to pray for the people. That is, they are approached as mediators between God and the people. The prayer is not addressed to them as the ultimate end. As it is believed that they are interested in the welfare of their descendants, they are expected to pray for them.

In other words, as Setiloane writes, the BaTswana were aware that *badimo* were not gods. They were addressed to as intermediaries. They were not giving rain but asking God to give rain. They were aware that rain comes from the power more superior to that of *badimo* hence they supplicate them to pray on their behalf for rain as they were capable of communicating with God better than the people can do. Looking closely at what Setiloane is saying one can conclude that the Tswana worshipped God.

In the Southern Sotho context, Manyeli cites the prayer that manifests that Basotho approached God through their ancestors. The prayer goes like this,

*Molimo, ak'u utloe rea rapela,
God, listen to us, we pray,
Melimo e mecha, rapelang oa khale,
New gods, pray the ancient one,
Rapelang Tlatla-macholo,
Pray the god of light,
Ra-Mmoloki liatla li maroba,
The father-of-the-saviour's hands are scarred,*

*Liatla li marotholi a pula,
His hands are wet with raindrops,
Liatla li mali, li mali a pula,
His hands are bloody with raindrops,
Liatla tsa hao li khathetse ke ho re bopa,
Your hands are tired after creating us,
Se rapeleng rona le rapale Molimo,
Do not pray to us but to god,
Ra-Mmoloki liatla li maroba.
The father-of-the-saviour's hands are scarred (1995:46).*

According to Manyeli, this prayer reveals that ancient Basotho worshipped God. That is, they did not pray to their ancestors as foreign investigators think. In the first place, the prayer demonstrates that *melimo*, the new gods are asked to pray to the ancient god. And according to Manyeli, these new gods are the ancestors and the ancient god is *Molimo*. Manyeli reaches this conclusion because he argues that *Tlatla-Macholo*, the ancient god in the prayer, is the omniscient God who is also the father of the saviour. That is, he is superior to the new gods and the new gods are asked to pray to him. Secondly, in the last sentence the *melimo e mecha* advise people to pray to God, that is, to the ancient One (1995:46-47). Hence it is clear that the ultimate end of the prayer in the Southern Sotho understanding is *Molimo*. They worshipped *Molimo* and not their ancestors.

On the other hand, the prayer shows that *balimo* are the intermediaries between God and the people. For *balimo* are asked as intermediaries to pray or intercede for the people to God. As we have pointed out, they advise people to pray to God and not to themselves. Therefore, we conclude that the Southern Sotho prayers were directed to God. Hence the ancestors were used as mediators. And with the examples we have given here we can argue that the view that says that in African Traditional Religion

the worship of God has no place is misleading. God has his place in African Traditional Religion. Like in other religions, God is worshipped.

2.3 ANCESTORS

Ever since the 'curious' started investigating on the worship of Africans they discovered that belief in the ancestors is found in almost every part of Africa. Hence much focus was put on the subject of ancestors in African Religion. But before we start with our discussion we must warn that the literature on this subject brought with it some terminological and conceptual confusion.

Firstly, when one reads books that are written by European travellers and missionaries, he finds that in their writings they either denied that Africans had a religion and where they accepted the presence of religion they say that it was nothing but an ancestor worship. They wrote that Africans did not know and did not worship the true God but rather they worshipped their dead relatives. They argued that in African worship God did not feature as the object of worship but only the ancestors. They referred to African religion as ancestor worship. And this wrong perception persisted for centuries.

Secondly, as travellers and missionaries contented as to whether God had any place in the African worship, they claimed that ancestor-worship is the very basis of religion in Africa (Idowu, 1973:180). And this claim implied that African Religion is not religion as understood according to the Western view. They regarded African Religion as a false religion and as superstitious. Thus discussion on the African belief

in the ancestors led to a distortion of African Religion by foreign investigators. Hence our attempt in this essay is to correct the mistakes that resulted from this confusion.

2.3.1 Who are the ancestors in African Traditional Religion?

According to Parrinder, “it is impossible to grasp the meaning of the religious foundation of Africa without going through the “thought-area” occupied by the ancestors” (1954:57). The study about ‘ancestors’ in African Traditional Religion is indispensable. Without understanding properly the role that they play in the belief of the people, one will not comprehend what African Religion really is. But to argue that ancestral belief is the basis of African Religion is to distort African Religion as some foreign scholars have done. Hence we have to clarify from the start that African beliefs in the ancestors is not African Religion as it was thought but it is only the part of religion of the peoples of Africa.

In fact, the study on ancestors in African Religion attracted attention of many scholars. As we have pointed out, foreign investigators believed that ancestral belief constitutes religion in Africa. That is why they were interested in researching on the ancestors’ role in the life of the Africans. Taking into consideration that ancestral spirits’ phenomenon was strange to the Westerners and that others learned about it from the books that discussed the issue in Chinese or Japanese worldview, they believed that what they had discovered applied to all the cultures. Sometimes they confused African beliefs in the ancestors with what is believed by the Japanese and the Chinese. As literature on the subject show, new ideas that were foreign to the

African worldview were introduced. For instance, the idea that the ancestors are regarded as gods in Africa and that they are worshipped in the place of God spread. As we will see Africans respect their ancestors and venerate them but they are aware of God and of his superiority over the ancestors of the people.

As it is indicated in the introduction, belief in the ancestors is found in almost every part of the continent of Africa. Although Africans share the same belief in ancestors we must say that there are some variations from clan to clan and from tribe to tribe. Hence in this discussion our aim is to define who the ancestors are, taking into consideration the similarities that exist as we have shown that African beliefs have common essence, we will not concentrate much on the slight differences that are found among the tribes. For as it is indicated, even in other religions that are said to be civilised religions, differences in confessing the same faith are found. For instance, Catholics and Protestants differ in expressing their faith in Christianity just as the *Sunni* and the *Shiites* differ in their expression of Islam and yet this does not imply that there are contrasting models of Christianity or Islam. Because they share the same faith and they differ only in proclaiming their faith. Hence the same applies when we speak about ancestral belief in Africa.

In his book, *Religions of South Africa*, Chidester explains that ancestors were regarded as relatives who had died, yet continued to show interest in their surviving descendants (1992:9). What is of great importance in this explanation of Chidester is the point that an ancestor is a person who is survived by descendants. In other words, only the deceased who completed their life cycle attained ancestorhood. That is, those who managed to marry and to bear children and reached the old age were regarded to

have completed their life cycle in the African view. And it is believed that when they died they become ancestors. Hence those who reached the stage of parenthood attain ancestorship according to this explanation.

Mbiti calls ancestors 'the living-dead' (1969:82). They are the 'living-dead' because he sees them as in-between life and death. In fact, he writes:

Attention is paid to the living-dead of up to four or five generations, by which time only a few, if any, immediate members of their families would still be alive. When the last person who knows a particular living-dead also dies, then in effect the process of death is now complete as far as that particular living-dead is concerned. He is now no longer remembered by name, no longer a 'human being', but a spirit, a thing, an IT (1969:83).

In Mbiti's view, one is regarded as an ancestor so long as there are people who know him or her and invoke his or her name. After the death of the last person who knows him or her personally, he or she is no longer regarded as an ancestor. He or she is no longer a 'human being'. He or she is dead for nobody invokes his or her name anymore. He or she is not remembered. In this view, what counts for one to be an ancestor is that the living must remember him or her and call his or her name. In other words, the living makes the ancestors. An implication of Mbiti's explanation is that the remote dead cease to be ancestors. Some scholars do not accept this view. For instance, in response to this view, Idowu writes: "The life of the ancestors in the after-life is a reality: it does not depend on the remembrance of them by those who are living on earth. They have their own independent existence; and their being is in no way a fulfillment of the theory that 'to live in the hearts we leave behind is not to die'" (1973:188). In other words, the living do not necessarily make ancestors as Mbiti implies. Ancestors are independent from the living. Furthermore, in the Basotho

context, all the dead relatives are called ancestors irrespective of whether they are remote or recent dead. That is why when one is making *Mokete oa balimo* (special meals to thank one's ancestors for their favours or for their protection), in the prayer that precedes the sharing of the food, one invites all his ancestors to partake in the meal, even those that he does not know. The Basotho believe that even the remotest ancestors care for them and in Basotho belief the ancient ancestors are thought to be the most powerful. Thus to include the remotest ancestors in the Sesotho prayer is very important.

Mbiti points out that ancestors are the closest link that men have with the world of the spirit. He maintains that they are bilingual: they speak the language of men, with whom they lived with until 'recently'; and they speak the language of the spirits and of God, to whom they are drawing nearer ontologically (1969:82). Because of the new status that they have acquired through death, one would say that ancestors share the citizenship of both the humans and the spirits worlds. The fact that their earthly life has just terminated and they have started the new life in the world of the spirits make them to be in-between two worlds. Despite their new status they still have contact with the world of humans. They have the full experience of the humans' world and they have now joined the world of God and the spirits. Hence they speak both languages, namely, language of the visible world and of the invisible world. Being able to communicate in both languages of different worlds they are expected to intermediate between the living and God.

According to Mbiti, "the living-dead are still 'people' and have not yet become 'things', 'spirits' or 'its'. They return to their human families from time to time, and

share meals with them, even though symbolically. When they appear they are recognized by names as so and so” (1969:82). Referring to the Sotho-Tswana context, Setiloane argues that this experience of contact with ancestors is about a person-to-person contact, not of a vision or apparition. He says that when people talk about this experience they say, ‘*Ke bone mofu ntate*, I have seen my deceased father’. It is like a direct contact of person-to-person (1986:18).

Like Chidester, Mbiti holds the view that ancestors still have interest in their families. They still want to know what is going on in the family. Mbiti asserts that because they are still ‘people’, the living-dead are therefore the closest link between men and God. He maintains that they know the needs of men since they have been ‘recently’ with them; and they intercede for men as they have full access to the channels of communicating with God directly (1969:82). According to Magesa, “the ancestors are in constant contact with God and humanity” (1998:14).

In his article, *Some Reflections on Ancestor-worship in Africa*, Meyer Fortes defines an ancestor “as a named, dead forbear who has living descendants of a designated genealogical class representing his continued structural relevance” (1965:124). He argues that in ancestor-worship, such an ancestor receives ritual service and tendance directed specifically to him by the proper class of his descendants. Being identified by name means that he is invested with attributes distinctive of a kind of person (1965:124). Fortes attempted an explanation, which would suit his theory of ancestor-worship. Inadvertently, what he wants to show is that Africans worship their dead parents.

2.3.2 The theory of Ancestor-worship in African Religion

In website, <http://mb-soft.com/believe/txw/ancest.htm>, John Saliba states that Ancestor-worship is reverence granted to deceased relatives who are believed to have become powerful spiritual beings or, less frequently, to have attained the status of gods. He argues that it is based on the belief that ancestors are active members of society and are still interested in the affairs of their living relatives. He shows that ancestors are believed to wield great authority, having special powers to influence the course of events or to control the well being of their relatives. He concludes that protection of the family is one of their main concern. Other scholars maintain that African Traditional Religion has the features that are found in ancestor-worship.

As we have argued, the question of ancestors in African Traditional Religion has been a burning issue among scholars. As we have seen, it led to a debate whereby, some investigators argued that Africans worshipped their ancestors and that ancestor worship is the basis of religion in Africa or is the religion of Africa. That is, they claimed that African peoples do not worship God but their ancestors. Investigators, who came up with this opinion, held that God has no place in African Religion. According to them, the African peoples maintain that God is far away from humans. He is withdrawn from human affairs. And He is regarded to be too good and need no worship from humans since they cannot add anything to Him. Thus ancestor-worship was introduced in opposition to the worship of God.

Some scholars supported the theory that Africans worshipped their ancestors while others rejected it. Meyer Fortes and William David Hammond-Tooke are of the opinion that Africans worshipped their dead relatives. While Mbiti, Idowu, Nxumalo, Berglund and Jomo Kenyatta consider the term 'worship' inappropriate to use in relation to ancestors. On the contrary, Driberg maintains that what is called ancestor-worship has nothing to do with religion, that is, it is not connected with religion. He sees it as a secular issue rather than a religious one.

In his article, *The Secular Aspect of Ancestor-worship in Africa*, Driberg gives the impression that ancestor-worship is not religious but is a secular phenomenon.

Driberg writes:

What we have mistaken for religious attitude is nothing more than a projection of (the Africans) social behaviour... For no African prays to his grandfather any more than he 'prays' to living father. In both cases, the words employed are the same; he asks as of right or he beseeches, or he expostulates with or he reprimands, or (as the Eastern Ewe word puts it) he gives an address to his ancestors, as he would do to elders sitting in conclave but he never uses in this context the words for 'prayer' or 'worship' which are strictly reserved for his religious dealings with the Absolute (1936:9).

That is, according to Driberg, it is ridiculous to say that Africans worship their ancestors. His contention as it is shown is that ancestor-worship in African context is misinterpreted by scholars. Even though we do not fully agree with what Driberg is saying, at least we agree that he has a point when he says that Africans do not worship their ancestors. What we do not accept is that Africans' approach to their ancestors is purely secular. We know that it has elements of religion in it. But these elements are exaggerated when they are referred to as worship in African Religion.

In his paper, *Some Reflections on Ancestor-worship in Africa*, Fortes argues that ancestor-worship in Africa is widespread. He quotes Tylor and Smith saying, "it has long been recognized that ancestor-worship is a conspicuous feature of African religious systems" (1965:122). The implication that is found in this is that African Religion is similar to the eastern religions (namely, Chinese and Japanese religions) where ancestors were worshipped; and therefore, Fortes concluded that Africans worship their ancestors. For the sentence gives the impression that what the investigators did was a comparative study whereby the features that were discovered in other religions were taken to be the features that exist in African Religion. Hence it was concluded that it is ancestor-worship. Fortes and his informants (Tylor and Smith) missed the point. For in Africa ancestors do not replace the Supreme Being as they imply. The ancestors have their own role that they play in religion but it is not that of substituting God. Hence the theory of ancestor-worship is wrong and irrelevant in African Religion.

On the other hand, Hammond-Tooke maintains that the term 'ancestor-worship' is relevant in African Religion. In his paper, *Do the South Eastern Bantu Worship their Ancestors?* Hammond-Tooke is of the opinion that Africans worship their ancestors. After a long and comprehensive discussion on the issue he concludes that the South-eastern Bantu worship their ancestors.

He argues that there is a support for the view that Africans worship their ancestors. He quotes various ethnographers who share the idea that Africans worship their dead relatives. He cites the Kriges, who in their study of the Lobedu state: "We must not expect behaviour pattern of humble worshipper to omnipotent god... People pray to

their ancestors as man to man, scolding them or reminding them of their duties to their children... As the gods have human attributes, "worship" is not characterized by humility or formality" (1978:134). He also quotes Junod, who says of the Tsonga: 'the attitude of the worshippers ... the freedom they show in insulting their gods, indicates that they consider them as exactly on the same level as themselves' (1978:134). He also cites Berglund who states that 'there is in Zulu society no worship of the shades, if by worship we understand a veneration of them... There is, on the other hand, a fairly complex ritual of communion with them in which the shades and the survivors commune with each other in the widest and most intimate sense of the term' (1978:134-135). This to Hammond-Tooke is the evidence that Africans worshipped their ancestors. Looking closely at this evidence of Hammond-Tooke, one detects that the study is approached with prejudices. For Africans do not take their ancestors as gods. The view that ancestors are gods came with Western scholars. They attempted to differentiate their God from the African God and concluded that Africans prayed to their ancestors as their gods. Their point was to show that African Religion is inferior to the Western religion, which they brought to Africa. Hence we cannot agree with the view that the ancestors are gods.

Besides the ethnographers point of view, Hammond-Tooke supports the theory of ancestor-worship as relevant to African Religion by challenging the use of the term 'veneration' as adequate term for describing the ritual acts directed to the ancestors by Africans. To show that the term 'worship' fits well in African ritual acts directed at the ancestors, he employs the definition of 'worship' as used by Ninian Smart. He gives the following summary of Smart's definition of worship:

First, worship is a relational activity: one cannot worship oneself. Second, the ritual worship expresses the superiority of Focus [of worship] to the worshipper(s). Third, the ritual also performatively sustains or is part of the power of the Focus. Fourth, the experience which worship expresses is that of the numinous, and the object of worship is thus perceived as awe-inspiring... Fifth, the Focus of worship is unseen, i.e. transcends any particular manifestations of it that there may be. Sixth, the superiority of the Focus gives greater power than worshipper, and this gap is infinite in the case of an undoubtedly supreme Being [but only, presumably, for such Being], so that the worshipper has no relevant merit, except in so far as this may be conferred on him by the supreme Being (1978:136).

Commenting on the above quotation, Hammond-Tooke argues that even though ancestors are not superior and numinous, the ancestor-cult, in Smart's view, fulfils the criteria of what he defines as worship. In other words, the ritual act Africans perform in relation to their ancestors amounts to worship.

And in protesting against the use of the term 'veneration', he uses Smart again, who posed the question: "What is the supposed difference between worship and veneration, so that one could differentiate attitudes and intentions? Saints are holy, superior to the cultist, numinous in their miracle-working, invisible'- in short, they have all the hallmarks of gods. And yet it would be blasphemous to accord them 'worship' (latria)" (1978:137). Hammond-Tooke suggests that Smart finds a possible clue in the fact that the holiness of saints is derivative. It is God who sanctifies them; the holiness of saints is not intrinsic to them. With the intention of showing that the view that ancestors are venerated is illogical, Hammond-Tooke asks: "Does this help? Should we say that the ancestors are 'venerated'? But, if so, whence do they derive their holiness? Certainly not from the Supreme Being for, as it is well documented, the creator among all the South African peoples was a *deus otiosus* to whom no rituals were directed and no prayers offered" (1978:138). And he continues: "The often-

repeated statement that the ancestors stand in a hierarchical relationship to the Supreme Being and mediate between him and man, is not part of any indigenous worldview. Where such an idea has been recorded it is almost certainly due to missionary influence. So veneration, as a substitute for 'worship', just will not do" (1978:138). What Hammond-Tooke fails to understand is that God has His own unique ways of doing things. First of all, by questioning the sanctity of the ancestors Hammond-Tooke takes as if God had limitations; he needed the Christian and Muslim Messages in order to convert Africans so that he could work in them. And he gives the impression that Africans who died before the arrival of these religions never reached 'Paradise'. These assumptions and prejudices against African peoples are wrong. For we know that God revealed himself to all the peoples in the way that he chose in accordance with that people, and that all the peoples derived their holiness from God. Hence like all other peoples, Africans who lived good and virtuous life were holy and derived their holiness from God. That is why their descendants venerate them. As the Zulus say: "They remember them" (Nxumalo, 1981:73). They remember all the good things that they have done and celebrate them. They do not worship them.

In this article, Hammond-Tooke argues that the concept 'veneration' does not exist in African worldview. He states that it was introduced by missionaries. In his view, it is foreign to Africa. What Hammond-Tooke attempts to prove does not stand, for Africans venerated their chiefs and heroes and heroines all over the continent. Hence to argue that the idea of 'veneration' of ancestors is not indigenous to the Africans needs to be substantiated. And taking Hammond-Tooke's point we would expect that only people who converted to Christianity or to Islam speak about the veneration of

ancestors. But reality proves the contrary, for those who converted to the new faiths and those who remained faithful to African Traditional Religion speaks about veneration of the ancestors.

According to Mbiti, ancestors are not worshipped. In his book, *African Religions and Philosophy*, he notes:

Many books speak of 'ancestor worship' to describe African religions. Certainly it cannot be denied that the departed occupy an important place in African religiosity; but it is wrong to interpret traditional religions simply in terms of 'worshipping the ancestors'... Libation and the giving of food to the departed are tokens of fellowship, hospitality and respect; the drink and food so given are symbols of family continuity and contact. 'Worship' is the wrong word to apply in this situation; and Africans themselves know very well that they are not 'worshipping' the departed members of their family (1969:8-9).

In short, to say that Africans worship their ancestors is wrong. In giving food to their departed, Africans are showing oneness, hospitality and respect, as Mbiti argues. Hence we conclude, "it is blasphemous to describe these acts of family relationship as worship" (1969:9).

As we have repeated several times, Idowu, one of the renowned scholars of African Traditional Religion, protests against the theory of ancestor-worship in Africa. According to Idowu, the first question of importance which has to be asked is, 'Is the term ancestor-worship correct?' Putting it differently, 'Do people anywhere worship their ancestors?' (1973:178). This is the question which holds the key to this debatable issue. For there is a fear of death and the dead in all the cultures but it is reported as if the phenomenon is particular to Africa.

Idowu speaks of communion and communication, which is believed to be possible between those in the visible world and the invisible world, that is, the living and the dead; and the dead are believed to have the power to influence, help or molest the living (1973:179). This is the popular belief which is shared by different cultures, and does not mean that they worship their deceased. The deceased are honoured according to the different customs of the people of Africa but they are not prayed to as some scholars implied.

In his book, *Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu*, Kenyatta argues that the honour given to *Ngai*, God, is quite different from the honour shown to the spirits of the dead. Studying the Gikuyu, Kenyatta shows that the difference is found in the distinction between the terms that are used by the Gikuyu which are *gothaiithaya* and *goitengera ngoma njohi*. Kenyatta explains “ The essential difference between Deity worship, in the true sense, and what is known as ‘ancestors worship’, is demonstrated by the fact that *gothaiithaya* (to beseech or worship) is never used in connection with ancestral spirits. The term used for what I shall call ‘communion with ancestors’ is *goitengera ngoma njohi*- literally to pour out or to sprinkle beer for the spirits” (1938:232). That is, according to Kenyatta, the ancestral spirits are not worshipped in the sense that God is worshipped. People honour them and keep communion with them.

As we have seen, Berglund also speaks of ‘communion’ with ancestors (1976:197-245). According to him, “Zulu society is a community of the living and the dead. There is no existence of the survivors separated from that of the shades, nor a realm of the shades separate from the living” (1976:197). He states that “there is in Zulu

society no worship of the shades, if by worship we understand a veneration of them” (1976:198). He argues that *Ukukhonza*, which is translated ‘worship’ in English, is used in relation to the Lord-of-the-Sky. His informants explain: “We do not worship (*khonza*) the shades. We simply speak to them (*ukuthetha*), telling them everything” (1976:198). According to Berglund, old people say that the correct term that was used traditionally was not *ukukhonza* but *ukuthetha*. They argue that it is only now that people say *ukukhonza* for everything that is done, even the work of the shades. But they, who know this thing of shades, do not say *ukukhonza*. They say *ukuthetha* (1976:198). In other words, in the Zulu worldview, there is a distinction between worship that is given to God and respect that is rendered to the shades. In short, the Zulus are aware of the hierarchy that exists in the invisible world. And they respect it. Worship is offered to the Lord-of-the-Sky and the ancestors are communicated with. They are not worshipped. On the contrary, the shades and the living commune with each other (1976:198). The shades are not worshipped. He points out that there are certain mountains and hills where people *ukukhonza* the Lord-of-the-Sky. And he writes that on occasions of severe drought, when communion with the shades has not led to rain, the local chief or another person of authority may appoint a day when people are to mount the hill to pray for rain (1976:45). They mount the hill to worship the Lord-of-the-Sky directly since the request they passed through their ancestors has failed. Like Basotho, the Zulus regard the ancestors as intermediaries between God and the living, as we have seen above. The ancestors are there to pray for the survivors. One of Nxumalo’s informants says: “I ask my ancestors to pray for me to God because they are with him and their prayers are heard. They intercede for me to God” (1981:73). Thus ancestors are not prayed to as the objects of prayer but as the instruments that are expected to pass the prayers to God to whom the prayers are

directed. Hence the theory of ancestor-worship is misleading. In order to understand the place of God in African Traditional Religion, his place in African worship and African ethics we need to get rid of the theory of ancestor-worship. For it gives the impression that ancestors replace God in African Religion.

2.4 ETHICS/MORALITY

2.4.1. Definition of the terms “Ethics” and “Morality”

The words ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ are used simultaneously in this paper to refer to human behaviour. We are aware that scholars use them technically in their works but our intention is to use them interchangeably. Let us briefly discuss the definition of these words as presented by some scholars.

According to Peter Kasenene, the word “ethics”, etymologically, derives from the Greek word *ethos*, which refers to the characteristic values, beliefs and practices of a social group. An *ethos* is constituted by the pervasive beliefs and practices that are seldom questioned within a given society. While, the word “morality”, on the other hand, is derived from a Latin word *mores* which also refers to customs or the generally held beliefs and practices of a given society. *Mores* are the social norms of a given society making its moral systems. He argues that terms ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ are often used interchangeably because they are close related (1998:8).

In further expounding the term ‘morality’, Kasenene points out that by a moral system is meant the integrated and systematised set of ideas of right and wrong in a given

culture which regulate individual moral judgments and social morality. He states that both ethos and mores mean the habits or customs of a people by which given community lives (1998:8). Hence in Kasenene's view, morality and ethics defines whether the behaviour is good or bad, right or wrong. He shows that the customs of the people are important in establishing social morality. In other words, moral judgment depends on the customs. We judge individual's acts according to the habits and customs of the community. The person who does what the community expects from him or her is judged to be morally good, while the person who deviates from the customs of the community is judged to be bad.

Furthermore, Magesa defines morality as "a normative ordering, in terms of perceived meanings, values, purposes and goals of human existence, of the lives of persons with regard to the ways in which they can choose to relate themselves to reality" (1998:13-14). In other words, it is the way that people order their lives in order to relate to one another and to the Supreme Being. Morality is the way by which individuals shape their lives in the way that is accepted by the community. As Magesa asserts morality involves a personal choice of the way of living.

According to Magesa, when we try to understand this system of ordering of meanings and values, we see the ethics of the people. He defines ethics as "the scientific study of such normative order" (1998:14). Briefly, Magesa maintains that ethics is the systematic study of human behaviour. He remarks that if this study of 'normative order' is done in the context of religious belief, one can be said to be doing religious ethics (1998:14).

Citing Gilbert, Mba Uka defines ethics as the science, which enquires into the meaning and purpose of life and conduct. He states that it represents a systematic attempt to consider the purposeful actions of mankind, to determine their rightness or wrongness, their tendency to good or evil (1991:180).

2.4.2. **Morality and Religion**

It is commonly held that religion and morality are inseparable. In his book, *Comparative Religion*, Estlin Carpenter writes, “we are assured that the historical beginning of all morality is to be found in religion; or that in the earliest period of human history, religion and morality were correlates of each other” (1968:197). According to Carpenter, religion and morality are related in the sense that morality originates from religion.

Arguing on the relationship of morality and religion, Kasenene points out that religion and morality are inseparable, morality being part of religion. He explains that some people even go as far as saying that religion and morality are one and the same thing; as religion is expected to be one’s way of life. He writes that others argue that without belief in God, gods or ancestors, even if it were not for the fear of hell, there would be no reason for being good. He cites Tremmel who argues that God’s will or the will of ancestors creates moral standards. He points that these views associate morality very close with religion. According to him, most religions stipulate the guides which their followers must comply with in relation to one another and to humanity in general. They prescribe what is right or wrong conduct, who is a good or bad person. Morality is regarded as one way adherents of a religion use to please the God they

worship, to live in harmony within the community and to enjoy blessings from above (1998:17).

Kasenene argues that in any African society, religion plays an important role in people's conduct. He states that religion is the strongest force that unites people into community and gives individuals a sense of identity. He maintains that in African society ancestors control both individual and social morals (1998:18). In one hand, religion and morality are connected with each other in African society. That is, as other scholars point out that Africans are notoriously religious, Kasenene confirms that whatever they do is religious. And the inclusion of ancestors in this description proves that morality is within the religion of the people.

Showing that there is relationship between morality and religion, Opoku writes:

Generally morality originates from religious considerations and so pervasive in African culture that the two cannot be separated from each other. Thus we find that what constitutes the moral code of any particular African society - the laws, taboos, customs and set forms of behaviour - all derive their compelling power from religion. This morality flows out of religion and through this the conduct of individuals is regulated and any break of the moral code is regarded as evil and punishable... And this system has one desirable ideal - social harmony and peace for the good of any man and society (cited by Uka, 1991:182).

Commenting on what Opoku is saying, Uka points out that the implication is that morality in African traditional society was not introduced by Christianity, nor was invented by society, to preserve itself as some scholars would argue. He mentions Durkheim who is of the view that society invented morality when it was faced with the problems of peace and living together. He describes that for Durkheim, in order to

meet these ends, the society evolved a system of self-preservation which people call morality (1991:182). Thus according to Durkheim, morality is the mere invention of a society for its harmony and survival. It has nothing to do with religion and the gods. In his view, morality is the invention of the people in order to organize the community life. Its purpose is to see to it that peace is observed and that people live together in harmony. It is intended for the community. It has nothing to do with religion.

To emphasise that in Durkheim's view, morality is not related to religion, Uka continues, "Durkheim argues that what religious people call 'the voice of God(s)' is nothing but the voice of the people" (1991:182). Uka also points out that Durkheim claims that what people call 'conscience' is just the notions which the society has planted in humans by providing a body of approved behaviours (1991:182). In short, as it is said above, in Durkheim's view, morality has nothing to do with religion.

But to show that religion and morality are really related and intertwined to each other, Uka turns to the African view of morality. He expresses that contrary to the view that morality is invented by the community, the traditional Africans view morality as given to them by God from the beginning. They also believe that the ancestors and the spirits keep watch over the people to make sure that they observe the moral laws and are punished when they break them (1991:183). He also quotes Mbiti who asserts that most African peoples acknowledge God as the final guardian of law and order and that the breaking of such order is regarded as an offence against God (1991:194). In this case, religion and morality in an African worldview are related.

Furthermore, Idowu explains that for the Yoruba of Nigeria, their moral values derive from the nature of God Himself whom they consider to be the “Pure and Perfect King” (1962:154). In one word, morality among the Yoruba people originates from religion. In addition, Idowu maintains that morality is inborn in man. According to him, God implanted the sense of right and wrong in the ‘heart’ of each man (1962:152).

Thus scholars of African Religion argue that Africans are extremely religious people and that religion constitutes their way of life. They consider their social, political and material life to be heavily influenced by religion. They believe that all individual and group activities are religiously determined. They hold that religion is not separated from other modes of life. They maintain that religion embraces the total life of the people and is integrated in all their institutions. They argue that the religious and the secular in African life interpenetrate, to a greater or lesser degree, at all points of existence. In whatever an African does or experiences, there is his religion with him. Thus one cannot separate religion from morality especially in African worldview.

Quoting the article by J. N. Kudadjie entitled *Does Religion Determine Morality in African Society?* Kenan states that most of the people who are of the opinion that morality can be determined by religion based their argument on the fact that true morality has dependence on religion (1997:52). In short, people who do not practice religion of any sort cannot have sense of valid morality. That is, religion in this sense, determines people’s way of life. And a society that lives without religion cannot survive.

Commenting on the relationship that exists between morality and religion, Magesa notes “morality is of the very nature of religion” (1998:14). He asserts that the study of morality involves the study of religion. In support of the view that religion and morality are the correlates he cites Clifford Geertz who argues that morality is intimately connected to religious belief and is the very expression of the religious belief (1998:14). According to Geertz, morality derives from people’s understanding of the Holy. Paraphrasing Geertz: ‘the Holy does not only encourage commitment but it demands it’. He points out that ethical commitments are ultimately anchored in the people’s conception of God who is the Holy, and in their interpretation of what God demands of them in real life (1998:15). To sum up, in Geertz’s view, morality and religion are neatly connected to each other. And morality presupposes religion.

In his paper, *The Salvific Value of African Traditional Religion*, Patrick Kalilombe puts it thus: “In African traditional society morality and religion are inseparable. Laws, taboos, customs and set forms of behaviour all derive their power from religion. Morality flows out of religion. God is generally regarded as the source of morality” (1991:215). In this sense, morality and religion in Africa are seen as interrelated.

2.4.3. African Ethics

In his book, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, Bujo notes, “many scholars, above all Western thinkers have long asserted that African ethics is exclusively anthropocentric, without connection to God as Person” (2001:1). In contrast to this thinking, Bujo argues, “the definition of “person” in Africa is not coterminous with the Western

definition; and he points out that those who hold the view that African morality is concerned exclusively with human person and that its perspective excludes a monotheistic God, have failed to comprehend African thought” (2001:1). It is an undeniable fact that African ethics is anthropocentric. But it is not true that it excludes God. Africans still bring God in morality. Like other ethics of religious people, African ethics is founded on God.

He also states that “while it is unambiguously true that the idea of community is the starting point for African ethics, this is not limited to the visible community: the invisible community, which is equally important for Africans, embraces not only one’s deceased ancestors, but also those not yet born and even God” (2001: 1-2). Scholars of African Religion share the view that the foundation and purpose of African ethics is life in its fullness (Magesa, 1998:77). That is why in his exposition, Bujo argues that African ethics is not limited to the visible community. In his view, what counts in African ethics is life. In Africa it is believed that life flows in and from God to the ancestors and then to the living (Magesa, 1998:41). As the Giver of life, God is important in African ethics because he demands that life must be preserved. As they are the agents of God and the transmitters of life, ancestors are also important in African ethics. It is their function to see that life is respected, promoted and preserved. And in African Religion they are regarded as the guardians of morality. Hence as Bujo argues, they are important in African ethics. Bujo also sees the unborn children as important in African ethics. In fact, Bujo argues that according to African understanding of ‘person’, the unborn child is already a person at the early stage of its development. He states that what Western biology calls a foetus or an embryo, in Africa view is closely related to the community both of the living and of the dead; it is

embraced by the love of the visible and the invisible community. He says that both communities continue their life in the foetus or embryo' which bears hope for the future, not only in the biological sense of extending the clan fellowship but also as regards life in general. That is, the foetus in African view already enjoys the privileges of the living. It is regarded as the living person and the living of the visible community ought to respect its life. They are demanded by moral norm to behave as if they are dealing with the 'other' person. Taking into consideration that the life of that foetus emanates from God who is the source of life, the African feels the need to respect this life. It also holds the future for the survival of the clan. Hence in African ethics the unborn child is regarded as part of the community (2001:89).

Bujo also explains that "Africans tend in practice to speak about human beings than about God; this is due to the view that one who pays heed to the dignity of the human person pleases God, and that one who acts against the human person offends God" (2001:2). According to Bujo, the Africans do not speak about God because he is excluded from African moral life as foreign scholars argue but because they believe that a person who respects a human life respects God and is approved by him.

According to Bujo, the community has a central place in African ethics. In short, he sees African ethics as communal ethics. In this view, African ethics is concerned with the community. Contrary to the Western ethics, which is based on the individual, African ethics is based on the community. An individual is expected to measure himself or herself according to the standards of the society. He or she has to comply with what the society has put as the yardstick for good moral life. That is, the person is judged according to the moral standard of the community. She or he is not

regarded as an island but as a member of the group. She or he learns from the community how to live and behave well. And Bujo states “ethical insight involves, however, more than, just the individual, who depends on others if he is to understand and discern moral norms aright” (2001:6).

Some scholars misinterpreted the community aspect of African ethics. In Bujo’s words, they “have maintained that Africans are so obsessed with the idea of community that they feel guilty only when ‘caught’ in some wrongdoing” (2001:120). According to this observation, Africans do not have the sense of sin as personal transgression. They do not have the sense of guilt conscience. Instead of feeling guilty for their wrongdoing, they feel ashamed that the community knows about it. In other words, it is argued that African ethics is not internalized. Bujo rejects this view. He shows that even though African ethics emphasizes the community, the individual is not relegated to the oblivion. As we have stated, African ethics starts from the community and goes to the individual.

Uka shares the same idea with Bujo. He points out that ethics in an African traditional society is a communal ethic not an individualistic ethic (1991:190). That is, as we have shown above, African ethics is concerned with the welfare and morality of the community.

Turning to the importance of the ancestors in African Religion and Ethics Bujo writes, “African ethics is articulated in the framework of anamnesis, which involves remembering one’s ancestors. As a narrative community, fellowship here on earth renews the existence of the community of the ancestors. This re-establishing in turn

implies the praxis which efficiently continues the remembrance of ancestors and gives a new dynamism to the earthly fellowship” (2001:35). That is, as they established and formulated the morality that is practiced by their descendants, the ancestors are remembered as reference point whereby the living can draw strength in order to be faithful to the way that is set up for them. That is why Bujo argues that the ethical behaviour in the African context always involves the presence of one’s ancestors. He states, “one who takes anamnesis seriously is challenged to confront ethical rules drawn up by the ancestors, in order to actualise anew ‘the protological foundation act’ which first called the clan fellowship into life.”

According to Magesa,

African Religion’s conception of morality is steeped in tradition; it comes and flows from God into the ancestors of the people. God is seen as the Great Ancestor, the first Founder and Progenitor, the Giver of Life, the Power behind everything that is. God is the first Initiator of people’s way of life and tradition. However, the ancestors, the revered dead human progenitors of the clan or tribe, both remote and recent, are the custodians of this tradition (1998:41).

In short, what Magesa emphasises here is the importance of God and the ancestors in African ethics. Firstly, God is manifested as the origin of life, that is, life in its fullness. He is regarded as the Great Ancestor. Hence related in a special way to the peoples of Africa. Secondly, as God is referred to as the Great Ancestor, he is also referred to as the Progenitor and the ancestors are referred to as dead human progenitors showing a relationship with God, and are seen as the worthy custodians of traditions (that is, morality included). In other words, as we have shown, God is presented as the foundation of African ethics. That is, in Magesa’s understanding, God is the source of African ethics. Other moral agents such as ancestors and the

spirits are mere ministers who are only serving under God's command. In African view, they are administrators and servants of God. They are in the service of God. Hence the role that the ancestors play in African ethics is great since they represent God. As Nxumalo argues "there is a relationship between God and those who are dead and from him they derive the power of doing good (1981:67). The ancestors are regarded as the guardians of morality because they derive their power from God. Hence it is erroneous to rule out God in African ethics.

And to show that ancestors play a special role in African ethics, Magesa states, "More than any other force, ancestors are the protectors of the society as well as its most feared critics and source of punishment. They are the direct watchdogs of the moral behaviour of the individual, the family, the clan and the entire society with which they are associated. No serious misbehaviour or anti-life attitude among their descendants, in thought, word and deed, escapes their gaze" (1998:51). As the guardians of morality, they are there to correct where people deviate from the moral laws and nothing escapes them. According to this view, it is their work to see that the way that they have established is followed accordingly.

He argues "the ancestors are in a real sense 'authority figures', who maintain the norms of social action and cause trouble when these are not obeyed" (1998:52). In taking what Magesa is saying, we can conclude that ancestors derive their authority from God. Hence they deserve obedience insofar as morality is concerned.

2.5 SUMMARY

We have defined African Traditional Religion as the indigenous religion of Africa. We have shown that it is alive and men and women of today still practice it. Contrary to the scholars who argue that there are many religions in Africa, we have attempted to prove that we can talk about African Religion in the singular. We have seen that God is worshipped in African Traditional Religion and that the ancestors play the role of intermediaries in African worship. We pointed out that ancestors are the relatives who have passed away, yet who continue to show interest in their survivors. We stated that Mbiti defines them as the living-dead. We tried to show that ancestors are not worshipped but they are venerated; and we have suggested that the term 'ancestor-worship' needs to be abandoned, as it is misleading. We argued that the purpose of African ethics is the promotion of life. And we have seen that in Africa life is understood to be flowing from God to the ancestors. And for that matter, *Molimo/uNkulunkulu* is regarded as the foundation or source of African ethics and the ancestors are believed to be the guardians of morality. Lastly, we have pointed out that African ethics is a communal ethics but we have also argued that an individual has a place within the ambit of communal ethics.

3. THE MAKING OF AN ANCESTOR IN THE SOTHO AND THE NGUNI WORLDVIEWS

In this chapter, we intend to define how one becomes an ancestor according to the Sotho and the Nguni customs. In other words, we want to see who qualifies to be called an ancestor according to these tribes. In order to have an idea of the Nguni and the Sotho groups we will present the schema of the Bantu-speaking peoples of South Africa. As the core of this chapter is the conception of ancestorhood in the Sotho and the Nguni, it will be of great importance to see the notion that these people have of death. From this we will be able to see who qualifies to be called an ancestor in the Basotho and the Zulu worldviews.

Hence we will divide our discussion into three parts. In the first part, we will concentrate on classifying the Sotho and the Nguni groups. After we have classified the Sotho and the Nguni, we will choose which tribes to concentrate on since the groups are constituted of big families. That is, in order to avoid generalising, our study in the following chapters will be limited to the Southern Sotho (known as Basotho) and the Northern/Natal Nguni (known as the Zulus). Thus the Basotho will represent the Sotho group and the Zulus will represent the Nguni group. Hence, while still keeping focus on our topic, we will insist more on the Basotho and the Zulus in order to have a clearer picture. Secondly, as we have indicated that our study will concentrate more on the Basotho and the Zulus, we will discuss the notion of death according to the Basotho and the Zulus. Then we will describe how one becomes an ancestor according to these peoples. The summary will follow.

3.1 CLASIFICATION OF THE BANTU-SPEAKING PEOPLES OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

We have indicated that our study will be limited to the Bantu peoples of Southern Africa, particularly the Sotho and the Nguni. As the Bantu of Southern Africa are made up of different big families, we find it reasonable to limit our study to the Basotho and the Zulus, for it is impossible to discuss the whole Bantu groups without falling into the temptation of generalising.

In his two papers "Groupings and Ethnic History" and "The Classification of Cultural Groups" which are more or less the same, Jacobus Nicolaas Van Warmelo divides the Bantu peoples of South Africa into four major groups: Nguni, Shangana-Tonga, Sotho, and Venda and Lemba. An ancestral belief is a common phenomenon to all these groups. Ancestors are called by different names: Nguni (*iminyanya*, *amadlozi*, *amathongo*), Sotho (*balimo*), Shangana-Tonga (*shikwembu*) and Venda and Lemba (*midzimu*). Ancestors are often referred to in the plural.

He schematically divides these groups in this way:

1. NGUNI Cape Nguni (Xhosas) consisting of Thembu, Hlubi, Pondo, etc.
 - Fingoes
 - Natal Nguni (Zulus) comprising of the Nyuswa, Buthelezi, etc.
 - Swazi
 - Transvaal Ndebele
2. SHANGANA-TONGA
3. SOTHO Southern Sotho (Basotho)
 - Western Sotho (Batswana)
 - Northern Sotho (Bapedi)
4. VENDA and LEMBA

3.2. THE NOTION OF DEATH IN THE BASOTHO AND THE ZULU WORLDVIEW

What we attempt to do here is to find out the similarities and differences that exist between the Basotho and the Zulus insofar as the conception of death is concerned. As we have shown, scholars of African Religion emphasise that even though Africans differ in expressing their faith, the nature of their faith is the same. That is what we discover in Basotho and Zulu's notion of death. After all, as ethnographers argue, the Bantu origins are the same. What they share in common is stronger than what differentiates them.

The Basotho never looked at death as a total annihilation or extinction of a human person, but rather as a transition from one world to another. Expressing this belief of the Basotho, Manyeli states, "the fundamental principle of the Basotho is that the human 'spirit' does not cease to exist, that life does not stop at death. They believe that a human being does not die, although animals do. A human being goes home where, s/he is going to live happily" (1995:84). The idea of death as the end of human life was never accepted among Basotho people (Segoete, 1913: 110; Guma, 1980:8; Rakotsoane 2001:139). It was never said a person was dead, *o shoele*. A person was said to have been called, *o bitsitsoe*, to have passed away, *o fetile*, to have left, *o re siile*, to have gone home, *o ile hae*, to have emigrated, *o faletse*, he or she has changed his or her abode, s/he has transferred her or his dwelling (Manyeli, 1995:84; Rakotsoane 2001:140). And when little children were informed of their parent's death, it was whispered in the ears with these words, "so and so has taken a journey, *o etile*" (Manyeli, 1995:84). Basotho believed that life continues even after death.

Among the Basotho, death of the old person is regarded as natural and is easily accepted. If the dead person is already old, it is said that he or she has died a death of God, *o shoele lefu la Molimo*, and he or she is resting, *o phomotse* or he or she is asleep, *o robetse*. On the other hand, death of a young person brings suspicion. It is not accepted and it is believed that witches and sorcerers have bewitched him. And this death is not referred to as a death of God, *lefu la Molimo*.

According to Berglund, Samuelson and Bryant, the Zulus also believed that life continues after death. Berglund shows that among the Zulus there are essentially two concepts of death. He explains that there is a timely death, which presupposes a number of children and grandchildren who survived the deceased. He states that a timely death is in the Zulu language expressed by terms such as *ukugoduka*, *ukudhula*, *ukuhamba* and *ukuqubeka*, which all give notions of a passing on, a continuation. On the other hand, there is death which is untimely and is regarded as a serious interference in human's life. Such kind of death, according to the Zulus, is a total annihilation of the human person. Berglund states that an untimely death is described as *ukufa*, *ukubhubha*, and *ukugqibuka*, which imply a breaking off of life (1976:79).

According to one of Berglund's informants, the Zulus believe that physical death, when it comes at the correct time in life, is in itself not evil. It is to be regarded as a natural continuation of man's existence. And the other informant remarks, "to the old death does not come unexpectedly. We do not mourn them because we knew that it was coming. They were not taken unaware" (1976:79). In short, to the old death is a passage from this life to the other life. It is expected to happen at any time and to the old it does not come as a surprise.

Taking what we have said above, we can argue that the Basotho and the Zulus' understanding of death is the same. They believe that human life does not stop at death. According to their view, life continues after death. Nevertheless, the Basotho and the Zulus differ in that in the Basotho belief life still continues even if a person died an untimely death. In nowhere do Basotho express the view that in order for a life to continue after death a person has to be of a certain age. It is true that Basotho looked at death prior to maturity with suspicion and that it is not easily accepted. It is not regarded as natural for a person to die before his time, that is, before reaching the old age. But Basotho never doubted that even those who died before their time still continue to live in the other world. Death is seen as a continuation of life irrespective of whether it is timely or untimely. Besides, nobody knows when a time of an individual is "ripe" for death. Although a person looks young and still in the prime of his or her life, he or she might have fulfilled his or her work on earth. According to the Basotho, his life is not annihilated like that of the animal. That is why even those who died young still appear to their relatives in dreams or visions. To Basotho, they are the living-dead. But they do not have influence like that of the living-dead who died timely deaths.

On the other hand, the Zulus are clear that only persons who died timely death survive after death. According to them, untimely death amounts to a total annihilation or extinction of the human person. As we have seen, the informant of Berglund argues that death is the continuation of life only when it comes at the "ripe age" (1976:79). To emphasise this belief, Alfred Bryant states, "With the hoary aged, one needed to consult neither oracle nor doctor. These were they, and these alone, who passed from

life 'by nature's way'. Of these it was never said, 'they die' (*ba-ya-fa*), but simply that 'they-go-back-back-home' (*ba-ya-goduka*) (1949:699). Even after death they are seen as alive. Death is not the end for them. They are believed to be going to the land of their fathers and forefathers, who have preceded them, that is, who had gone before them.

But death prior to maturity is regarded as a tragedy. For in their belief, life for such a person ends after death. He or she cannot live in the other world. While death of the old person is accepted as natural development, death prior to maturity is related to witchcraft and sorcery (Berglund, 1976:80). It is considered as the work of sorcery and as intended to deny the person a chance to live further. It terminates his life. That is why in the Zulu belief an untimely death is taken as the extinction of life. As the Zulu language describes a person who dies an untimely death is dead, *ukufa*. Bryant expresses this belief clearly. According to him, a person who dies in his or her prime of life is destroyed. Bryant explains that to die young among the Zulus is unnatural and inconsistent. He writes, "For is not man born to live? And is not youth, and health, and vigour deliberately supplied him to enjoy that life? So all that die young, or in their prime, depart life 'prematurely', destroyed by spirit or by man" (1949:698-699).

As we have shown, according to Basotho, the dead person was said to have gone home. This expresses their belief that there is another home beyond the grave where the departed go and live peacefully. That is why it was also said that he has taken a journey. They believed that he has taken a journey to that new home where he will join his forefathers who preceded him. In that way, death was not regarded as a

destruction of human life but as its continuation. Moreover, the grave was called “the house of the deceased”, *ntlo ea mofu*; and the cemetery were referred to as “the village of the silent, *motse oa ba khutsitseng*. In one word, Basotho believed that a person has gone home. The Zulus had the same belief that a dead person is going home and that life especially of the person who dies at the “ripe age” continues. It is said that in the past they had the custom of “Sending Home”, *Ukugodusa* (Samuelson, n.d.; Bryant, 1949; Berglund, 1976). According to these authors, if a person reached the age that he was unable to do anything for himself or herself and became somehow a burden to the family or the society, he or she was taken out to the bush where he was killed. It was said that he or she was sent home. The custom appears cruel and barbaric and the persons who committed it are regarded as the most selfish and inhumane individuals, but it also expresses the view that the Zulus believed that there is another home beyond the grave. It signifies that to the Zulus the dying are going home. Physical death does not stop human life. As the informants state, timely death does not annihilate human life. Death is a continuation of life and the custom of sending home, *ukugodusa*, was taken in the spirit that death at old age is the development of life.

Talking about the Xhosas (the Cape Nguni), Masilo Lamla explains that death does not mean complete oblivion. It means continuation. He argues that death is a rite of passage from the known to the unknown, from the temporary to the permanent, from the mundane to the super-mundane, from the earthly to the sacred and from the ordinary to the sublime (1981:15). In other words, like the Basotho and all the Bantu-speaking people, the Nguni strongly believed in the after life. That is, death is regarded as a bridge to the other world where life is thought to be far better than in

this world. No person can taste the life of the ancestral world without passing through death.

Hence as we have argued, Basotho and the Zulus emphasise that death is a continuation of life and when they are taken by death the deceased are said to have gone home. Though we have shown that the Zulus categorise according to whether a death is timely or untimely, both Basotho and the Zulus maintain that death is not the end of human life.

To emphasise that the 'dead' person is alive and that he is travelling to another world or another home, the Basotho and the Zulus slaughtered a beast, which, according to their belief, was supposed to accompany the 'dead' person. The Basotho call this accompaniment beast *khomo ea mohoha* or *khomo ea phelehetso*. According to Basotho belief, the sex of the accompaniment animal must correspond to the sex of the dead person. That is, for a male, Basotho slaughtered an ox and for a female they slaughtered a cow.

The Zulus also believed that the 'dead' person is travelling to the other world. He is changing his abode or his dwelling. In order to accompany him in the journey he was about to carry, a cow of accompaniment was slaughtered, *inkomo yokukapha*. Lamla argues that the word *ukukapha* literally means to accompany a distance; to guide or direct for some distance on the way. He explains that it figuratively means to bring one over the border, that is, death (1981:15). Like the Basotho, the Zulus believe that *inkomo yokukapha* accompanies the dead home. Hence it was important in the rite of making the dead to cross to the other world. It is believed that if that animal is not

slaughtered the dead will not reach the land of the ancestors. He or she will wonder around and haunt his relatives. Looking at this ritual of the killing of accompaniment beast among the Basotho and the Zulus, one finds that the sense of death as going home among these peoples is very strong.

Furthermore, as we have shown, Basotho never regarded death as a termination of life. That is why they bury their dead with some seeds of maize, pumpkin and tobacco. The dead is buried with weapons and other useful instruments, utensils, and some clothing, which according to that belief, will be needed and used in the other world (Segoete, 1913:110; Sechefo, n.d.: 6; Ellenberger, 1969:262; Gill, 1993:58; Manyeli, 1995:85). That is, this system of burying the dead with some of the tools that he used in this world expresses the idea that there is a belief in life beyond the grave. There is a belief that the dead is going home and he will need the things that he used on this world. In fact, 'Makali Mokitimi sums up the belief of the Basotho in the ancestors as she says,

The Basotho believed that after death, people go to another world where they meet their ancestors. The ancestors are believed to be intermediaries between God and the living, and are also believed to be alive in another world. That is why in the past when one died, he/she was buried with agricultural tools, war tools, seeds of plants and tobacco, to go and use them in that world (1997:1).

According to Lamla, the Nguni also buried their dead with things they used while they were alive. Basing himself on Soga and Hammond-Tooke discoveries, Lamla states that it has been recorded that in the remote past the dead were buried with their personal belongings (1981:15). That is, the Nguni believed that life still continues beyond the grave. They thought that the dead still needed their personal belongings

for the life of the other world. Thus there is a sense of going home where life will continue.

To show that Basotho strongly believe that the dead are only changing their abode, *mohloa*, a tuft of ordinary dog grass twisted into a tiny ring were put beside the dead in the grave (Sekese, 1931:25; Sechefo, n.d.: 8). Sechefo argues that *mohloa*, which grows only in places that are already inhabited by people; signify that the deceased is now dwelling in some permanent home inhabited by other people. So, in like manner, he or she should, when settled there, procure a lasting home for his or her grieving family (Sechefo, n.d., p.8). Hammond-Tooke states that *mohloa* symbolizes family and community life because it grows near settlements (1974:327).

In addition, for the Basotho burial the dead were traditionally not laid stretched out in the grave, but they were buried in a squatting position. And the significance of burying the dead in a squatting position is that they must be ready to stand up and start the journey to the ancestral world (Manyeli, 1995:115; Rakotsoane, 2001:143). They are seated prepared for the journey to the other world.

Moreover, the accompanying words that are used by the Basotho at burial manifest that they strongly believe that life continues after death and that the dead are going back home. When they pay their last greetings to the dead, Basotho say, "Go in peace to prepare a home for us, *tsamaea ka khotso 'me u re lokisetse bolulo.*" To Basotho these are not empty words but the manifestation of their strong belief in the life after death. As we have shown they also reveal the belief that through death people pass to their new home. That is why the living ask the deceased to prepare a home for them.

The words also manifest that the ancestral world is a world of peace. The dead is wished to go in peace since he or she is going to the land of peace.

Furthermore, Basotho stressed that the dead person is only sleeping and this shows that death is not the end. One of the last words which are said before people turn the soil back in the grave are 'sleep for us', *u re roballe*. It is my contention that some investigators misinterpreted this prayer of Basotho. For whenever they use it they give the impression that Basotho utter these words to ask the dead to go away and not to disturb them. It is as if the dead are sent away because the living are afraid to have contact with them. Contrary to this misleading view, Basotho wish their dead to be accepted in the land of their fathers, the ancestors. Apart from that, as we have stated, these words have significance as they show that Basotho regard death as a mere sleep. They believe that their dead are asleep and that they will wake up in the other world and live again. Thus the belief that the dead are still alive has always been with the Basotho. As we have seen, it is manifested in the words they used when they referred to death or to the dead. It is also shown in their burial rites. On the other hand, as it is argued, the Zulu burial rites also prove that life still continues after death even though there is no belief in life after death for those who died prematurely. In addition, Basotho believe that when the dead person manifests himself or herself to the living, he or she appears as he or she was in the flesh with the same clothes that he or she used to wear. That is, the shade does not change into something else. According to Manyeli, Basotho believed that at death, each person kept the form, appearance and character that he or she had during his or her life time (1995:92). On the contrary, the Zulus believed that the shades manifest themselves as snakes or house lizards. That is,

the male ancestors materialise as snakes, while female ancestors materialise as house lizards (Berglund, 1972:132, 1976:94ff; Ngubane, 1977:50).

While Basotho and the Zulus differ greatly on the mode in which the ancestors manifest themselves, they shared the idea that ancestors reveal themselves in dreams and visions. Dreams are a channel of communication between survivors and the ancestors. According to Basotho, they express what they need or their dissatisfaction in dreams. It is to the individual discretion to consult a diviner if the dream is not clear or to do exactly what he was ordered to do in the dream. For the Zulus, absence of dreams becomes a great concern. According to the Zulus, not only does one experience the lack of dreams as a vacuum in life. The absence of dreams can also indicate a lack of interest on the part of the shades (1972:145). To emphasise the importance of dreams one informant of Berglund states, "They come to us at night. They reveal themselves. We see them very closely and hear them saying things. They are just beside us when they reveal themselves in this way" (1972:145). Hence we can conclude that there are similarities and differences between the Basotho and the Zulu conception of death and after-life.

3.3. THE MAKING OF AN ANCESTOR

In the section we have just discussed, we have seen that there are certain similarities and differences in the Basotho's notion of death and the notion of death among the Zulus. In this section we will try to look deeper into the phenomena of ancestorhood. We will discuss how one becomes an ancestor in the Basotho and the Zulu worldviews.

3.3.1 Does death make the dead an ancestor?

Some scholars argue that death is not a criterion for one to become an ancestor (Hammond-Tooke, 1974:327). They argue that one is made an ancestor by his or her survivors through certain rites that are performed for him or her. And as we have seen, according to the Zulus, only those who reached old age are believed to survive death and only the kraal heads are addressed as the ancestors of their families or clans. In short, death does not make one an ancestor. So according to Basotho and the Zulus, who becomes an ancestor?

In his book, *The Basutos: Or Twenty Three Years in South Africa*, Casalis writes,

As soon as a person is dead he takes his place among the family gods. An ox is immolated over his grave: this is the first oblation made to the new divinity, and at the same time an act of intercession in his favour, serving his happy reception in the subterranean regions. All those present aid in sprinkling the grave, and repeat the following prayer: 'Repose in peace with the gods; give us tranquil nights'' (1965:250).

Contrary to the belief that death is not criterion to declare one as an ancestor, Casalis shows that according to Basotho through death one becomes an ancestor. Indeed, Casalis' observation is correct. Basotho never had special rites which made the dead ancestors. They believed that their new status had automatically promoted them to be the ancestors. But it seems that Casalis did not understand the significance of the slaughtered animal in Basotho's burial rites. He argues that it was a sacrifice to the deceased. As we have argued, an ox or a cow that was slaughtered was meant to accompany the dead to the land of the living. It was not a sacrifice to him. At least we would agree with him when he says that it was an act of intercession in favour of the dead. That is, the impression that the animal of accompaniment was a sacrifice to the

deceased is misleading. The animal was slaughtered with the intention totally different from that which Casalis expresses here. Nevertheless an ox or a cow of accompaniment, *khomo ea phelehetso*, is very important in the rite of burying the dead. In his book *An Experience of Pastoral Theology in Southern Africa: Inculturated and Committed Christian Communities*, Eugene Lapointe emphasises the importance of *khomo ea phelehetso* in the Basotho burial rites. He points out that it is supposed to accompany the dead man on his journey (1986:41). It was thought that if an animal was not slaughtered the dead will not reach his destination, that is, the land of the ancestors. For Basotho believed that the dead who were not buried properly would lose the link with their deceased elders and wonder about as ghosts causing trouble to the living (Rakotsoane 2001:140).

Casalis also gives the impression that Basotho regarded their ancestors as gods. The ancestors were respected but they were not taken as gods. Manyeli (1995:90) argues that according to Basotho conception, the living dead were human beings who have gone to another world. They are not gods. Hence Casalis' assumption that the dead were regarded as gods among the Basotho is not true. In addition, Casalis and some investigators insist that Basotho took their ancestors as gods. And the inclusion of 'gods' in the farewell prayer which is cited by Casalis, does not give the true picture of Basotho belief in their ancestors. Above all the prayer contradicts what Basotho believed in. They regarded dreams and visions of the dead as the sign that they are still in communion with them; and according to the prayer that Casalis recited, it appears as if ancestors are asked to remain in the oblivion forever. Thus according to Basotho, death and the proper burial make the deceased an ancestor. Hence all those who were properly buried are regarded as ancestors.

On the contrary, as we have seen, the Zulus believed that only the dead who died a timely death continue to live. Similarly, they believed that only the family heads become ancestors. That is, only people who exercised authority while they lived become ancestors. Hence women and children and those who died before they completed the life cycle fall outside the category of ancestorship. They cannot become ancestors. According to Lamla, they remain minors even in the spirit world (1981:15).

According to Nxumalo's informant, the ancestors, *amadlozi*, are "the great fathers" (1981:66). He sees *amadlozi* as great fathers. Other informants stressed that *idlozi*, the ancestor, is the father, the grandfather and the great grandfather. That is, according to the Zulus, *idlozi* is only a male progenitor and the father of the family. *Amadlozi* are the ones who are addressed directly at the ceremonies, the rites of family celebrations. Women, children and all male members of the family who did not father any offspring are not taken as *amadlozi* (1981:66-67). Unlike Basotho who regard all the dead as ancestors, *balimo*, the Zulus maintain that only those who fathered an offspring are the ancestors, *amadlozi*.

As we have seen, according to Basotho, *khomo ea phelehetso*, an ox or a cow for accompanying the dead plays an important role in making the dead an ancestor. We have pointed out that Basotho believed that it was only if the ritual of slaughtering a beast for the dead is omitted that the dead will not reach the land of the ancestors and will wonder as the burial rituals were not properly performed. But according to the Zulus, *inkomo yakukapha*, the cow of accompaniment is not sufficient for making the dead to become ancestors. In the Zulu understanding the family has to perform the

ceremony of *Ukubuyisa*, “Bringing Back the Deceased” in order that he may be effective. Contrary to the Basotho world, to the Zulu worldview the ancestor is made

3.3.2 *Ukubuyisa*: The Zulu way of making an ancestor

As we have indicated, *idlozi*, an ancestor in the Zulu understanding is the head of the family; and for the Zulus, death is not understood as the criterion of ancestorhood. It is believed that a certain period has to pass by before the dead is addressed as an ancestor of the kraal. During this period, the deceased is considered to be ineffective, that is, he cannot help his family. He is still in isolation. Unlike the Basotho who maintain that as soon as the person is dead he takes place among his ancestors, the Zulus maintain that he still remains outside the communion of his ancestors for some time. In his paper *Ukubuyisa: The Service of Bringing Back the Deceased into Vital Participation*, Setiloane compares this period of waiting to the period of sequestration, a time of being cut off, from both worlds (1972:3). He sees it as a period in which the deceased is between the visible world and the invisible but he is not participating in any of them. He regards this time as the time of purification of the deceased. According to him, this period of waiting can be compared to the Roman Catholic doctrine that teaches about Purgatory where ‘the souls of the deceased are kept in a state of cleansing until their release’. Setiloane argues that it would appear that our traditional understanding also has an experience of such an estrangement immediately following death (1972:4). That is, during this period the devout Catholics pray and intercede for the souls of their beloved to be released from Purgatory and be received in heaven. Similarly, the Zulu understanding is that the dead is being prepared and also preparing himself to join his ancestors.

Setiloane finds the logic of *Ukubuyisa* in that when death has hit the family, all the members of that family go into mourning. They withdraw from customary activities. In short, they enter the period of seclusion and sequestration. Setiloane argues that if Africans take seriously the idea of *Ubuntu* as vital participation and man as a living, relating, acting, reacting, inter-acting, force-being, it is understandable that the deceased should be affected and participate in this experience of seclusion and sequestration of his kin. He states that in our African traditional worldview we believe in a social solidarity that death cannot break (1972:4). Hence in this period both the living and the deceased participate in seclusion. Absolon Vilakazi notes that this is the most dangerous period. He remarks: "The immediate period after death, when the spirit is still 'wandering', is a dangerous one for it is uncontrolled or as it were, 'unsocialised'" (1962:89).

Setiloane explains that to release the living from contamination of contact with death we perform cleansing services at home. According to Setiloane, the purpose of the cleansing services is to set the living free, to liberate them, after their period of mourning, so that they can re-enter into the normal life of participation as fully-fledged human beings, in society, at home and abroad. Setiloane confirms that the same happens to the deceased whom the death and contamination have come into the midst of the living. He states that after being liberated from the bonds of mourning and participating in the normal and full life of the community, the family of the deceased wish the enjoyment of a similar abundance of life to their departed, so that he can be what he is to the full (1972:5). Briefly, the family performs the service that liberates the deceased. As we have shown that after death the deceased is regarded to

be passive, with the service he is made to be active, to participate in the daily living of his family. Thus to the Zulus he is made an ancestor.

To define what this ceremony of *Ukubuyisa* really is Setiloane cites Bengt Sundkler who writes, "In the traditional Zulu religion *Ukubuyisa idhlozi* is of great importance for the clan. By this ceremony a deceased kraal-head is finally incorporated into the group of ancestors... The *ukubuyisa* ceremony guarantees the help of the deceased, not only to the chief's son, but to the whole lineage" (1972:6).

According to Setiloane, Sundkler's statement has two points of significance, viz.:

1. The incorporation of the deceased kraal-head into the group of ancestors.
2. The guarantee of the deceased's help to the living (1972:6).

Ukubuyisa releases the deceased kraal-head from seclusion and sequestration. He is incorporated into the group of the ancestors of the family. The members of the family address him for the first time as their ancestor. He is believed to have taken his place among his elders who went before him to the land of the ancestors. That is, he is regarded as the full member of the land of the ancestors. Nxumalo argues that the one who presides at the service invites him to come back home, and calls him to be present in the midst of the family (1981:71). His name is included in the praises of the ancestors for the first time after his death and he is requested to return to his home and care for his dependants. That is, from the day that *ukubuyisa* ceremony is performed, the deceased kraal head is expected to do his duties as the father of the family. He is expected to intercede for his survivors to God, to protect them from harm and to provide them with good things. Thus as Krige points out, the *ukubuyisa* is a very

important ceremony, and one that secures the blessings and help of the deceased for the whole lineage (1974:170).

Hammond-Tooke describes that in this ceremony the eldest son of the deceased takes the branch of a tree and drags it from the grave into the house, by this process bringing him home (1974:328). He states that an ox is sacrificed and choice portions are placed on the *umsamo*, the sacred place at the back of the hut especially associated with the ancestors (1974:328). It is in this place where the services concerning the ancestors are performed. It is in this place that ancestors of the family are venerated.

To the Basotho, death makes the dead to become *balimo* and all those who belong to the land of *balimo* qualify to be called *balimo*. This is one of the major differences between the Zulus and Basotho conception of the ancestors. According to the Zulus, *Ukubuyisa* ceremony makes the dead an ancestor or makes him to take his place among his ancestors. To the Basotho, death immediately makes the dead an ancestor. His or her family does not intervene in any way to make him or her change his or her status. He or she automatically becomes an ancestor because of the new status that he or she has attained through death. Whereas the Zulus believe that the family of the deceased has to intervene in order that the deceased become an ancestor. They also think that a certain time has to elapse before a deceased is addressed as an ancestor.

The Zulus take the *umsamo* as the special place for the ancestors. In this way, *umsamo* is regarded as sacred. For it is the place of the *amadlozi*. On the other hand, for the Basotho, the grave and the cemetery are the special places of the *balimo*. That is why to the Basotho the grave and the cemetery are sacred (Manyeli, 1995:93). That

location

is, the Basotho and the Zulu sacred places of the ancestors differ. When Basotho want to pay visit and talk to their ancestors they go to the cemetery whereas the Zulus go to the *umsamo* where their ancestors abide.

Hence the Zulus and the Basotho understanding of how one becomes an ancestor is not the same. In the Zulu worldview, the family makes an ancestor. The family performs a special rite, which changes the status of the deceased and incorporates him in the group of the ancestors of his family. According to Basotho understanding, death changes the status of the deceased and makes him an ancestor.

3.4. SUMMARY

The Basotho and the Zulus strongly believe that death is not the end of life. They maintain that death is a continuation of life. Death at the old age was regarded as natural and accepted by both groups. While death prior to maturity was seen as the work of witchcraft. The Zulus believe that for those who died before time, death means annihilation. Whereas for the Basotho, people who died before time still continue to live in the land of the ancestors. According to Basotho, as soon as a person is dead he or she takes his or her place among his or her elders, that is, he or she becomes an ancestors. There are no specific rites that are performed to admit the dead to the ancestor world. It is believed that through death he or she attains all that is necessary to reach the next world. So long as all mortuary services are performed properly, it is believed that he will reach the land of the ancestors and will be welcome among them. For the Zulus, it is believed that at least a year or two has to elapse after the burial before the deceased is addressed as an ancestor. It is taken as a

time of cleansing between death and ancestorhood. Hence after this time, they bring the deceased home where he takes his place among his elders who died before him. Thus after this period the deceased can now be addressed as the ancestor of the family.

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4. THE ROLE OF ANCESTORS IN THE BASOTHO AND THE ZULU WORSHIP

In the previous chapter we concentrated on the question of making an ancestor according to the Basotho and the Zulu worldview. We have seen how the peoples of these tribes perceived death and from that we have drawn the conclusion as to who qualifies as ancestor according to the Basotho and according to the Zulus. Our intention in this chapter is to discuss the role of ancestors in the Basotho and the Zulu worship. We will attempt to respond to the question whether the Basotho and the Zulus worship God or their ancestors. To tackle this problem of worship in the Basotho and the Zulu religions we will present the negative approach of some scholars who deny that Africans worship God and the positive approach of other scholars who maintain that even though the Basotho and the Zulus believe in their ancestors, God has a place in their worship. In other words, we will explore the question of worship of God and the veneration of ancestors.

4.1. THE 'VENERATION' OF ANCESTORS

4.1.1 Negative approach to the veneration of ancestors in the Basotho and the Zulu Religions

In his book, *The Southern Sotho*, George J. V. Sheddick says, "Moshoeshoe is reported as having told Casalis that his people adored the spirits of their ancestors and petitioned them for rain, abundant harvests, good health, and a friendly reception

among them after death” (1953:12). In fact, what led Casalis to report this was his doubt that the Basotho people have a religion. And in his book, *The Basutos: Or Twenty Three Years in South Africa*, Casalis manifests clearly that he doubted that Basotho had any religion. He writes: “In all ages and all climates man has erected monuments, in accordance with his progress in the arts, to express his religious ideas, or to shelter his worship. Nothing of the kind is seen here; not even a consecrated stone, like that which Jacob set up at Luz until he was able to build an altar” (1965:237). In other words, what Casalis reported confirms his belief that the Basotho did not have a religion and did not know anything about God. Thus it follows logically that they did not worship Him. Hence Casalis, like other missionaries and explorers had to invent the object of worship of the Basotho, which was different from that of Christianity and they claimed it to be the ancestors. In relation to what Sheddick is saying, Moshoeshoe is used as the authority to believe. As we have pointed out, the starting point of Casalis’ contention is the lack of religion which he perceived among the Basotho. He voices this as he says, “the absence of ostensible worship implied much that was vague in the religious tendencies and ideas, if any such as existed” (1965:238). That is, he doubted that the Basotho had a religion. And commenting on the absence of religion in Southern Africa, Chidester writes, “the absence of religion was repeatedly observed in the Southern Africa by travellers and settlers, by missionaries and government officials, throughout the nineteenth century. As the Wesleyan missionary William J. Shrewsbury put it, the indigenous people of Southern Africa lived ‘without any religion, true or false’” (1996:13). In his view, during this period, lack of religion meant that the natives had no rights. They were equal to animals.

In other words, Casalis maintained that the Basotho did not worship God. "The absence of ostensible worship" as he argues, sums up his view. As one continues to turn the pages of Casalis' book, he finds out that in the final analysis he accepts that the Basotho had a religion even though their knowledge of God was vague. Although Casalis accepts that Basotho had the vague knowledge of God, he is troubled by the fact that in his perception He is not worshipped. To express this he states,

But there is another assertion, the humiliating truth of which is displayed among Basutos by something far more real and more important than the passing echo of a song: 'They have transferred the honour due to the incorruptible God to corruptible man'. It is, indeed, to the manes of their ancestors that these people address their prayers. A prophet has described their religion in a few words: 'They go to the dead for the living' (1965:243).

And Casalis goes on to say, "The adoration they render to the deceased establishes the fact of the scantiness and confusion of their metaphysical notions, they believe that man still exists after death, and is capable of acting upon the living in a beneficial or pernicious manner" (1965:245).

Looking at these quotations, one notes two points of significance, which are: the Basotho worshipped their ancestors and that religion of the Basotho in Casalis' view is ancestor religion. For Casalis, Basotho did not worship God, instead they worshipped their ancestors. Contrary to Christianity which is considered to be the proper religion, Casalis defined Basotho religion as ancestor religion.

As we have indicated, according to Casalis, the Basotho did not worship God, *Molimo* but their ancestors, *balimo*. That is, in his view, *Molimo* had no place in the worship

of the Basotho. In short, the object of the Basotho worship was their deceased relatives.

Besides the Basotho, Casalis also maintained that the Zulus rendered adoration to their dead. He writes:

One of our converted Basutos, addressing a caffre, originally from Natal, asked him, "What is the confidence (belief) of your nation? and when you pray in your country, what do you say?" "We invoke the dead (setoutsela/sethotsela). We say, 'O Mose, son of Motlanka, look upon us! Thou, whose smoke is seen by all men, turn thine eyes upon us this day, and keep us, O our god!' This is how we pray." The caffre added, that Mose was one of the most remote ancestors of the sovereign of his tribe (1965:247).

In this quotation Casalis claims that the Zulus worshipped their ancestors. They did not pray or worship God. They regarded their ancestors as their gods. That is why in the prayer mentioned above, the ancestor is invoked and prayed to as god. Anyway, the prayer cited above conforms to the early missionaries and explorers propaganda that according to the Africans, ancestors are gods.

Hugh Ashton writes, "in the old days, each family was considered to be under the direct influence and protection of its ancestors and the tribe as a whole under those of the ancestors of its chief. Thus the Basuto prayed to Monaheng and Motlomi (Mohlomi), and the Bahurutsi and Barolong to Tobega and his wife Mampa" (1952:114-115). He points out "it was believed that the earlier gods were more powerful than the more recent ancestors so that many prayers began with the phrase 'New gods pray for us to the gods of old'" (1952:115). What Ashton emphasises here is that the object of Basotho worship was their ancestors. He supports the view that ancestors in African understanding are gods. That is why he explains with all confidence that the Basotho believed that the earlier gods (who in his view are earlier

ancestors) were more powerful than the more recent ancestors. Hence like Casalis, Ashton mentions two things which we must not take for granted, namely,

1. Basotho worshipped their ancestors
2. To the Basotho, Ancestors are referred to as gods.

In addition to this, Ashton makes worship of God among the Basotho to appear irrelevant and unnecessary. He claims that according to the belief of the Basotho, God was looked at “as somewhat remote and detached, rather as a chief, who is interested at a distance in his people, than a fond parent” (1952:117). Like other scholars who argue that Africans perceive God as far away and disinterested in human affairs and for that matter not worshipped, Ashton also concludes that God was not worshipped among the Basotho. In short, he claims that God is not prayed to because he is perceived as far and as less interested in human beings.

According to Nxumalo, Father Joseph Gerard had the conception that the Zulus did not worship God. In the letters he wrote to the Superior and Founder of the Missionary Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Eugene de Mazenod, who lived in Marseilles (France), Nxumalo states that:

Father Gerard points out that the 'kafirs' like their own way of life and they did not enquire after and take interest in the customs of white men. He goes on to say that the Zulus have a vague idea of divinity, and that their idea of God is confused. They have no worship in relation to God. Their god is a herd of cattle. Their religion is a religion made for poor savages whose god is their very stomach (1980:6).

What we have to mark in this letter is that according to Gerard, the Zulus did not worship God. As he stated: “They have no worship in relation to God” (1980:6). But

is what Gerard expressing about the Zulus true? Did they not worship God in their own way that was different from the one that Father Gerard and other observers were used to?

In his book, *Creed and Confession in South African Ancestor Religion*, Hammond-Tooke cites William Burchell, an explorer who happened to visit the Batlhaping for a short time in the early nineteenth century. When writing about the Batlhaping, Burchell states:

The superstition of the Batchapins, for it cannot be called religion, is of the weakest and most absurd kind... These people have no outward worship, nor, if one may judge from their never alluding to them, any private devotions, neither could it be discovered that they possessed any very defined notions of a supreme being and beneficent Deity, or of a great and first Creator... (1994:1).

The implication that one gets from this quotation is that Burchell regards the Batlhaping as the people without religion. That is, what is regarded as religion in the Batlhaping understanding is superstition according to Burchell and he states categorically that it cannot be called religion. In addition, the Batlhaping are taken as people who did not worship God or whose worship was not clear or rational. We have to bear in mind that the Batlhaping are of the Sotho family. Hence it is not strange to find that Basotho were regarded as people without religion and as people who did not worship God.

Eillen Krige and Josiah Tyler were also of the idea that the Zulu people worshipped their ancestors. In *Forty Years Among the Zulus*, Tyler writes, "It is often said that 'Zulus are snake worshippers'. This is not strictly true. *Amatongo* (ancestral spirits)

are the objects of their worship” (1971:93). While after a brief discussion about the Zulu conception of *uNkulunkulu* as the high God, Krige states that the word *uNkulunkulu* is also used to denote an original ancestor. She argues that it is the name given to the founder of the house or a family, who is prayed to and worshipped in the usual way. She narrates that an informant elaborated that the Zulus did not worship God but their ancestors. Then she concludes, “It is thus often wrongly thought that *uNkulunkulu* is worshipped when in reality it is an ancestor that is being propitiated” (1974:280-81).

Focusing on anthropologists’ arguments that according to the religions of the Bantu of Southern Africa, the idea of a Supreme Being or High God was not highly developed, Hammond-Tooke strongly believe that the Bantu-speaking peoples worshipped their ancestors. His contention is that the term ‘veneration’ is inappropriate in describing what happens when Africans pour a libation of beer at the family shrine or when the elders slaughtered an animal for ancestors (1994:7). In his view, the notion of ‘veneration’ is not found in the worldviews of the Bantu-speaking peoples. It is a Christian imported concept (1978). Thus in his view, Africans worship their ancestors.

Modiri. Molema sees the god of the Bantu as a distant god. And this wrong perception leads to the presumption that Africans did not worship God. In his book, *The Bantu: Past and Present*, he writes,

Of God, the pagan had but the faintest and haziest idea, nevertheless, an idea, sufficient to show that inherent spark of higher faith which seems to be an endowment of the human mind. This god, however, was more of an absent god; he lived retired on high, took no concern

in what was going on, and although the author of Nature and more powerful than the spirits, he was inactive (1963:166).

As we have observed from various authors, when they speak about the God of the Africans, they give the impression that He is totally different from the God of the Christians and the Muslims. God is presented in a strange way as if He is different from the God of Christianity. He is presented as if He is something that is created by and for the Africans. For in no way the Supreme Living God can be said to be “absent”, to be retired and to be inactive. The God who is said to be the god of Africa is given these negative characteristics as a proof that Africans did not have religion. They were taught about religion or true religion by the European explorers and missionaries. In addition, it gives the impression that Africans did not know God. Hence as we have pointed out, the implication of Molema’s quotation cited above is that Africans did not worship God. And it is our contention that Africans indeed do worship God.

Charles Willoughby is of the opinion that ancestor-worship is the basis of African thought, that is, religion, social life and ethics included. In his book, *The Soul of the Bantu*, he writes:

Ancestor-worship is almost as conspicuous in Central Africa; but casual observers have spent a year or two with the tribes in South of the Zambesi and with some tribes in West Africa without suspecting its existence. Nevertheless, it is everywhere present in Bantu Africa and always normative to the Bantu thought. It is the basis of their political institutions, the pre-supposition of their law and ethics, and the key to an understanding of their social life (1928:1).

Besides the wrong perception that ancestor-worship is the basis of life in Africa as the quotation implies, Willoughby mistakenly asserts that the Bantu worshipped their ancestors. For, in his view, ancestor-worship constitutes Bantu thought.

In his book, *Death, Property and the Ancestors*, Jack Goody seems to be aware that 'worship' is not an accurate term to describe what is happening when an African pours a libation for his or her ancestors or when an elder presides in slaughtering an animal for ancestors. Goody opts for the re-definition of 'worship' which means something less than the commonly accepted definition. Goody gives the following re-definition of 'worship': "By worship I understand the sorts of activity to which Frazer referred when he defined religion as 'propitiation or conciliation' of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course and nature of human life" (1962:379). On the contrary, Martin West points out that propitiation and conciliation, however, do not necessarily imply worship, which in his view implies elements of adoration, devotion and supplication of a superior power. He agrees with Driberg who concludes that the term 'worship' should be reserved for the Supreme Being, and should not be used for cults of the ancestral shades (1975:187). Thus as scholars like Jack Goody and Meyer Fortes insist on the use of the term 'ancestor-worship', West and Driberg contest the use of the term and prefer to limit it to the Supreme Being. In their view, the appropriate use of the term 'worship' is when it is referred to God and not to ancestors. In other words, only God is worshipped but ancestors are venerated, as we will show in the next section. Thus, 'worship' is not acceptable.

4.1.2. Positive Approach to the 'veneration' of ancestors

As we have shown from above, many writers attacked the use of the term 'worship' in reference to African ancestors and argue that it is inappropriate. They maintained that ancestors are not adored but they are venerated. They also argue that ancestors are not gods but creatures. They are intermediaries between humans and God.

Igor Kopytoff contends the use of the term "ancestor worship". In his view, the term is misleading. In his article, *Ancestors as Elders in Africa*, he states,

We talk of ancestor 'cults' and even of ancestor 'worship'. In their modern meanings these English words are culturally appropriate in describing dealings with the dead and the supernatural. By contrast we would hesitate to apply the terms 'cult' and 'worship' to relations with the living. Yet, if the Suku and others 'worship' their dead elders, then they also 'worship' their living elders. If they have a 'cult' of dead elders, the same cult applies to the living. Obversely, if the living elders are only 'respected', then so are the 'ancestors', and no more than that (1971:137).

Kopytoff goes on to say, "The selection by anthropologists of the phrases 'ancestor cult' and 'ancestor worship', in dealing with African cultures, is semantically inappropriate, analytically misleading, and theoretically unproductive" (1971:140).

Kopytoff's point is that in African understanding both the living elders and ancestor elders are respected. In his view they are taken as equals. That is, what is done for the living elders is also done in the same way for ancestors. Even though we do not fully agree with Kopytoff especially when he puts ancestors and living elders in the same footing, we appreciate his contribution in clarifying the fact that ancestors are not

worshipped but respected in African Religion. Indeed, Kopytoff seems to have penetrated the religion and thought of the Bantu peoples.

As we have pointed out, Martin West contests the use of the term 'worship' in African Religion. He cites Driberg who suggests that ancestors are "intermediaries between man and the absolute Power, a function which brings them more in line with the saints of Christian hagiography than with pantheistically independent deities" (1975:186). He suggests that the terms prayer and worship should more properly be reserved for the absolute Power. In short, in his paper, Driberg warns against the term 'ancestor-worship' which is misleading.

According to Nxumalo, many writers have suggested that Africans worship their ancestors out of fear (1980:9). He points out that "ancestors in traditional religion are believed to have power over the living. They can afflict punishment on those who do not show respect and homage to them. They can do good for the family and for the members of their lineage." Despite their weaknesses and frailties while they were in the human body, it is believed that through death they change to the new status and have power. That is why in times of crisis they are approached for help. In Kopytoff's words: "Ancestors are vested with mystical power and authority" (1971:129).

Nxumalo also states, "it is clear that they are not like God, supreme, in spite of their power over the family and its affairs. He argues that fear of ancestors does not mean that they demand adoration and want to be regarded as supreme. In his view, there is a *Modimo* above the *badimo*, for the Basotho, and for the Zulus there is the Lord-of-the-Sky who is even Lord of the *abaphansi* (those who are down below)" (1980:9).

4.2. THE ROLE OF ANCESTORS IN THE BASOTHO AND THE ZULU WORSHIP

Nxumalo, Stanley Mogoba, Manyeli, Berglund, to mention but a few writers, argue that the Basotho and the Zulus do worship God. According to these authors, the term 'ancestor-worship' in reference to the Basotho and the Zulus is misleading. They maintain that the Basotho and the Zulus do not worship but only venerate their ancestors.

We have discussed Berglund's view in the previous chapters and have seen that in his findings the Zulus declared that they do not worship (*ukukhonza*) their ancestors but they simply speak (*ukuthetha*) to them, telling them everything (1976:198). Thus according to Berglund, worship is an inappropriate term to use in reference to the ancestors. Worship (*ukukhonza*) is used only in relation to the Lord-of-the-Sky, *iNkosi yeZulu*. In his view, the Zulus are aware that their ancestors are creatures. When they pray to the ancestors, they do not pray as if they are praying to God. They pray to them as mediators. They approached the Lord-of-the-Sky through their ancestors. One of Berglund's informants said:

If there is something we wish to be brought before him, we say to those who look after us, 'we salute you, you our people, you who see kings we do not see! We say to you, go and kneel on our behalf! We need not mention the thing because you have seen it. So why should we mention it to you? We are just requesting you, our Fathers, we say to you who know the manner of approaching him (the Lord-of-the-Sky), bring this before him so that we do not die of hunger (cited by Nxumalo, 1980:10).

In other words, ancestors are asked to intercede for the living to God. It is believed that they know what their families need. Since they are interested in the welfare of their descendants they petition to God on their behalf. What the informant expresses is that when they pray to their ancestors they ask them to pass their request to God. They are not asked to give what is asked, but they are asked to pray to the Lord-of-the-Sky who is the Giver of all the things. They are the 'bridge' in approaching God. Hence they are not prayed to as the ultimate object of the Zulu prayer. And Berglund's informant clarifies this as he says: "...bring this thing before him so that we do not die of hunger" (1976:43). The Zulus believe that the ancestors have the power to petition God (Nxumalo, 1981:67).

In reference to the Basotho, Nxumalo uses Richards who made a research in the Basotho religion. Nxumalo points out that in Richard's research we also find the same idea that is found among the Zulus insofar as worship is concerned. He states that Richard insists that Basotho were aware that ancestors are creatures. And he argues that when they pray to the ancestors, they do not pray as if they are praying to God (1981:10).

Nxumalo quotes Richard who explains that the Basotho ancestors were never regarded as supreme beings. He elaborates that the Basotho never saw them as almighty. Richard writes, "Yes, the ancestors are superior and greater than men, and better but without equality with God, they are seen as mediators" (cited by Nxumalo, 1980:10). Though the Basotho see ancestors as superior and greater than men, they still regard them as not equal to God. They are not taken as gods but as mediators (1995:96). They are not supreme beings. And Nxumalo notes that in the research of

Richard *balimo* are not considered as indispensable mediators. He states that Richard points out that there is a prayer in Sesotho which shows that the living also intercede for the dead (cited by Nxumalo, 1980:10). On the other hand, the power of the ancestors is not absolute. They are not like God who is Supreme. They depend on God. They derive their power from God. We have shown that the Basotho also prayed for their deceased to be received and live peacefully in the land of the dead. Therefore, to the Basotho, ancestors are not supreme beings. When the Basotho make a Service (*Mosebetsi oa balimo or pha-balimo*) to their ancestors, they are not praying to them but they are requesting them to pass their prayers to God, the Supreme Being. In that way, it is misleading to say that the Basotho worship their ancestors.

Expressing the same view about *balimo*, Mogoba writes about the Pedi, and states that *badimo* are regarded as intermediaries. In reading Mogoba's article, one gets the impression that in the Pedi view, God is understood as the Highest Authority which cannot be approached directly. To approach him one needs intermediaries and *badimo* fulfill this function. Mogoba makes an analogy with the Pedi way of passing greetings to the senior person. He states that greetings pass from the junior to the most senior through those in-between. Commenting on this Mogoba says:

The manner of passing on greetings expresses the aspect of mediation clearly. If you want to greet my elder brother, then you place the address with me, the younger brother, and I direct your greetings to my elder brother. If there is another elder brother yet, then the brother who precedes me will pass on the greetings to the eldest brother of us both. That eldest brother then will take our greetings to our father...In short, the highest person is approached only through intermediaries. This method is the same in the sphere of divinities (1981:55).

Taking into consideration that the Basotho belong to the same family with the Pedi, what Mogoba is saying applies to the Basotho. Rakotsoane states that just as in social life, it is often the custom among the Basotho to approach someone of a higher status through someone else (lower in rank), so even in religious life Basotho approach God through ancestors as mediators (2001:128). To Basotho, the chief, *morena*, is not approached directly. There are intermediaries through which the subjects approach their chief. That is why even in his presence a person would not refer to him directly. He would ask his first advisor, *letona*, to tell the chief this or that. It is rare to hear a person addressing himself directly to his chief. Men who work with the chief are expected to speak on behalf of the people. He is the mouthpiece of the chief (*molomo oa morena*) to the people and he speaks for the people to the chief. In the Basotho religion, God is taken as the greatest chief. People approach him through their ancestors. *Balimo* are seen as intermediaries. Thus in paraphrasing Mogoba, we could say these principles of mediation permeate the entire life of the Basotho and are applied to the ancestors in their individual or collegiate form (1981:55). To sum up, Harry Sawyerr expresses the same view in his book, *God: Ancestor or Creator?* when he points out that in African communities, chiefs are not easily approachable and are therefore reached only through intermediaries. He argues that this also applies to God (1970:7).

As we have stated, the Zulus never refer to the *umsebenzi* (ritual service performed for the shades) as worship. Citing Berglund, Martin West says:

Zulu are explicit that there is no worship of the shades in the sense that there is a veneration of them. If there is worship, then it is veneration of the Lord-of-the-Sky. But with the shades there is an association, a togetherness which takes honour and respect of seniors for granted but allows for intimacy and an atmosphere of mutual trust as expressed

and experienced in the sharing of food. I maintain that there is no worship of the shades, neither is prayer addressed to them. On the other hand there is a speaking to them, a 'telling them everything'... (1975:187).

Like the Basotho, the Zulus do not worship their ancestors. They worship the Lord-of-the-Sky. With the shades, they speak about the communion with them. They are honoured and respected but they are not worshipped. As Berglund's informant shows, prayers that are addressed to them are addressed with the expectation that they will present them to God (1976:43). According to Nxumalo, they are not prayed to as if praying to God. That is, as we have argued, the Zulus are aware that the shades are creatures. They are not gods. To them, the only difference is that they are closer to God. In fact, one of the Christian informants of Nxumalo pointed out that ancestors are ruled and governed by the power of God. Nxumalo explains that according to his Zulu Christian informants, ancestors are looked upon as those who have been assumed into the "family of God". They are the ones who intercede for the living (1981:67). In short, they are still under the power of God. As we have seen, they are mere creatures of God. Though through death they have attained some power superior to that of the living, they are not made gods. In this way, the Zulus cannot regard their ancestors as gods. Hence it is absurd to say that the Zulus adore the shades.

What Nxumalo's Christian informants emphasised is that

There seems to be a feeling of closeness to those who are members of the family, but who are now dead. It is easy to pray to them. They have experienced death. They are no longer in this world. They have been elevated to a new status. They have a particular power to pray to God and be heard. They are closer to God than those who are living, therefore they become our intermediaries. There is a relationship between God and those who are dead and from him they derive the power of doing good (1981:67).

In other words, ancestors are respected because they are close to God. As an informant states, 'they are assumed into the family of God', that is, they are seen as members of the community of God. In Christian theology conception, they form the circle of the 'Blessed' that see the face of God all the time. But in African Religion, it is believed that they still look back and care for the families they left behind here on earth. That is why it is easy to pray to them. According to the Basotho and the Zulus, God is approached through them, because they have a particular power and channel to pray to Him and be heard. Thus, since they are close to God, they know what He wants. We can say they know the exact words to be used before God.

Nevertheless, we are time and again, forced to return to the question of authority of ancestors. As the informants argue, the dead derive their power from God. In other words, writers who maintain that Africans worshipped their ancestors claim that according to Africans, ancestors are the supreme beings. In other words, it seems that the question of whether ancestors are all-powerful, contains the key to understanding the worship of God and veneration of ancestors in the Basotho and the Zulu religions. As we have seen, the question has been examined and scrutinised by many writers. For instance, we have seen that for Berglund and Richard, the Basotho and the Zulus are aware that ancestors are not supreme. According to Nxumalo, Mbiti and Callaway are of the view that ancestors are not supreme beings. Callaway maintains that for the Zulus, the shades were not seen as supreme beings and as equal to God. Callaway writes: "The son reproves the father saying: 'We for our part may just die. Who are you looking after? Let us die all of us, that we may see into whose house you will enter. You will eat grasshoppers; you will be no longer invited to go anywhere, if you

destroy your own village.” In his book, *The Prayers of African Religion*, Mbiti also demonstrates that ancestors are not considered as supreme and almighty. One prayer says, ‘if the spirits do not improve they will be forgotten’. The prayer goes, “When have we ever forgotten to make sacrifices to you and to enumerate your honourable names? Why are you miserly? If you do not improve, we will let your honourable names fall into oblivion. What will your fate be then! You will have to go and feed on locusts. Improve: else we will forget you...” (Quotations cited by Nxumalo, 1980:11).

As we have shown from the previous paragraphs, the criticisms demonstrate clearly that the shades were never regarded as supreme and equal to God. They depend on the living. In Callaway’s information, ancestors need a shelter and it is given by the living. That is why they are warned that if they let them die, they will not find the house where they will enter. They also need food which is supplied by the living. And if they do not look after their descendants they will not have proper food to eat. Thus, they extremely rely on the living in order to operate. Hence they are not supreme. They are not equal to God and they cannot be prayed to as if they are gods.

Writing about the role of ancestors in the Basotho worship of God, Rakotsoane asserts, “ancestors were either looked on as intercessors...” He argues, “being the closest circle to *Molimo*, ancestors acted as mediators between God and the living. They prayed for the needs of the living and passed the prayers of the living on to *Molimo*” (2001:149). In fact, *balimo* in Sesotho are the people of God. As Setiloane notes “*Badimo* are as the word suggests ‘...of *Modimo*’ and therefore share in the essence of *Modimo*, *BoModimo* (Divinity) (1986:19). The word *balimo* in the Sesotho

language is a contraction of *ba-Molimo* which in its full form is *batho ba Molimo* (the people of God). The long description is contracted to '*balimo*'. The contraction of the words in the Sesotho grammar is not foreign. For instance, Basotho are known among other Sotho groups as *Bashoeshoe* which is the contraction of *Batho ba Moshoeshoe*. To support our argument, other scholars argue that *Molimo* etymologically derives from *mo+holimo*, which is *Moholimo*, meaning the one in the sky (1995:57). For, the sky in Sesotho is called *leholimo*. In other words, *balimo* are the people of God in Basotho understanding. However, other scholars query this idea.

Nonetheless, due to their new status ancestors are believed to be closer to God than the living are (2001:148). That is, like the Zulus, Basotho believe that ancestors have power to petition for the living to God. God is seen as superior to ancestors. Hence *balimo* are created beings. They are seen as the agents of the Supreme Being, *Molimo*.

According to Setiloane, *badimo* are significant because, in an exceptional way, they participate in *bomodimo* (1976:77). Since they live with *Modimo*, they participate in his being. Although *badimo* are significant, Setiloane maintains that they are not taken as gods and they are not worshipped. As we have seen in chapter two, Setiloane insists that to the Basotho, ancestors are not prayed to as if praying to God. They are seen as intermediaries. Writing about the prayer of the West Sotho (Batswana) Setiloane puts it: "*Badimo ba borra-rona re rapeleleng pula (badimo of our fathers pray for rain on our behalf)*" (1976:73). Briefly, *Badimo* are asked to pray on behalf of their descendants. In short, they are not prayed to as gods. They are prayed to as mediators between men and God. Thus, *badimo* appear in the Basotho worship of God as intermediaries and not as object of worship.

In explaining the prayers of the ancient Basotho, Manyeli comes to the conclusion that the ancient Basotho asked their ancestors to intercede on their behalf to God (1995:47). After comparing prayers that are recorded by Casalis, Laydevant and Makara, Manyeli argues that the prayer recorded by Makara seems to be the normative of the ancient Basotho (1995:46-47). As we have indicated, in this prayer, *Molimo* and *melimo* (ancestors), are clearly distinguished. While in Casalis, the new *melimo* are asked to pray to the old *melimo*, and in Laydevant a new *molimo* is asked to pray to the old *molimo*, in Makara's prayer, the new *melimo* are asked to pray to the old *Molimo*. And this to Manyeli signifies that this old *Molimo* is different from the new *melimo*. He is the Supreme God. That is why in this prayer, the new *melimo* are asked to pray to Him, the old *Molimo*. Casalis' contention that the object of worship of Basotho was their ancestors is not valid. On the other hand, Laydevant's use of the singular in both the object and the subject of the prayer is contentious. Besides, in the closing stanzas of the prayer, the new *melimo* warn the people not to pray to them but to God, implying that He is supreme to the *melimo* (1995:46-47). Hence this clarifies that in order to approach God, Basotho passed through their ancestors, but they did not pray to them in the place of God. It is absurd to say that God had no place in Basotho worship

4.3. SUMMARY

In this chapter we have concentrated on the ongoing debate about 'veneration' of ancestors and 'worship' of God in African Religion. We have limited our study particularly to the Basotho and the Zulus. We have seen that according to some

writers, Africans, the Basotho and the Zulus included, did not worship God but their ancestors. They relied on the assumption that in African Religion, God is regarded as distant from human beings and less interested in human affairs. We have seen that some scholars like Hammond-Tooke, content the use of the term 'veneration' as appropriate for describing the ritual acts directed by the Bantu-speaking peoples to their ancestors. He sees 'worship' as the accurate term to define these ritual acts.

On the other hand, other writers attacked the use of the term 'worship' in reference to the ancestors in Africa. In their view the term 'worship' is inappropriate to use in reference to ancestors. They argue that no African worship his dead. In their view ancestors are not worshipped but respected. They are regarded as intermediaries. Hence they are not prayed to but are asked to pray for the living. Irrespective of whether they are explicit or implicit, prayers of the peoples of Africa are addressed to God. Prayers are addressed to ancestors as the means of approaching God. They are not the objects of worship of African peoples. Hence we conclude that the term 'ancestor-worship' in African Religion is misleading.

5. THE ROLE OF ANCESTORS IN BASOTHO AND IN ZULU RELIGIOUS ETHICS

In this chapter, we intend to explore the role that ancestors play in the ethics of the Basotho and the Zulus. In reading books that are written by some of the Western missionaries and explorers, we are usually given the impression that African peoples were immoral. But taking a serious study of the case of morality in Africa, we find that there were misunderstandings between the Africans and the Europeans. On the other hand, Westerners compared their Western ethics to African ethics and instead of studying the differences that exist between ethical views of Africans and Europeans, they rushed to the conclusion that morality in Africa was lacking and that it was their work to teach morality to the peoples of the “Dark Continent”. In dealing with morality, scholars put much emphasis on the idea of God as an active moral distributor, and they said that this idea was lacking in the African context. For instance, Father Perlo, the missionary of the Congregation of the Consolata, expressed this Western view clearly in his “*Memoirs*”. Father Perlo arrived in Kenya in 1902 and served among the Gikuyu people. Writing in the *Codex Historicus* of their Mission among the Gikuyu, Perlo states,

How could morals be found among this people who in their age-long abandonment have become so corrupt as to raise practices openly immoral to be a social institution? ... In short, every moral principle in which our civilization glories and which our religion commands is here, at least in practice, simply reversed in its terms: and that is enough to argue that whatever inference is drawn in this connection it must always confront us with a state of things essentially deplorable, barbarous, inhuman (cited in Cagnolo, 1933:257, Kibicho, 1978:377).

In other words, some of the missionaries, explorers and government officials doubted the moral conduct of the African peoples. For example, scholars investigated the

question of sin in African thought. They argued that the notion of sin did not exist in African Religion. And this gives the impression that according to the African worldview, everything is permitted, that is, if we use Saint Paul's terminology, Africans live according to 'the whims of flesh'. In that way, Africa is like in a *laissez faire* situation where everyone is allowed to do whatever he or she likes. Hence, we protest against the view that sin does exist among the African peoples and that everybody does what he or she pleases. For, this is implied in the theory of some Western scholars when they deal with African ethics. The real point is that African ethics differs from Western ethics. It is centred on human person and is communal, while Western ethics is individualistic. Our intention in the following section is to compare African ethics and Western ethics and then discuss the role of ancestors in African ethics (the Basotho and the Zulu religious ethics). As we have already suggested, we will highlight the point that African ethics differs from Western ethics, as it is anthropological and communal, in opposition to Western ethics, which is individualistic; we also will investigate the problem of 'conscience' in African ethics. We will, therefore, attempt to discuss the role of ancestors in African ethics. We will conclude the chapter by a short summary.

5.1 AFRICAN ETHICS: ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND COMMUNAL ETHICS

As we have pointed out, some of the foreign investigators argue that in African Religion, there is no concept of sin. In other words, they claim that Africans do not have a sense of sin. As we have argued, they base their theory on the belief that according to the Africans, God is regarded as far away from human beings and not interested in what they are doing. The proponents of this theory argue that Africans

are convinced that a human cannot offend God, and this principle applies also to the consequences of sin. That is, they argue that humans cannot sin against God. They suggest that Africans believe that they can neither add anything to God, the Creator, nor take anything away from him, so that moral behaviour and its consequences concern only human beings. According to Willoughby, “the Bantu ancestor-worshippers do not bring God into the problem of morality at all, for they think that he stands aloof from that section which is still in the flesh” (1928:386). Ronald Green points out that according to some Western investigators, the high God in African Religion is cast in a morally unfavourable light (1983:4). In this case, God is excluded in African ethics. Briefly, God has no place in African ethics.

But, what these scholars miss is that African ethics differs from Western ethics. They are not aware that African ethics is anthropological (Bujo, 1992, 2001; Magesa, 1998; Setiloane, in *The God of My Fathers and My God*). For, as we have indicated, the African peoples do not say much about God insofar as ethical issues or morality are concerned, but it does not mean that they do not recognise God as the ultimate end of their moral acts. They take it for granted that one who respects human life and dignity respects God. That is why they put much emphasis on human persons. As Setiloane points out “*Motho ke Molimo*”: “A human person is a sacred being, a divine creature” (n.d., 6). In other words, the human is the centre of African ethics. But in affirming that human person is the centre of African ethics, we do not dismiss the fact that God is the foundation of African ethics. We also caution the reader to take care that when we say that the human person is the centre of African ethics, we do not refer to him or her as an individual but we refer to humanity in general. For African ethics is communal.

Thus, contrary to Western scholars who argue that in African ethics there is no reference to God, we affirm that Africans do good deeds because they believe in God who is understood as the Judge. Setiloane points to this reality as he claims: “my fathers lived in constant awareness of, or even in obsession with, the presence of the divine in their midst” (n.d., 5). To bring home this point that African ethics is founded on God, Setiloane quotes Willoughby who explains, “The Africans ‘instinct’ for God is the deepest thing in his soul.” Willoughby writes that “belief in the existence of God is never questioned: His presence is felt upon the lives of people, and the affairs of the community...” (n.d., 5).

Besides, in every undertaking an African invokes the name of God for help. And every good action that is done by an African deserves the blessing irrespective of how insignificant it is. For instance, among the Basotho the words “*Molimo a u hlohonolofatse*”, “God bless you” accompany every good deed that is done for the other person. These words are on the lips of the people. While for the evil action that is done against the other person especially the stronger one, a Mosotho would say: “*Molimo o tla o bona*, God will see you.” That is, punishment is left to God. In other words, God is seen as involved in the moral life of the people. He is alive and his presence is felt in every action that is done. It is believed that he rewards the good and punishes the evil. Hence it is absurd to argue that God has no place in the Basotho ethics.

As the heading of our sub-topic indicates, African ethics is anthropological. It revolves around the human person. As we have mentioned above, God is not often

referred to in African ethics. And this tendency deceived some of the Western investigators. They then made the wrong conclusion that God has no place in African ethics. But as we have argued, facts prove the contrary.

On the other hand, some Western thinkers over-emphasised the importance of an individual over the community insofar as morality is concerned. In Western thought an individual is given priority over the community. Similarly, in ethics she or he is given precedence over the community. Everything revolves around them. He or she is seen as the centre of morality. He or she is taken as the reference point. That is why in Western ethics different ethical systems were tried just to accommodate an individual. For instance, other Western scholars introduced "Situation Ethics". Situation Ethics teaches that "morality is a private affair; each person must follow his own conscience; one need not justify one's ethical decisions to other people; and so on" (Bujo, 2001:112). According to situation ethics, the situation determines the rightness or wrongness of the action. The community does not establish the moral norms which an individual has to follow. In other words, an individual is on his or her own and the community needs to make sure that he or she is respected for the choices he or she has made. It cannot force her or him to do anything against his or her will even if it may appear to be for the common good. In short, the community's influence on the individual is taken for granted. The impression that one gets is that Western ethics pretends as if each person invents his or her own way of behaving, which is unique to himself or herself. The communal aspect of ethics is relegated to non-existence. But this is impossible. For, like it or not, the moral behaviour of an individual is influenced by his or her community. The people around the normal human person have an impact on his or her life irrespective of whether it is positive or negative. A

normal person cannot behave in an absolutely different manner from his community. For he or she is not totally free from its influence. In one way or another, the community impinges a way of behaving in his or her life. Hence, in denying the influence of the community on the moral action of the individual and emphasising that morality is private, Westerners seem really to be unrealistic.

On the contrary, as we have pointed out, the African ethics emphasises the community. For instance, the Basotho and Batswana say: "*Motho ke motho ka batho*", that is, "A person is a person only through other persons." Insofar as this saying is concerned, exponents of African ethics argue that African ethics is based on *Ubuntu* or *Botho*, that is, on the dignity of the human person as made in the image of God.

The above expression is found in almost all the tribes of Africa. For in Africa, no human person is seen as an island, isolated from other human beings. According to the Africans, a human person is created to interact and relate to other human beings. And this implies that he or she attains his or her full humanity in community. A human person is not a human person without other human persons. He or she cannot do anything by himself or herself alone. In order to do his or her best, he or she needs the support of other human persons. That is why there is a Sesotho proverb that says, "*Matsoho a ea hlatsoana*", "Hands wash each other." For, without the help of other human beings a human person cannot realise himself or herself. Even in moral issues, he or she needs other human beings to support him or her. Firstly, he or she needs them in order to learn from them what is good and what is wrong. Secondly, he or she needs them for support in his or her endeavour to do well.

In other words, Africans strongly believe in the community. Community plays the most important role in the African ethics. In African understanding as Bujo argues, “morality cannot be privatised; one is not moral on one’s own, merely for the sake of self-realisation. Rather, it is by definition an interaction among all the members of the community. It is always a give and take, for its goal is that all may have the fullness of life, and this ideal can be mastered only in common ” (2001:129). Africans never understand morality as a private matter and as based on the individual decisions. And as we have shown above, the community influences the behaviour of its members. It imprints in the mind of the individual (in the early stages of his life) what is right and wrong. As Bujo argues, “the individual cannot avoid reflecting on how his ethical actions affect the community” (2001:125). He states, “ethical norms are not created by the individual *ex nihilo*; rather, the individual must identify with something that already exists” (2001:125). A person is not an island. He lives in the community and is made what he is by the community.

Nonetheless, African ethics is conscious of the importance of the human person as an individual. As we have seen, human person is regarded as a sacred creature. His or her sacredness emanates from God, the Creator. That is why Basotho and Batswana say: “*Motho ga a lathwe or motho ha a lahloe*”, “A person is not thrown away or discarded like a useless bone”. He or she should not be deserted in time of need; hurt, physically, mentally or spiritually, or have his or her dignity abrogated with impunity” (The God of my fathers and my God, n.d., 5). In other words, *motho* is not treated like a worthless thing. He or she represents God. That is why in Africa a human person is respected. Hence it is not true that Africans are so obsessed with the community to the

extent that an individual has no place in their ethics. It is not true that in African thought an individual is relegated to a non-existence. An individual is charged with the responsibility of acting morally. He or she is not taken as a non-entity that is subsumed in the group. The wrong conception circulating among some of the Western scholars that an individual has no place in African thought is misleading. In fact, there are myths, proverbs, folktales, and legends that prove that an individual is valued in the African worldview.

5.2 THE PROBLEM OF 'CONSCIENCE' IN AFRICAN ETHICS

Furthermore, the question of "conscience" in morality also distinguishes African ethics from Western ethics. Some scholars, especially Western scholars argue that the notion of "conscience" in African ethics does not exist. That is, as they claim that Africans do not have a concept of sin, they also maintain that the concept of "conscience" does not exist in African Religion and Thought. They argue that due to the fact that Africans emphasise the community over the individual, they cannot speak about "conscience" since the community cannot internalise or interiorise moral actions. In their view, only an individual human being is capable of internalising moral acts, and not the community. Taking in particular the Catholic moral theology, which emphasises the term "conscience", we will attempt to define in this subsection what the doctrine of 'conscience' means and what scholars say about it in reference to African ethics. According to Bujo, the Catholic Church inherited the doctrine from the writings of St. Thomas of Aquinas. Bujo explains that Thomas "clearly expresses the function of conscience as ultimate moral authority." He states that "Thomas based his doctrine of *synteresis* on the conscience" (2001:108). *Synteresis* tells the person to do

good and avoid evil. It is inborn. God gave it to human beings. To sum up: the debate about conscience revolves around the belief that the human person has the divine light in himself or herself (Psalm 4:7ff). This divine light, which God has put in the heart of every human person, helps an individual to make correct moral decisions. It is bestowed on the human person at creation. It is believed that a human person is capable of doing God's will if this divine light is listened to carefully and followed accordingly. It is like the Divine Word speaking in the depth of the human person's heart, encouraging him or her to do what is right, rebuking him or her whenever he or she decides to do or has done something wrong. It is internal in the human person and therefore internalises or interiorises human acts. We can analogically define 'conscience' as the final 'court of appeal' insofar as morality is concerned. It is a serene voice that is whispering in the heart of the individual advising him or her to do what is right. It is always murmuring the will of God and depends on the person whether he listens to it or goes against it. It haunts the wrongdoer and encourages the faithful.

As we have indicated, some scholars maintain that due to too much emphasis on the community, Africans cannot speak about personal conscience or internalisation of moral actions. They say that Africans are not aware of personal responsibility of sin. In their view, African ethics is not concerned with conscience and the internalisation of moral actions. For instance, Willoughby says, "Morality, according to Bantu thinking, is a matter of conduct, not of inward purity and integrity" (1928:392). In this view, the African ethics is concerned only with the external acts. And scholars who share this view argue that Africans do not have 'guilt conscience' but the 'feeling of shame'. That is, since moral actions are not internalised in African ethics, when an

African is caught in wrongdoing he or she does not feel guilty that he or she has done something wrong and awful, but he or she feels ashamed that the community will know about it. Junod suggests that the Bantu idea of wrong is not wrong against God, but of wrong against society, and that consequently, if society does not discover your fault (i.e., does not feel wronged), you have no fault (Willoughby, 1928:393). In other words, African ethics does not recognize God as the one who is wronged. In short, God has no place in African ethics. The impression that the quotations we have just mentioned above gives is that for the African, the belief that God is the Judge and that His 'Eyes', do not slumber, is taken for granted. For they imply that what Africans are concerned about, is that the community must not know about their failures and ignore that God sees even things that are done in secret. Contrary to what these scholars hold, we know that Africans do internalise ethical norms.

Even though Africans have no technical word to define what the Europeans call 'conscience', they are aware of its function in morality. Bujo notes that African ethics locates the seat of ethical conduct in the inner organs of the human person (2001:121). Among the Basotho, *pelo*, the heart and *letsoalo*, the diaphragm, are identified with 'conscience' and are used in reference to morality. Basotho would say about a person: "*O pelo e ntle*", "He or she has a good heart" to a person who behaves well or treats other persons well. But to an evil person, they would say: "*o pelo e mpe*" or "*ha a na pelo*", "He or she has an evil heart or has no heart". Or when he or she feels that it is bad to do something and decides not to do it, the Mosotho would say: "*Pelo ea ka ha e ntumelle ho etsa ntho ena*", "My heart does not allow me to do such a thing", which literally means, "My conscience does not allow me". Or "*Letsoalo la ka le ea hana*" which can literally be translated, "My diaphragm does not allow me" but means, "My

conscience does not allow me.” That is, these organs are seen as representing “the inner man.” Another proverb that connects ‘the heart’ with morality says about a well behaving person: “*Ke ngoana se-tsoha le pelo ea maobane*” which is literally translated, “A child who wakes up with yesterday heart”. The proverb refers to a person who is always happy and who treats other persons well. If when he or she was happy, promised to do something for you, you are assured that even when he or she wakes up tomorrow, he or she will be the same. He or she is consistent in his or her dealings with other persons. Unlike an evil person who is pretending and is swayed by situations, he or she is reliable and does not change from his word or promise. In fact, Basotho say, “*Pelo ke motho*”, “the heart is a human person” (Guma, 1980:89).

The same thought is found among other Bantu peoples. For example, the Bahema and Walendu of Congo-Kinshasa, not only fear or timidity but also lies are rooted in the heart. They express their conviction that the heart is centrally significant for all human conduct by calling one who is not wise, or one who is mentally backward, “heartless” (*ngathi*) (Bujo, 2001:121). The heart is central in African ethics. It is taken as the place where God communicates with the human person. To the Africans, the heart is like a special place where the divine light that prompts people to do well is placed.

Even though Casalis insists on saying that Basotho and the Batswana did not bring God into the problem of morality, there are important things that he highlights. As one of the first Westerners who came into contact with the Basotho before they knew and practised some of the Western ways, he observed that the Basotho lived a good moral life. He writes,

The external appearances of moderation and decency constitute in the eyes of the natives what they call botu (botho), the title or dignity of man. In opposition to bopofolo (bophoofolo), the brute life; a name they apply to every immoral act of an excessively scandalous nature (1965:303).

And he continues:

The idea of moral evil is represented in Sesuto by 1. that of ugliness (bobe, mashoe); 2. of damage or deterioration (sebe); 3. of a fault or a debt (molatu); 4. of incapacity (tsito). These definitions complete each other admirably. The first shows the essence of evil, and condemns it: it is ugly, disagreeable, and odious in itself. Second and third show its natural and certain effects: it spoils, destroys; it is a debt, a failure; it demands reparation. The fourth explains its cause, the weakness of man left to his own resources (1965:304).

The Basotho impressed Casalis. And if Casalis found this highly developed understanding of morality among the Basotho, it is clear that the arguments that Africans are immoral or cannot internalise moral actions are mere prejudices which people have to overcome.

To sum up, the peoples of Africa internalise morality. Even thoughts are considered to be liable for the moral action of the person. Paraphrasing Magesa, 'No serious misbehaviour or anti-life attitude among the descendants, in thought, word and deed, escapes the gaze of their ancestors' (1998:51).

5.3 THE ROLE OF ANCESTORS IN AFRICAN ETHICS

In African view, death is understood as giving the new status to the deceased. The deceased is believed to have acquired the higher status than the one he or she had while he or she was living. The fact that he or she has crossed to the ancestral world and that he or she is not mortal anymore makes him or her to be revered by the living.

According to Magesa, African Religion's conception of morality is steeped in tradition; it comes from and flows from God to the ancestors of the people (1998:41). Thus, contrary to the view that African ethics does not bring God into the forefront but ancestors, in African thought, everything comes from and flows from God to the ancestors. In this case, ancestors fulfill the role of mediation between humans and God even in morality. In African Religion, it is believed that ancestors do what God does. They do not act on their own against God's will. To emphasise the ancestors' role in African Religion does not mean that they substitute God. In fact, as we have just mentioned, they are seen as the agents of God. What scholars of African Religion agree upon is that ancestors are the guardians of individual and community ethics.

Since the Africans believe that God created all human beings, He is seen as the Great Ancestor (Sawyer, 1970:4; Magesa, 1998:41). Among the Zulus He is known as *uNkulunkulu*, the Great Ancestor of the people. And the Basotho call Him *Moholoholo oa Matsatsi*, 'the Ancient of the Days' which signifies that He is the Ancestor of humans. Thus as the Great Ancestor, it is believed that He has assigned ancestors to be guardians of morality of their respective peoples and communities.

In addition, it is believed that ancestors have a unique relationship with God. Nxumalo's informants (1981:67) claim that the ancestors are closer to God than the living are and they have a special relationship with Him. Further, they say that they derive the power of doing good from God. In African understanding, *balimo* also become the guardians of morality of the people because they are now under the direction and rule of God. They act under the command of God. As we have pointed out, they are his agents insofar as morality is concerned.

Apart from emphasising God as the Great Ancestor of the people, Africans see God as the Founder. Magesa describes Him as “the first Founder and Primogenitor, the Giver of Life, the Power behind everything that is.” He argues, “God is the first Initiator of the people’s way of life, its tradition. However, the ancestors, the revered dead human progenitors of the clan or tribe, both remote and recent, are the custodians of this tradition” (1998:41). In taking part in the procreation (that is, giving birth to the offspring), the ancestors are vested with the authority of looking at the ethics of the people. And as the founders of respective families, ancestors participate in the work of God who is the first Founder and Initiator of people’s way of life. And as parents, ancestors also take part in God’s work of giving life. As Magesa suggests, they are the human progenitors. Hence they are given privilege to guard morality of the people. They promote and preserve life, the precious gift from God. And in preserving and promoting life, ancestors fulfill the will of God. That is why Africans strongly believe that even in the “other world”, they still continue to guard the ethics of their descendants. Idowu states “during their earthly days, it was their duty to help, to ensure domestic peace and the well being of the community, to distribute favours, to exercise discipline or enforce penalties, to be guardians of community ethics and prevent anything that might cause disruption.” Further, Idowu states,

In Africa, it is the general belief that a living father or a living mother, by virtue of his fatherhood or her motherhood, is endowed with the power to bless or curse an offspring effectively. That is why every passage of life and every undertaking by the offspring requires parental blessing. It is believed that parental dissatisfaction may upset an undertaking or cause it to fail. It is believed that such power in a father or mother who has passed into the ancestral world has become infinitely enhanced and continues to be actively effective accordingly (1973:185).

In other words, their authority as parents does not stop at the grave. As we have seen, when a person dies, he or she passes on to live in the other world and as he or she was concerned with the moral conduct of his or her children in this world, he or she continues even in the other world. He or she continues his or her responsibility of guarding the morality of the survivors. Mbiti and Magesa share the same view with Idowu. Mbiti defines ancestors as the guardians or police of tribal ethics, morals and customs (1969:202). Magesa defines them as the direct watchdogs of the moral behaviour of the individual, the family, the clan and the entire society with which they are associated (1998:51).

In taking Idowu's, Mbiti's and Magesa's quotations, it seems that ancestors are looked upon as promoters of life. That is, in African Religion, it is believed that even in the "Other World" (ancestral world) they are still preoccupied with the promotion and preservation of life. They continue to help in ensuring peace in their families and in the community, in distributing favours, enforcing penalties and guarding community ethics. "For the Southern Sotho", argues Rakotsoane, "another important role of ancestors in the life of the living was the enforcement of morality" (2001:149).

Basotho clearly manifest this belief in their sayings when a person succeeds in his or her undertaking or fails in it. When he succeeds, they know that he or she is doing well in his or her moral life and would say to him or her, "*Balimo ba hao ba na le uena*", "Your ancestors are with you." But if he or she fails, they know that he or she is not doing well in his moral life and would say to him or her, "*Balimo ba hao ba u furalletse*", "Your ancestors have turned their back against you." In other words, as

the guardians of individual and community ethics, ancestors bless those who behave well and punish the wicked.

5.4 SUMMARY

In this section, we have discussed the difference that exists between African ethics and Western ethics. We have shown that African ethics is anthropological. It puts much emphasis on the human person, rather than God. But, we also contested against the view that African thought does not bring God in the problem of morality. We have argued that according to African thought, to respect a human person is to respect God. That is why the Africans insist on talking about human person in their ethics. We have also seen that in African Religion, it is believed that everything flows from God to the ancestors and in that way; ancestors are taken to be the guardians of morality. It is believed that they derive their power for doing good from God. In other words, we responded to the problem how African ethics differs from Western ethics and discussed the role that ancestors play in African ethics. We have affirmed that ancestors are not the ultimate authority in African ethics. Contrary to the view that African ethics is based on the ancestors, who are feared because they punish individuals that do not obey their laws, we have shown that African ethics is grounded on God. Hence, he has a place in African ethics. We have pointed out ancestors are believed to be the guardians of people's ethics because they are God's agents. They are acting under His command.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, we would like to remind the reader that our intention was to discuss worship and ethics in African Religion. We targeted to refute the belief that God is not worshipped in Africa and that He has no place in African ethics. As the continent of Africa is one of the largest continents, we restricted our study to the Bantu-speaking peoples of Southern Africa, particularly the Basotho and the Zulus. We firmly confirmed that the Basotho and the Zulu were and are very much aware of God. We contested the view that they lacked religion and that their view of God was vague, as the early missionaries implied. We elaborated that the Basotho and the Zulus believed in the ancestors. We argued that their belief was that ancestors were close to God and have a special relationship with Him. Then the outsiders mistakenly thought that they worshipped their ancestors. We have found that in Africa, ancestors are not worshipped, but they are venerated. We have seen that the ultimate object of African worship is God and that all prayers were addressed to him as the Creator of humans. But we have argued that Africans approached God through their ancestors. We insisted on the fact that ancestors are not prayed to as gods but they are requested by the living to pass their prayers to God as they are believed to be closer to God and to be heard when they petition for the living. We pointed out that the term 'ancestor-worship' which is used by some scholars to define what is happening when an African pours a libation or slaughters an animal for the ancestral spirits is misleading. We came to a conclusion that ancestors are not worshipped in African worldview but they are respected. We have shown that Africans (in particular, the Basotho and the Zulus) distinguish clearly between God and the ancestors. We demonstrated that it is not true to say that God has no place in their worship. While they put much emphasis and

attention on the ancestors, they were aware of God and took Him as the object of their worship. The ancestors were seen as intermediaries between men and God but not as the substitutes of God. Hence it is erroneous to say that the object of worship in African Religion is the ancestral spirits.

On the other hand, we have seen that in African ethics a human person takes a central place. Everything revolves around him or her. But we have established that even though a human person is the centre of African ethics, it does not mean that African ethics does not bring God into the problem of morality, as other Western scholars implied. We have explained that God is the foundation of African ethics. We have shown that in African thought ancestors, *balimo*, are regarded as the guardians of morality. By virtue of being primogenitors and participating in giving life, the function that belongs to God, they are seen as the promoters and preservers of life and in that way are given authority to guard the ethics of their descendants. We have shown that they do not act on their own, but on the authority of God. They are his agents.

All in all, we could say, God is alive in African Religion. It is absurd to make it appear as if to the African peoples He has revealed Himself in a way that is totally different from other peoples. In fact, He is the same God to all the peoples. And if He is understood as the object of worship in other religions, He is also understood as the object of worship in African Religion. And the same thing also applies to morality.

RECOMMENDATION

The researcher acknowledges the great work that has been done by scholars, especially Western scholars, who put much effort to enter into the African worldview, which was totally different from the European worldview and yet published substantial works on African Religion. On the other hand, he has manifested that the very fact that African worldview was foreign and strange to Western scholars impacted negatively on the study of African Religion. Other things were not so clear to them and were misinterpreted. For instance, certain norms and values of African Religion were misunderstood and defined wrongly. As he has shown, belief in ancestral spirits was one of the beliefs that were not properly understood and that brought confusion among scholars. Even though our study did not cover up all the things that concern belief in ancestors in African Religion, we tried to highlight the main points insofar as this belief is concerned. Hence, it is his impression that though Western scholars did a tremendous job in promoting research in African Religion with the challenges they brought forward, it seems that a lot needs to be done as African Religion covers a vast space in African worldview. Thus, he recommends that more study on the topic we have just discussed and many other topics in African Religion need to be carried-out seriously. And he thinks that it is the high time that African scholars take full responsibility in studying the issues of African Religion. Not undermining the great work that is done by other scholars of African Religion who are not Africans by birth, he strongly believes that with their inside knowledge, African scholars will bring more depth to the study of African Religion. Therefore, he strongly recommends that in addition to what Western scholars and some few African scholars have already done, more African scholars must dedicate their time to making research on African Religion.

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