Eliade's Theory of Religion and the African Experience

by

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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ABSTRACT

Mircea Eliade has made meaningful contributions to the academic debate in the field of religion and comparative religious studies. As much as he had scholastic opinion that would find synthesis with, support and defend his thought patterns and argument, so too he had, of almost equal proportions, those who would criticize his scholarship, accusing it of being, amongst others, biased and "revealing uncritical unverifiable generalizations". The scope of this essay is to enter that debate, with the intention to specifically focus on and unpack some of the most important concepts that underlie Eliade's thinking and deliberations, rather than focusing on the *holistic* theory of religion as purported by him. These concepts will be measured against the African Religious experience, to see if it finds resonance or stands in conflict with it. In the process, this study attempts to reveal some aspects of Eliade's theory of religion that could be saved to fit an African religious perspective. It also attempts to identify some aspects or conceptions of Eliade's theory that are lacking if read through an African lens. The focus in this study will specifically be on conceptions such as the hierophany, the sacred, symbolism, and myth, and how these interact and show themselves within the African context.

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

The Purpose of the Study

Mircea Eliade regards religion as an independent entity, and should be studied as such. He takes a very strong stand against reducing religion to other disciplines of science and research, and argues that religion is autonomous and can be studied completely and independently within its own field. He insists that a religious phenomenon does exist, and that religion is not merely a "by-product of some other reality" (Pals, 1996: 161). Religion, he says, is an "independent variable" or a "constant", as opposed to a "dependent variable". Religion is not dependent upon other aspects of life, but functions as a "*cause* rather than an *effect*" (Pals, 1996: 162). Eliade argues that, as in the case of exact science and other disciplines of science, that theorems and theories are timeless, and can hold true for a time and space way beyond the time and space it was discovered in.

For Africa and Africans, religion is a real phenomenon that affects every aspect of their life and culture. Religion is an intimate part of being African. For Africans there can be no dichotomy between religious life and "secular" life.

The purpose of this study is to test Eliade's claims within the context of the African religious experience, to see if there are "general forms [and] certain broad patterns of phenomena in religion" that can be applied out of its original contexts of time, space and culture.

Key Words

Hierophany; sacred space; axis mundi; sacred and profane; symbolism; myth; African culture; African religious experience; African communal living.

Aims of the Study:

1. To determine whether Eliade's theory finds resonance with or stands in conflict to African religious expressions;
2. To reveal some aspects of Eliade's theory of religion that could be saved to fit an African religious perspective;
3. To identify some aspects or conceptions of Eliade's theory that are lacking if read through an African lens.

Delimitations of the Study

Eliade has published books and articles from a very young age, and his bibliography amounts to more than 1 500 separate items of books and articles, excluding translations and republications (Ricketts, 1996: ix). That is an enormous amount. This study will not focus on the Eliadean literature in its totality, but will be delimited to some of the conceptions that undergird Eliade's theory of religion. This study will be delimited to the conceptions of the axis-mundi, the sacred, the hierophany, the sacred and the profane, symbolism and myth, and its parallel interpretation within the African religious context.

African religious experience, prior to the advent of European missionaries and colonialism, was mostly expressed in what is known as African Indigenous Religions. It is important to note at the outset that there is no homogenous African Religious expression (see eg. Platvoet, 1996: 52). Religious expressions in Africa are as diverse as the cultural, political and language groups. "We speak of African religions in the plural because there are about one thousand African peoples (tribes), and each has its own religious system" (Mbiti 1990: 1-2). This study will focus on some religious concepts that can be regarded as more or less *general* rather than *particular*, despite the fact that it arises, or comes from a particular context or setting within Africa. Thus, the focus here would be on what is common and general, even though the expressions would reflect a particular language group or geographical area. Also, the term *Africa* is used in this study to refer to sub-Saharan Africa.

Methodology

This study will be a purely text-based approach. The sources I shall consult will include academic books, websites, and articles in journals. I shall interpret, analyze and clarify some of the key concepts in Eliade's Theory of Religion and that of the African Religious experience. I shall focus on conceptual and logical analyses of key debates of scholars in dialogue with Eliade, and also interrogate Eliade's theories from an African religious perspective. I shall look at Eliade's interpretation of a variant mythical text, and, by comparative analysis, make some inferences regarding the African context.

CHAPTER 2:

AN OVERVIEW OF ELIADE'S THEORY OF RELIGION

Mircea Eliade has made meaningful contributions to the academic debate in the field of religion and comparative religious studies. As much as he had scholastic opinion that would find synthesis with, support and defend his thought patterns and argument, so too he had, of almost equal proportions, those who would criticize his scholarship[1], accusing it of being, amongst others, "subjective" and "revealing uncritical unverifiable generalizations" (Allen, 2001: 187).

Eliade proposes that a study of religion takes "general forms, certain broad patterns of phenomena in religion" out of its original contexts (time and place) and compare them with other phenomena of a similar kind in a different setting. As in the case of exact science and other disciplines of science, he argues that theorems and theories are timeless, and can hold true for a time and space way beyond the one it was discovered in (Pals, 1996: 163). Yet, as Whaling records, there is a link between the "religious data" as studied by the scholar of religion and the "theories and methods" that are "likely to be developed as a result of *wrestling* with those religious data" (Whaling, 1995: 25). This means that, unless Eliade has made use of religious data from an African context, he most likely would not have developed theories and methods of religious study that would have reflected a sign of appreciation of African ethos and

[1] See for example, Ivan Strenski, "Love and Anarchy in Romania", 391. See also Rennie, 1996: 1. Douglas Allen classifies Mac Linscott Rickets, Bryan S. Rennie, Carl Olson and David Cave as "defenders" of Eliade's scholarship (see Allen's article, "Reviews", *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science*, 2001).

culture. Whereas Eliade has had much European exposure (Romania, Italy, and France, amongst others), and some exposure in India and the USA (Pals, 1996: 159-161), I noted a lack of African exposure. In my reading I have also found him to be quiet about African religion and African religious expressions. The question for consideration in this essay is: would Eliade's expression of the manifestation of the sacred, considered as a timeless theory or theorem, correlate with that of the African religious experience?

The Reality of the Sacred

For Eliade religion is a real phenomenon. It is not something removed from the reality of the day. It is something that affects, influences, shapes and gives meaning to life. Thus, for Eliade, in a word, the concept of religion is the *reality of the sacred*.

Eliade's conception of religion is based on what he calls the *sacred* and the *profane*. These are found in the everyday routine of the way people live their lives, and in particular in the life of what Eliade calls the "archaic man", that is people who lived in "prehistoric times", or even people who today live in "tribal societies and rural folk cultures" (Pals, 1996: 163). The sacred and the profane are two distinct and different planes on which life operates. The profane is the ordinary life; it is what Pals refer to as the "realm of everyday business". The sacred is of the "supernatural, of things extraordinary" (1996: 164), a reality that does not belong to our world.

What exactly is this "sacred"? This concept cannot be looked at in isolation. In what follows I would like to discuss the sacred as it shows itself in the hierophany.

The Hierophany

According to Rennie (1996: 7), the word "hierophany" is a composition of the Greek *hiero*, which means 'the holy', or 'the sacred', and *phainein*, which means 'to show'. Rennie continues to show that, given this plain and straightforward meaning of the word, there seems to be some confusion still as to whether the sacred manifests itself, or whether some other agent manifests the sacred (1996:8).

So, what then, is a *hierophany*? Is it a place where the gods have made an appearance? And if so, does this place become *the sacred*? Has this place, or *thing* (as Rennie refers to it), been changed into a hierophany? Eliade himself speaks about the limitation of the sacred whenever the sacred is being made manifest. "By appearing in the concrete form of rock, plant or incarnate being, the sacred ceases to be absolute, for the object in which it appears remains part of the worldly environment. In some respect, each hierophany expresses an incomprehensible paradox arising from the great mystery upon which every hierophany is centered: the very fact that the sacred is made manifest at all... The same paradox underlies every hierophany: in making itself manifest the sacred limits itself" (Eliade, 1987: 314).

As an example, let us look at the Christian confession that refers to Jesus as the complete revelation of God. Jesus, being both human and divine (in Christian understanding), is limited as any other human being. He reflected the same human strengths and weaknesses of the people of his time. For example, suppose the people

of Jesus' time believed that the earth was flat, chances are that he too, may have accepted and believed that same notion. So, the fact that Jesus manifested and revealed God, did not make him in any way an absolute, for despite the fact that he was considered divine (as Christians profess), yet he was very much limited as a "divine human being".

So, as much as we look around at hierophanies that speaks to us about the sacred world, so much too do we recognise the profanity; the ordinary; the world, as we know it. Eliade recognises this when he refers to a number of religious traditions that see the world as profane. "[The] Christian tradition sees the phenomenal world as essentially 'fallen', reduced by original sin from its original, divinely intended condition to a vitiated, lesser state; the Buddhist tradition sees the world as *anitya*, impermanent and perishable, and even the human self as negated in the doctrine of *anatman*; to the Hindu the temporal world is produced by *maya*, the magical power of illusion; for the Moslem "all that dwells upon the earth is perishing, yet still abides the face of thy Lord" (Rennie, 1996: 10-11).

And yet, it is from this "fallen", "lesser state", "impermanent and perishable world" that something so much more profound, something that is *other,* is recognised. Rennie asserts when this *profane* world is understood in a specific way, and "*interpreted* in a certain manner", that the ordinary becomes "authentic, real, sacred: it becomes a hierophany" (1996: 10-11).

This "process of sacralizing", is not so much "the sacred show[ing] itself to us", but rather "*the sacred is manifested*" (Allen, 2001: 189). This means, being aware of,

perceiving, and, to some extent, experiencing the sacred, even in the midst of the profane, as opposed to the sacred *manifesting itself* and the *homo religiosus* being the passive recipient. A phenomenon "shows itself to human consciousness"[2], and requires human "participation as active constituting subjects."[3]

The homo religiosus is the subject, and the hierophany is the object. A hierophany can be considered as a hierophany in as far as it is being perceived and interpreted by the homo religiosus. Rennie understands Eliade's conception of the hierophany as "any element of the experiential world of humanity which is perceived in such a way as to constitute a revelation of the sacred" (1996: 15).

The Sacred

We have established that a hierophany is a perceived manifestation of the sacred, according to Eliade. What then, is the sacred? What makes *the sacred*, sacred? As part of our investigation, we must also establish *how* people encounter and experience the sacred.

Chidester (1994: 211) speaks of "two broad lines of definition [that] have been advanced, one substantial, the other situational." Situational religious definitions express the "practical, relational, and often contested dynamics of its production and reproduction", an example of which is Durkheim's "society as sacred". Substantial religious definitions are ones that describe the experience of the "essentially" sacred, examples of which are Otto's "holy", Van der Leeuw's "power", and Eliade's "real".

[2] Martin Heidegger, as quoted by Douglas Allen, 2001: 190.
[3] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, and others, as quoted by Douglas Allen, 2001: 190.

Upon closer inspection and comparison of the "substantial" and the "situational" strands, both seem to have an element of "sacralizing" in it. The mode or the manner of sacralizing, however, seems to be diverse. Chidester describes the substantial as an "essential experience of the sacred", and the situational as the "practical, relational and often contested dynamics of its [the sacred's] production and reproduction".

For Eliade (1957: 28), the sacred is "pre-eminently the *real*, at once power, efficacy, the source of life and fecundity". The sacred "always manifests itself as a reality of a wholly different order from 'natural' realities" (Eliade, 1957: 10). Pals says that Eliade's concept of the sacred bears a strong resemblance to Rudolf Otto, author of the famous book entitled *The Idea of the Holy*. Smith suggests that part of Eliade's "strategy" might have been to "substitute Otto's language for the Holy for Durkheim's more neutral and positional Sacred while maintaining the dynamics of Durkheim's dualism" (Smith, 1978: 91). When people encounter the sacred, they encounter "something truly extraordinary and overwhelming", an "otherworldly" reality, one quite different to the one they know. This "other" has a dimension of existence that is "alarmingly powerful, strangely different, surpassingly real and enduring" (Pals, 1996: 164-165).

Eliade uses a language very distinctive and clearly recognizable as "Eliadean" when he describes the *Reality of the Sacred*. A much-loved term is "irruption"[4]; it refers to a power that breaks through and displaying itself in the ordinary, mundane and profane world. It is this sudden breakthrough that defines the world and makes it what it is today. Eliade also employs terms such as "symbols", and "myths", that points towards

[4] See for example Eliade's *Myth and Reality*, p6; and also *The Sacred and the Profane*, p21.

or "reveal the inner dynamics of Reality expressed as the creative activity of the gods" (Smith, 1978: 92).

This "irruption", the "image of an opening," is most important, for it is here that the *act of making sacred* happens. "Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different.... *Something* that does not belong to this world has manifested itself...." (Eliade, 1957: 26f; Smith, 1978: 94).

Eliade regards sacred space to be of enormous importance in the life of people. It is in such spaces that humanity can communicate with an other world, "the world of divine beings or ancestors". Such spaces represent an opening towards the "beyond" or "transcendent" (Eliade, 1986: 108).

This is a completely different perception to Durkheim's understanding of *sacred*. The *sacred* society of Durkheim places the role of religion right in the center of an "earth-based" life as experienced in the community. The supernatural has been banned from this scene. Whilst this could be a "great positive value of religion" in that human life on earth is enhanced, and that religion is rooted in the social reality of human life on earth, religious meaning and authentic religious experiences are still unaccounted for. Durkheim's theory of religion, according to Indinopulos, "ignore[s], if not actually discount[s], the factor of the individual's religious experience". It does not account for the "solitarily religious" such as monks, nuns and ascetics, or the "anti-social

[4] See for example Eliade's *Myth and Reality*, p6; and also *The Sacred and the Profane*, p21.

religiosity of dissent and protest" as found in the "Hebrew prophets, Martin Luther, Soren Kierkegaard, and so many others". (Indinopulos, 2002: 6-7).

Rennie defines Eliade's view of the sacred as thus: "*It is the intentional object of human experience which is experienced as the real*". The focus is on the *human* experience of the sacred, and not on the "independent existence of a Divine Being" (Rennie, 1996: 21). For Eliade the sacred does not of necessity occupy a belief in a deity or deities. It is not of necessity that there be a mediating concept or deity between the ordinary, profane experience and the extraordinary, sacred experience; "...it is the experience of a reality and the source of an awareness of existing in the world" (Eliade, as quoted in Rennie, 1996: 20).

For Eliade, the sacred is essentially a qualitative difference from the profane, even though the sacred is not "dualistically separable" from the profane. For Eliade, the sacred is at the same time contained in the profane and yet also qualifies it. "The sacred and the profane interact and interrelate dialectically, similar in function to the mutual complimentary of the Chinese polarity yin/yang" (Cave, 1993: 37).

The Axis Mundi

An important phenomenon in Eliade's theory of religion is what he calls the *axis mundi*, or center post in the world. At a center post the world of the sacred and the world of the profane are joined, so that life is being oriented around the sacred center. The sacred center is that place where the gods have already appeared, thus making it a place of order. Such places are used to build sacred temples and places of worship,

which will resemble and reflect the sacred, both in its construction but also in the manner of *being* sacred (Pals, 1996: 167).

Eliade makes the following points that explain the sacred center:

(i) a sacred place constitutes a break in the homogeneity of space;

(ii) this break is symbolized by an opening by which passage from one cosmic region to another is made possible (from heaven to earth and vice versa; from earth to the underworld);

(iii) communication with heaven is expressed by one or another of certain images, all of which refer to the *axis mundi*: pillar (cf. the *universalis columna*), ladder (cf. Jacob's ladder), mountain, tree, vine, etc.;

(iv) around this cosmic axis lies the world (=our world), hence the axis is located "in the middle", at the "navel of the earth"; it is the Center of the World.

(Eliade, 1957: 37).

For Eliade, every place and every space has a center. This center is sacred. It is a place where there is a total manifestation of the sacred. This manifestation could either be in the form of hierophanies (as in the case of "primitives"), or that of a direct epiphany of the divine (as in the case of what Eliade calls "traditional civilizations") (Eliade, 1961: 39).

This phenomenon of a sacred center reflecting or imaging the sacred is one that is not confined to any one religion at any one time in any one space. It is to be found in religious cultures and identities around the world in all time. For Christians Golgotha

is the "summit of the cosmic mountain". In the Islamic tradition the Ka'aba is the "highest place on earth". In many other religions sanctuaries, temples, holy sites, villages, cities and even countries become what Eliade calls the *imago mundi*, "a mirror image of the entire world as it was first fashioned by its divine makers" (Pals, 1996: 167). These are symbols that present "holy ground", and from where the rest of the world can be made sacred. It is this symbolism, according to Eliade, that, in the majority of cases, "explains religious behaviour in respect to the space in which one lives" (Eliade, 1957: 38-39).

Jonathan Z. Smith argues that Eliade's Center has been "too narrowly discussed in literalistic terms of geographical symbolism". Jerusalem, he says, serves as a Center in a variety of ways, such as "...an enclave against the forces of chaos, as the vertical and horizontal center of space, as the center of time and history, and as a center of value. The majority of relevant texts do not explicitly employ the kind of "Center" language Eliade has collected, yet they are frequently more eloquent testimony to the underlying ideology" (Smith, 1978: 98).

Smith also questions whether one "can pay so much attention to the 'Center' without giving equal attention to the periphery" (1978: 99). In contrast to the axis-mundi that is supposedly constant and an icon of stability, order, and immovability, there is also the fluidity and mutability of the "world out there", and the role it plays in creating and establishing this sacred center. As much as the world out there could be planned, controlled, and coerced by this so-called fixed axis of the sacred center, so too could a sacred center be influenced and shaped, and indeed sacralized by the culture, the experience and forces on the periphery.

Symbolism in Eliade's Theory: Signs of the Sacred

According to Eliade, symbolism has its origin in religious expressions, even though it now forms part of all human activity (1986: 3). Symbolism is a way of revealing the deity. The symbol is the way in which humanity "can arrive at some knowledge of the sacred and transcendent" (Saliba, 1976: 54). Symbols and images convey more than can be conveyed by words. They convey deeper meanings than ordinary knowledge (1976: 55). Symbols can be considered a language expressing coherent thought on existence, reality and on the world. Symbolism expresses and reveals thought patterns and explanations of a time when "conceptual vocabularies had not yet been constituted" (Eliade, 1986: 3). This is especially so considering the fact that Eliade based his research on the archaic or pre-modernist people. Images, myth and symbol were present long before the development of languages in expressing religious manifestations. Eliade asserts, "... at the level of archaic societies, all symbolism is, or at least was, a religious symbolism" (Eliade, 1986: 3)

In modern societies symbolism has lost some of its social value and religious meaning. "They have become more rationalized, degraded and infantilized. ... Archaic man still possesses the primal symbols, such as the moon, the stars, the sun, and so on" (Saliba, 1976: 56). These symbols connect the people to the cosmological reality, as much as it connects and reveals the sacred and/or the divine to the people. "Symbols are never univocal; they are multivalent or polyvalent, insofar as they disclose many senses or meanings at the same time. The function of symbolism is therefore one of unification" (Saliba, 1976: 57).

Symbols are signs of the sacred. Eliade says just about anything can be a symbol. Whilst ordinary life is considered profane, anything from the ordinary world can be transformed and become more than itself, "a marker or sign of that which is not profane, but sacred" (Pals, 1996: 169). Symbols are discovered or decided upon by the adherents, and are as wide ranging as "a tool, an animal, a river, a raging fire, a star, a cave, a blossoming flower, or a human being" (1996: 169). Nevertheless, nature is seen as the "main supplier of materials for symbolism", which, for the traditional cultures, is a resource for the creation accounts, epic tales and folklore and legends. These collections of symbols are captured in narrative form, which, as Pals says, can be "broadly associated with myth ... which are tales of the sacred, stories that bring the supernatural world of divine life closer to the natural world of humanity" (1996:170-171).

One of the most common symbols in traditional cultures is the presence of the sky god. The sky reflects that which is distant and transcendent, holiness and infiniteness. According to Eliade:

> The transcendence of God is directly revealed in the inaccessibility, infinity, eternity and creative power (rain) of the sky. The whole nature of the sky is an inexhaustible hierophany. Consequently, anything that happens among the stars or in the upper areas of the atmosphere – the rhythmic revolution of the stars, chasing clouds, storms, thunderbolts, meteors, rainbows – is a moment in that hierophany. (Cave, 1993: 44-45).

The sky god, because of its distance and transcendence, soon became a functionless god with no direct involvement in the life of human beings. Within the course of history sky gods were devalued, stripped of their power and omniscience, and new gods were being raised from within the earth and vegetation. "Plowing the soil,

planting seeds, and harvesting crops – all of these brought a new pattern of life, and with it an occasion for new hierophanies and different kinds of symbols" (Pals, 1996: 172).

The sun god, for the same reason(s) as the sky god, also became a distant god. The sun did not occupy a unique role amongst agriculturalists. Other divinities, such as the moon, the waters, and the gods of the vegetation could more readily be connected with the processes of human life and thus symbolized and promoted fecundity and creation.

Unlike the sky and the sun, the moon did not become a degraded symbol of divinity. The endless rhythms of the moon could easily be identified with the rhythms of life and death, "of being born only to die again-constant temporality, endless becoming" (Cave, 1993: 46). Pals says that "lunar symbolism … shows a remarkable power of expansion; it keeps reaching out to make new connections. Besides waters and vegetation, the moon is often linked to death, the last phase of life; to the snake, which regenerates itself by shedding its skin; and to the woman, whose power to renew life by giving birth arises from the 'lunar' phases of the menstrual cycle" (1996: 172-173).

It is clear that the symbolism of the sacred or deities only make sense in as far as it touches, revitalizes, energizes, or sacralizes human life or earthly life. A symbol is recognized as such when there is a breakthrough of the sacred into the profane; a connection between the *earthlings* and the powers that are transcendent.

Because of its rhythmicality, the moon became a comprehensive, unifying symbol for the human condition. Processes relating to the human experience, such as birth, death, fecundity, immortality, light coming out of darkness, cycles, dualism, reconciliation of contraries, were immediately grasped by the primitive mentality. (Cave, 1993: 47).

Amongst the lesser images or symbols of the archaic people are those of water and stone. Water gets its symbolic content from its formlessness, and formlessness is a sign of the nature of things before it took form. Water takes you back to the "unformed, the primeval, the 'clean slate', where a new beginning can be made" (Pals, 1996: 174). It is the beginning of creation, and by extension, a symbol of life, of regeneration, and creating form out of the formless, creating cosmos out of chaos. As Cave puts it, "by default, to be separated from water is to lose potentiality, since water fertilizes life. To come out of water, therefore, is to become subject to the laws of time and of life, and subsequently, to change and decay" (1993: 47).

The hard, rugged and unchanging substances of stone are some of the qualities that provides for its symbolic meaning. Stone represents permanency, hardness, firmness, and therefore bears the mark of "a spiritual force of power" (Cave, 1993: 48). A sacred stone generates "awe and fear", it "fascinates, terrifies, attracts, and threatens, all at once". It is, as Otto would describe the sacred, "*fascinans* and *tremendum*" (Pals, 1996: 174).

The earth, often referred to as Mother Earth, *Tellus Mater,* is, besides the sky, probably one of the most inescapable symbols of the sacred. "The earth's existence is immediately accepted by all humans and cultures. The earth unifies all sacred

symbols. As a wealth of symbolic meaning and natural forces, the earth is perceived as a procreator par excellence; it never wearies of procreating" (Cave, 1993: 48).

Alongside the earth as a symbol of procreation and power is the sacred tree, which best represents the symbolism associated with vegetation and growth. "The tree symbolizes a microcosm of the whole. What takes place at the sacred place occupied by the tree extends into and represents the entire cosmos" (Cave, 1993: 49). For many cultures the sacred tree is combined with the symbolism of the world's centerpost, the *axis mundi* (Pals, 1996: 174). Eliade, when referring to an interpretation of the cross of Christ, speaks of "the blood of Christ, crucified as the center of the earth, on the very spot where Adam was created and buried, falls upon the 'skull of Adam', and thus, redeeming him from his sin, baptizes that father of mankind" (Cave, 1993: 49). Trees are seen as a focus of human hopes for immortality, given the long lifespan of trees (Pals, 1996: 174).

Symbols are the reality of the presence of the sacred, the hierophany. It transforms the place where it occurs, which was, up to the point of appearance, profane, and will from the time of appearance henceforth, be sacred. As Cave puts it, "a sacrificial site, an altar, a temple, a place of residence founded upon a sacred spot are transformative and empowering centers. For it is at the center that one's self is rooted as a religious being" (1993: 50). This center is sacred, and involves both space and time. Sacred time is that time during which "a ritual takes place, ... and when a person enters a sacred story, a myth, by means of a ritual or some action in imitation of a mythical model". Profane time precedes and antecedes sacred time. According to Eliade, amongst the archaic people, there is a constant desire to flee from the profane time to

a time "back to the beginnings", when the creation was "fresh, pure and strong" as created by the creator. Rituals that are associated with myths of creation are reenactments of "what the gods did" in the beginning. In these rituals religious adherents attempt to restore, even if only momentarily, 'pure' time, "the time of the 'instant' of the Creation" (Pals, 1996: 179, Eliade: 1957: 91).

This periodic return to the sacred time might be judged by moderns to be an "escape into dream and imagination". Eliade warns against such sentiments, saying that we have no motivation or warrant to do so. The archaic person is thirsting for the sacred, and, yet at the same time, has a longing for being (Eliade, 1957: 94). Myth provides an avenue to the religious person as he/she seeks connection with the sacred.

Myth in Eliade's Theory

Eliade considers the primary function of myth to "reveal the exemplary models for all human rites and all significant human activities- diet or marriage, work or education, art or wisdom" (Eliade, 1963: 8). Sacred history is narrated via myths. Myth tells of a primordial time; it speaks of how reality came into existence by the works of the gods. Much of the contents of the mythical stories concentrate on the creation, and how things were at the beginning. The only actors in myths are "Supernatural Beings". Myth is regarded as a sacred story, and therefore "true history" dealing with realities.

Rennie (1996: 63) compares and contrasts Eliade's understanding of myth to that of G. S. Kirk's, which claims that " 'most people' assume that myths are a special *kind*

of traditional tale, and that the qualities that make them special are those that distinguish them as profound, imaginative, other-worldly, universal or larger-than-life". In the light of this understanding, Rennie identifies the words "truth" and "reality" that make for such qualities in Eliade's understanding of myth.

Myth is not necessarily devoid of all truth. In fact, Eliade insists that "myth is the true story *par excellence*" (as quoted in Rennie, 1996: 63). Eliade differentiates between "true stories" and "false stories", in that the true stories are those that deal with the beginning of the world, and in which "the actors are the divine beings, supernatural, heavenly, or astral". The false stories are those that speak of the profane, stories that have a "more or less humorous" undertone (Eliade, 1963: 8-9).

Eliade's use of myth is not used in the sense of "falsehood" or "fable". Rennie stresses that Eliade's "truth" in his description of myth is "quite distinct from historical actuality", yet it is true in the sense of our common understanding of truth, even though it might not be true in the sense of the "actual, historical sate of affairs" (1996: 66). Rennie further asserts that this "mythic truth is not independent of, but certainly not in opposition to, historical actuality". Eliade certainly considers "historical actualities to be the perennial source and auditor of the truth which is expressed in creative interpretation" (Rennie, 1996: 67).

Eliade's understanding of myth, as illustrated above, falls within Kirk's analysis of myths, which, amongst others, states that myths must "possess both exceptional narrative power and clear functional relevance to some important aspect of life beyond mere entertainment" (Rennie, 1996: 65).

Eliade's understanding of myth reveals not only the true stories of the origin of the world (i.e. animals, plants and humanity), but also explains the way things are. It gives meaning to why humanity acts and relates the way they do. It explains why humanity is "mortal, sexed, organized in a society, obliged to work in order to live, and working in accordance with certain rules" (Eliade, 1963:11).

> If the World *exists*, if man *exists*, it is because Supernatural Beings exercised creative powers in the "beginning". But after the cosmogony and the creation of man other events occurred, and man *as he is today* is the direct result of those mythical events, *he is constituted by those events*. He is mortal because something happened *in illo tempore*. If that thing had not happened, man would not be mortal – he would have gone on existing indefinitely, like rocks; or he might have changed his skin periodically like snakes, and hence would have been able to renew his life, that is, begin it over again indefinitely. But the myth of the origin of death narrates what happened in *illo tempore*, and, in telling the incident, explains why man is mortal.

(Eliade, 1963: 11)

This explanation, which gives Eliade's understanding of myth an etiological interpretation, fails Kirk's test when evaluated against the etiological theory. Eliade's definition lacks "*emotional evaluation*" (my italics), which, according to Kirk, is considered to be inclusive in an etiological explanation of myth (Rennie, 1996: 67-68).

Myth reiterates and allows for experiences and re-experiences of that time of origin of the world and humanity. It brings together, through ritual re-enactments, the supernatural and the religious adherent, and reveals that all of life has a "supernatural

origin and history, and that this history is significant, precious, and exemplary" (Eliade, 1963:19).

Eliade understands myth to be perceived as myth by the participant or believer. It is "the *perceived* participation in or revelation of the real which makes a particular narrative mythic for a particular believer" (Rennie, 1996: 73). Kirk concurs with this, recognizing that one person's myth could very well be another person's legend or folktale.

What is considered as mythic is thus connected and dependent upon the hearer of the mythic narrative. A myth is only a myth in as far as it makes sense to the participant hearer. It is given its significance by its "relationship to other elements". Its form is determined and understood by its orientation within an "extended matrix of interrelated significant entities", and not by its own essential significance. Rennie, in an attempt to explain this phenomenon, compares it with the position of numbers in a mathematical system. "The significance of a number", he says, "is not fixed, not essential, but is given by its relationship to other elements of the mathematical system" (Rennie, 1996: 68-69).

Strenski, one of the foremost critics of Eliade, locates and positions, and connects, Eliade's view of myth to his experiences of events in his much-loved Romania. Segal (1990), in a book review of Strenksi's book *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History*, says that Strenski succeeds in "tying text to context" in his analysis of Eliade's view of myth. The context of Eliade's surroundings, and particularly the

events he detested, allowed him to pen a view of myth that was "escapist" and "anti-historical".

In one of the review articles on Eliade's writings, *Love and Anarchy in Romania,* Strenski attempts to show how Eliade's writings and his life inform each other, the one enlightening and revealing the other (1982: 391). "From the pen of this popular student of myth, we read in the *Autobiography* an endearing, if problematic, personal myth" (Strenski, 1982: 393).

Strenski regards Eliade's understanding of myth as rather confusing. "What sort of scholar would talk with apparent credulity about the Creation as if it really happened, about some myths 'participating' in others, about the *gods* as if they really worked *in illo tempore*, about myths as if they really arose in moments of actual release from history and sacramentally produced such moments for their devotees?" (Strenksi, 1987: 75). Such confusion is brought about by Eliade's participation in what Strenski calls the "non-academic – political and religious - projects of the Romanian right" (1987: 76).

Much of this is ascribed to the turbulent history of Romania during and in the aftermath of World War II, the memory of which Eliade would rather not want to hold on. He would rather choose to deal with the turmoil in his Romanian past by "transmuting it through the method of dreamlike fictions and ... by transvaluing it through the method of 'creative hermeneutic'" (Strenski, 1987: 77).

Strenski argues that Eliade's notions of myth and religion is better understood if, in conjunction with these, we also "know something about [Eliade's] situation". In comparing Eliade's detachment from India to that from Romania, Strenski suggests that the psychological and the soon-to-be-followed geographical detachments from these two countries be seen as indications of Eliade's devotion to another kind of writing. "As his departure from India corresponded with a shift toward political concerns in his writing (culminating with *Hooligans*), so his departure from Romania corresponded with a parallel shift towards 'fantastic' concerns in his fiction" (Strenski, 1987: 88). This is what Strenski calls Eliade's 'creative hermeneutic', providing for him a "way out of certain dilemmas" (1987: 88, 210). Strenski's line of argument identifies Eliade himself as a *key actor* in his understanding of myth, in contrast to Eliade's assertion that the "Supernatural Beings" are the only actors in myth.

Evola and Guénon, two of the early influences on Eliade's thoughts, propounded a theory, which held that "history has a cyclical development and we are at present in a descending phase," (Spineto, 2002: 71). Guénon, however, describes Eliade's notion of "regeneration of time" as unclear, and criticizes the idea propounded by Eliade that "the cyclical conceptions of time are opposed to history" (Spineto, 2002:72).

Tony Stigliano, in his paper called *Fascism's Mythologist: Mircea Eliade and the Politics of Myth*, claims that Eliade, by means of his theory of mythology, "was instrumental in providing a mythic base for the Romanian fascist movement" (2002: 32). He cautions that Eliade's "life and work should be taken as a serious warning", which he describes as "utopian thinking based on mythic imagination". At the core of

Eliade's understanding of myth was the claim that the "transcendent" (or cyclical time) was being replaced by the "historical" or linear time. Eliade sought to re-interpret myth as "transcendent", and advocated a return to the cyclic time which could bring about a healing of the modern time. In this instance myth is used, Stigliano argues, to justify individual choices, social arrangements and political power (Stigliano, 2002: 32-33). As much as Eliade sought refuge from the events that surrounded him in turbulent Romania, so too was his understanding of myth advocated and presented as "immune to critique because it was transcendent" (Stigliano, 2002: 34).

CHAPTER 3:

AFRICA AND AFRICAN RELIGIOUS EXPRESSIONS

> African traditional religion is the historical, sacred, cultural practices of indigenous African people. It is practiced on the continent of Africa and throughout the diaspora. ATR is not a fossil religion but is an active and present way of life practiced by millions of people.

(Thomas, 2005: 131)

African religious experience, prior to the advent of European missionaries and colonialism, was mostly expressed in what is known as African Indigenous Religions. It is important to note at the outset that there is no homogenous African Religious expression (see eg. Platvoet, 1996: 52). Religious expressions in Africa are as diverse as the cultural, political and language groups. "We speak of African religions in the plural because there are about one thousand African peoples (tribes), and each has its own religious system" (Mbiti 1990: 1-2). In what follows I will focus on some religious concepts that can be regarded as more or less *general* rather than *particular*, despite the fact that it arises, or comes from a particular context or setting within Africa[1]. Thus, the focus here would be on what is common and general, even though the expressions would reflect a particular language group or geographical area.

[1] The term 'Africa' is used in this essay to refer to sub-Saharan Africa. See also Chidester's discussion of the term 'African' (1992:1).

Worldview on African Traditional Communal living

Theories about African religion are based upon and built on what has been termed a "theory of forces", which was first articulated by Placide Tempels (Kwenda, 2005). This vital force is understood to be the *power of life*, or, "the essence of being", as it makes for dynamism and interconnectedness, "participation and mutuality" (Kwenda, 2005).

Nyamiti (n.d.) lists four characteristics of an African traditional worldview. These are dynamism and vitalism, solidarity and relationality, the sacred, and anthropocentrism.

The first one emphasizes "fecundity and life, and the identification between being and power or vital force". God is considered to be the supreme force. Other beings participate in the supreme force, each to a different degree, depending on their *rank* or their *place* in a hierarchical order (for example, an ancestor is endowed with more power than the living). Yet all beings are connected to the *superior force*, which animates and holds together the cosmos.

Setiloane understands this force to be seated "inside the human body, but its source is beyond and outside the physical body" (quoted in Shutte, 1993: 54). The physical manifestation of this force, as seen in human relations and being, is referred to as *Sereti* (Shutte, 54). This force is ever acting and involved with the external world; with the human, animal, animate and inanimate world, and also with the spiritual world. There is a mutuality of interaction between the self and the external world. Shutte (1993: 55), however, quite rightly asserts, there is a difficulty as to which is

more fundamental, "the self that develops in the interaction with others, or the influence of others that enables it to develop". A person is a person in community, one who is situated in and relates to the cosmic world. This makes the external world to be fundamental. On the other hand, the status of personhood is derived from the interaction between and participation of the self and the external world, which makes the self the subject. There is a reciprocal interaction of 'participation' and 'belonging'.

The second characteristic as propounded by Nyamiti (n.d.), refers to solidarity and relationality, of the individual's participation in a representative fashion. Nyamiti asserts that the supreme force is the "[foundation] of human and cosmic solidarity, totality, and participation". The individual is assimilated in the community, and the "social order is perceived to be a replica of the order of the cosmos". This strong sense of community life makes for strong family ties, respect for elders, and a bonding with the ancestors. Witvliet (1985: 92) quotes Mveng who says that the individual is "not a *human* person in the African meaning of the word; he or she is only an outline sketch which must be developed by integration into the world and society". The human person is much bigger than the individual; it is "a network of interpersonal and cosmic relations".

In South Africa, the concept of the *person within the context of others* is expressed in the aphorism *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*. A person can become 'umuntu' (human person) only through 'ubuntu' (human community). The emphasis here is on the *active relationship and relations* between the person and the community. Menkiti argues: "in the African view it is the community which defines the person as person, not some isolated static quality of relationality, will or memory" (1979: 158). Your

humanity is intrinsically linked to that of another. Relationships happen within a community, and the community is considered the basic unit of life. The community is the family, in which each child becomes everyone's child, and each parent becomes everyone's parent.

The third characteristic of the African traditional world-view, as purported by Nyamiti (n.d.), allows for the presence and recognition of the sacred. The world of the living is closely connected to the world of the dead, just as the people are closely connected to the ancestors and other spirits. The sacred is "characteristically manifested in initiation rites comprising, among other things, return to the sacred time of the ancestors, culture heroes, founders and archetypes".

For Kwenda (2005) the theory of sacred spacing is closely connected to and flows from the theory of force. Sacred spacing is not to be confused with sacred space. The former is a deliberate transcendence of the limitations as found in the static notion of the latter, and "probe the activity of making and taking place". Included in sacred spacing are both the "creation of habitable human space as well as the creation and maintenance of sacred space".

Place is given its meaning by the relationship to the human body, and the experience of the human and its orientation in space (Smith, 1987: 28). Humanistic geographers consider place to be closely connected to human beings. They maintain that interpreting "the meaning of places' is to interpret the "subjective meaning of persons" (Smith, 1978: 28).

Chidester (1992: 4-5) considers the homestead and the chiefdom as "arena[s] in which the symbolic relations and place [are] negotiated". The homestead is the "nexus" of all relations, living and departed. It is a place to be *human*. Power relations are also established here. "The oldest, adult, male member of the homestead performed the role of the ritual elder, but he also had an interest in the labour power and reproductive power of his subordinates in the homestead" (Chidester, 1992: 5). The chiefdom is a larger social scale of the homestead. Political and religious authority is vested in the chief.

Material things and property are to serve the human being, not the other way around. Kaunda (1966: 24) says that in the African context, all property and resources, such as land and cattle, are communally owned. Land, according to Ndungane (1996: 78), is the bonding agent of the living, those who have died and those who are awaiting their birth. Land is only important in as far as it allows the human family to be connected or joined together, but not as an asset for personal gain. Yet the material is underpinned and given its meaning by the non-material. It is "grounded in the valuation of the spiritual" (Kwenda, 2005).

Nyamiti's (n.d.) fourth aspect of the African traditional worldview is anthropomorphism. Humanity is at the center of all structures, society, and religion. Humanity has a "privileged place" in the universe, and the world's resources are to reinforce and enhance human life. Even God is more than eager and ready to help humanity in its earthly interests.

Kwenda (2005) argues that "religion is about the viability of human life in relation to other life forms and modes of being, and that all other concerns, such as the quest for belonging, consolidation of identity, and so on, which are essential elements of religion, are actually in service of the primary concern that life be viable in every sense and sphere, whatever its end may be thought to be".

African religious expressions included, and include, mythical and legendary practices, and religious and cosmological notions, particular to African societies, as has been shaped throughout history. Within any one society all members would ordinarily practice and subscribe to the religious tradition of that particular society. Religion was not organized in any institution separate from the community. Religion was (and is) very much part of the societal fibre, pervading most of society's make-up (Platvoet, 1996: 51).

Myth and Symbolism in African Traditional Religion

African people and African religious understanding place the human being in the center of the universe. Myth in African religion, therefore, would be more focused on the origin and early life of humanity, "explaining some actual or imaginary reality which is not adequately understood and so cannot be explained through normal description" (Mbiti, 1975: 76). Myths, Mbiti continues, carries ideas from one place to another, and from one generation to another, especially in "societies without written records". The ways of myths being communicated is not only oral, but also through arts and crafts, dances, rituals and ceremonies. This, in some way, can explain

why African people have thousands of myths on all aspects of life. These range from the creation of the universe, natural forces and myths about God, to myths about chiefs and heroes, animals and the non-living world (1975: 76-77).

Mbiti tabulates three ideas pertaining to the origin of humanity, as conveyed by the different versions of mythical stories:

(i) Humanity was created by God;

(ii) In most cases it was a creation of both husband and wife, in one or two pairs;

(iii) The creation of humanity was the last of God's creations, making it complete and perfect.

(Mbiti, 1975: 79).

At first God were the caretaker of humanity and the sole supplier of all things necessary for them to survive, including equipment for hunting and ploughing. Humanity had free access to God, and "heaven and earth were joined by a ladder, rope or road, or were one substance" (1975: 80). This union was eventually severed: heaven and earth split, and God moved away from humanity.

Mbiti (1990: 33) asserts that African Traditionally Religion sees evidence of God in all things, which does not mean that African religion can be termed pantheistic. Mbiti speaks of a hierarchy in which some things or phenomena are in a higher mode of being than others. "God is the Originator and Sustainer of man [sic]; the Spirits explain the destiny of man; Man is the center of this ontology; the Animals, Plants and natural phenomena and objects constitute the environment in which man lives,

provides a means of existence and, if need be, man establishes a mystical relationship with them" (Mbiti, 1990: 16). All of this is controlled and enforced by God.

For Kwenda (2005), the African mythical stories of creation are about *breaking into* the sacred space for the purpose of creating human habitable space. Humans, Kwenda says, generate a space for themselves "by strategically situating themselves in relation both to nature and the supernatural (the gods, however these may be conceived of)". Humans claim for themselves this habitable space, using a strategy of "naming", not just the animal and vegetable forms of life, but even and including the divine world. The Hebraic myth of creation is a good example of this. Kwenda argues that the Genesis 3 account of "humans eating of the Tree of Knowledge" is an attempt, if not overtly, to tame the gods for the creation of human habitable space. The gods have been displaced, and would only be allowed back on terms laid down by humans.

The idea propounded by Kwenda here is not so much that of the humans controlling the divine, but rather a healthy exchange between humans and the divine. It is in extreme cases where the "divinity strays or unduly impinges on the profane, that the humans resort to the violence of taming as a corrective and defensive measure".

Kwenda's account, nevertheless, places *control* and the *terms of negotiation* squarely in the hands of humans, in contrast to Mbiti's account where God is in control and withdraw from human involvement out of choice, as the next story shows.

For the Akan people of Ghana, God and humanity once lived together, until one day, when an old woman pestered God regularly with her *fufu* (traditional food). She kept on knocking against God with her pestle. This made God to leave the abode of humanity, and withdrew to the skies (Mbiti, 1990: 94). Varied versions of this same story of myth are found throughout Africa (see Mbiti, 1990: 95). These mythical stories all convey God's active and physical withdrawal from humanity (for whatever reason), leaving the humans behind to *make their own life*.

Control by humans and exchange are part of knowing the name of the divine or to give it a name. Knowing the name of the divine allows the human to shut in, bribe, pressurize and confine the divine to a temporal maze. Divinities who do not *play along* or who refuse to be named cannot be of any meaning or value to humans. Such a God is a "logical and theological impossibility" (Kwenda, 2005). The Hebrew God is an example of a divinity that was localized and confined to the life and times of the Hebrews. Their God was *brought down* and made to share in their "warfare and welfare, [their] futility and fertility" (Kwenda, 2005).

Mbiti's account of the creation story is a typical western analysis of African religion. Mbiti speaks as a Christian theologian. His explanation resonates with the western conception of a God who acts (initiates) with a response from humanity. Any initiation from the human side is considered to be offensive, rebellious and a sign of disobedience (Kwenda, 2005).

Some humans, however, given their status within the hierarchy between the gods and humanity, such as "medicine-men, witches, priests and rainmakers", are allowed to

intervene, "some for the good and others for the ill of their communities" (Mbiti, 1990: 16). In this hierarchy there is most certainly also a role for the ancestors, who are believed to be frequently present in the homes of their descendants, and directly concerned about their welfare.

Mbiti (1990: 40) records that, in many African myths, there is no general order in which the creation of the universe was accomplished, other than the fact that heaven was made before earth, and that there is no "special order in the creation of 'minor' things".

> The sun, moon and stars feature in myths and beliefs of many peoples. The Zulu narrate that when God had created men, He gave them the sun and the moon to be their light, so that they could see. The Balese regard the sun to be God's right eye, and the moon His left eye. Among the Kiga, God is the One Who causes the sun to set. For the Ila, the sun signifies God's eternity, and they describe Him as 'He of the suns (or days).

(Mbiti, 1990: 52)

Rain is highly valued in all African societies; it is considered to be one of the greatest goods given by God. Rain is so closely connected with God that, in some circles, it is personified "as divinity". For some societies rain is understood to be God's spittle, which is considered to be a blessing (Mbiti, 1990: 41, 53). Rain is seen as a sign of God's providence and care for humanity.

Rain and great floods that caused great destruction and loss of animal and human life have been incorporated in the stories of myth of the people. Rivers and streams are as such personified as "divinities or major spirits" (Mbiti, 1990: 54).

Africans, it is often said, have an "anthropocentric cosmology" (Kwenda, 1999: 10). This could either mean that the space they occupy is defined in spatial terms, or that humanity is the center of all cosmic attention. The latter would imply that all cosmic resources and forces are for the benefit of humanity. The question now arises: is this a sign of human dominance over "other life forms and species", or are these only being taken care of by them? Kwenda (1999: 10) concurs with Mbiti's claim that the image of an anthropocentric cosmology is not so much one of dominance, but rather one that simply speaks about the centrality of human beings, "the friend, the beneficiary, the user" (Kwenda, 1999: 10). Nature, Kwenda continues, is not to be understood as "sub-human" but as "non-human". The general order in which creation was accomplished, therefore, as well as the presence of other cosmic phenomena, such as rain and vegetation, and the presence of other life forms, could all be considered as providence. The emphasis here would shift from a personified understanding of these elements as divinity to one of human benefit and providence.

The African stories of myth, as a rule, do not speak of humanity as being "made in the image of God", as found in the creation stories of Judaic and Christian writing, nor does it refer to the "position" of human beings in relation to the rest of the created order. The African worldview does hold, however, that humanity is the center of all structures, societies and religion (Nyamiti, n.d.). Humanity is superior to animals, plants and inanimate things. These cannot act as intermediaries. Intermediaries such as ancestors, rainmakers, priests and elders do act in the interest of the human being, mostly for their own good, even though it could also act for ill.

Mythical stories also account for the origin of death, which is caused by the primordial separation and a breakdown in communication between the spiritual and human world. Death came as a result of the separation of the spiritual world and the human world, but this could be restored through the medium of ancestors (Chidester, 1992: 7). Mbiti (1990: 25) speaks of a *Sasa* period and a *Zamani* period. The former refers to the earthly life of a human being (the world of the living), and the latter to the period after death (the world of the spirits). Mbiti uses the term *living-dead* to refer to ancestors, as they enter and become part – through a process – of the Zamani period (Mbiti, 1990: 25). Ancestors, then, by becoming part of the world of the spirits, restores communication between the spiritual and human world.

The African image of a happy life is one in which God is amongst God's people. Yet there is no myth, according to Mbiti, that seeks to reverse this scenario of *God not being with God's people*. Acts of worship amongst African people are therefore an attempt to reclaim the "lost paradise" rather than finding God (Mbiti, 96). Chidester (1992: 6) makes it clear that the object of ritual ceremonies is not so much the "high god" as it is the ancestors. The high god is regarded more as a "mythic reference point for explaining the origin of the human world."

Myth provides a medium or a base for "working out a particular understanding of the social and political conditions of the present world" (Chidester, 1992: 7). It uses the primordial past to make sense of the present. Thomas (2005: 142) asserts that many scholars support the "Durkheimian idea" which advocates a close and intimate connection between the sacred and social ideologies. Malinowski was commended for his "interpretation of myth as a legitimation of the social order" (De Heusch,

1988: 200). Anthropologists have argued that myths may have existed "*before* a system of beliefs, which coming *afterwards*, justifies the prior level of reality" (De Heusch, 1988: 200, Thomas, 2005: 142). De Heusch argues that the social construction of reality uses founding myth[s] to "constitute its own empirical reality through an original language", and not so much to "justify the existing order" (1988: 200). My own understanding is that an appeal is always made to an ancient institution, custom or tradition to give meaning, understanding and, in some cases even legitimacy to the present state of reality. An example of this is the *attire* of the judges and magistrates in our courts of law.

Thomas (2005: 143) remarks that, prior to Arab invasion or the presence of colonial powers, the traditional societies were governed by socio-economic-political systems that were based on myths. Even western and modern societies have ideas and principles that are derived from myths. Thomas argues that religion, and in particular the Jewish, Christian and Islamic religions, supplied the Western world with a mythical foundation. De Heusch (1988: 201-2) maintains that, [f]or centuries, the Old and New Testaments formed the intellectual core of what has been called a 'Christian civilization' in reference to its founding myth".

Even the principle of profits in a capitalist society is based on myth, and not so much on sound economic theories. In the words of De Heusch (1988: 202):

> Profits were not generated by capital in compliance with a fundamentally economic logic; they were produced through a reinterpretation of the myth that constituted the ultimate reality of this civilization. Profits arose out of this myth just as the dog and the pig sprang out of the Obukula ravine on a faraway Melanesian island in order to give people other reasons for living together-a reason such as exchanging seashells.

The primordial myth of divine kingship holds together and illustrates the connectedness of the "social and cosmological realms" (De Heusch, 202). This is also so for the socio-political structure of Africa. The king, besides being the head of government, was also the "living representative of the kingdom, the chain binding the past to the future and the living to the dead". The well being of the country was connected to the well being of the king (Chidi Denis Isizoh, as quoted by Thomas, 2005:144).

The following myth serves as an explanation of the traditional political system:

> ...[the] political institution was introduced by a mysterious wandering hunter who was taken in by a group of natives that gave him wives in exchange for game in abundance. This story pattern crops up across Africa in societies that have quite different histories, languages and cultures. (De Heusch, 1988: 202).

Kings are deified and their authority is legitimated and honoured because of this myth (Thomas, 2005: 144).

Thomas speaks of the traditional African society as a "symbol-driven community". Ejizu classifies symbols as either "natural", or "work objects". "Purely natural symbols include things such as land, rivers, animals, hills, colors, and numbers. These natural symbols serve as media that can reveal the mind of God" (Thomas, 1988: 144-145).

Symbols that are of a 'work object' nature include items used by the ritual leaders and healers. These items are made from natural objects and shaped by artists, examples of which are icons, images, and "ancestral stools" (Thomas, 145).

Cultural gatherings and rituals are flooded with symbols. These "express the human need to live in harmony with one another". These gatherings emphasize co-operation, communion and community, as it gathers the people in song, prayer, dance, prostrating and pouring libation, all acts of corporate involvement and community building. Even though these are events that make for community building and corporality, Thomas (145) points out that it does not demand conformity as in the case of the Abrahamic traditions, but rather encourages and advocates diversity.

The African traditional community is symbolically viewed as both a society of people bound together, and a unity of the visible and invisible world. It is the world of the living, and it is also the world of the "ancestors, divinities and souls of children yet to be born" (Ejizu, n.d.).

The definition and composition of community is, in many cases, supported and undergirded by a mythic story. A point in case is the "priestly caste group of Nri in Igbo heartland", who believes that the Supreme Being gave them their traditional home. *Chukwu*, the Supreme Being, called them and set them apart from the rest of the people, giving them a duty to serve as a priestly class and "ritual specialists". *Eri,* the exemplary ancestor of the Nri people, and *Namaku*, his wife, sacrificed their only son and only daughter to the Supreme Being in "order to obtain food". From each of the graves of the children, the earth yielded *yam* and *cocoyam,* as a reward to Eri and his wife for the sacrifices made, and on Eri was bestowed the honour of "traditional high priest with the exclusive right to cleanse all forms of abomination (Ejizu, n.d.).

This myth defines and brings meaning and legitimacy to the Nri people, and connects them to a "divine origin". This divine approval, and / or connection of human activity with the divine, brings about a complete "satisfaction", or a "peace" of what they are about.

Many similar stories are found in the traditional Yoruba societies. *Oduduwa* was the founding ancestor and first king of the Ife; *Kibuka* was a mythical war hero amongst the Baganda; and *Mukasa* was the mythical ancestral spirit associated with rivers and waters of the Baganda tribe (Ejizu, n.d.).

> The idea and structure of human society for traditional Africans, are essentially part of a world-view that is fundamentally holistic, sacred and highly integrated. Human community, therefore, has its full meaning and significance within the transcendental center of ultimate meaning. Hence, the belief in ancestors and the supernatural order, in addition to its inherent religious import, provides traditional African groups a useful over-arching system that helps people organize reality and impose divine authority and sanction to their life.

(Ejizu, n.d.)

The Concept of God

Mbiti (1975: 40) makes it quite clear that all Africans believe in God. The origin for the belief in God is not so clear, though. Three explanations, however, are offered in support of the fact that Africans do believe in God. These are: (i) a belief that came about through reflection on the universe; (ii) a realization of the limitations of the people, and (iii) the observation of the forces of nature.

The vast and complex cosmic world must have been created, and maintained, by some creator. This belief may have been formulated over a very long time, based on "myths and ideas which tried to explain the mysteries of the world" (Mbiti, 1975: 40).

Given the vastness and the complexity of the universe, the forces of nature, and particular cases of disaster or misfortune, African people realized their own shortcomings and limitations to exercise control and have power over these. This powerlessness gave rise to their belief on a greater power, someone stronger than them and "greater than the world, who had full control over it" (Mbiti, 40-41).

The vastness of the sky, with no limits in sights, and whatever is beyond, is associated with God and the heavens. Forces of nature, such as storms, thunder and lightning, and phenomena of day and night, and heavenly bodies such as the sun, the moon and the stars, are all connected with the sky, the place where God reside. It is *from the sky* that the people would receive "light, warmth, rain, and so on" (Mbiti, 41).

The perception that Africans are a profoundly religious people has become more common nowadays. This was not always the case. Some of the early anthropologists felt that, for Africans, the concept of God was too far removed from their reality and understanding. "The present situation in which indigenes as well as foreigners vie with one another to testify to the piety of the African mind is a remarkable reversal of earlier attitudes and prepossessions. There is virtual unanimity, in particular, on the report that Africans have a strong belief in the existence of God" (Wiredu, 1998).

Although Mbiti found Africans to be "notoriously religious" (1990: 1, 1975:27), he however regarded it to be "defective" with "several grievous shortcomings"(Platvoet & Van Rinsum, 2003: 129). Mbiti's African Traditional Religion was too anthropocentric, "pragmatic and utilitarian", and lacked eschatology (Platvoet & Van Rinsum, 129). It only served as "*praeparatio evangelica* ...stepping-stones towards the one true, or at least the best, religion for Africa: Christianity" (Platvoet & Van Rinsum, 129). These utterances clearly show Mbiti's bias towards Christianity, despite the fact that he regarded Christianity also as defective (Platvoet & Van Rinsum, 130).

Platvoet and Van Rinsum (2003: 135) argue that the myth of Africa being "notoriously" or "incurably religious" is one of the "inventions of tradition of modern Africa". It serves as a counter against the tradition of Africa being labelled as "primitive, savage, without religion, pagan, superstitious, full of witchcraft, witch hunts, sorcery and black magic", as invented by pre-colonial and colonial European discourse. Christianity and European civilisation, it was believed, would bring "rationality, progress and prosperity" to Africa. Against this backdrop, western and liberal African Christian theologians developed the 'ATR'-discourse. Given the fact that African religion was not easily identifiable apart from African culture and society, as it was gradually showing in Europe, it was concluded that "African societies, and Africans, were deeply religious".

p'Biket alleges that, in the study of African Traditional Religion, conceptions loaded with western or Christian symbolism and discourse were used to study African

religion. This is cause for grave concern, since, as Thomas puts it, "it is impossible to analyze another people's cultural traits with cultural-specific tools" (2005: 54).

p'Biket accuses both European and African missionaries and/or Christian theologians, including Placide Temples and John Mbiti, as "intellectual smugglers" who draped African deities with Hellenistic robes to show them off to the western world. "African people may describe their deities as 'strong' but not 'omnipotent', 'wise', not 'omniscient', 'old', not 'eternal', 'great', not 'omnipresent'. The Greek metaphysical terms are meaningless in African thinking" (p'Biket, 1970: 88). "This-worldly religions", p'Biket said, were converted into "other-worldly spiritualities" (Platvoet & Van Rinsum, 2003: 138).

Whilst some scholars may regard African traditional religions as polytheistic, a vast majority, however, consider it to be a monotheistic religion. A conference of Roman Catholic priests and theologians, African scholars, civil servants and politicians met with French anthropologists at a Benedictine Monastery in Bouaké in Ivory Coast in 1962, where many of the participants considered African indigenous religion as basically monotheistic. The presence of other gods and ancestors are considered to be intermediaries between God and humanity, "without intrinsic power of their own" (Platvoet & Van Rinsum, 2003: 126).

Platvoet, in another publication (1982: 41), speaks of a "balance of monotheistic tendencies and polytheistic practices" which he labels "inclusive monotheism". The

lesser gods are created by the Supreme God to "deputize" him, yet they in themselves are also "independent and objects of cult".

Idowu (1962: 204) has coined the phrase "diffused monotheism", which has the advantage of presenting the religion as monotheistic, "though it is a monotheism in which the good Deity delegates certain portions of His authority to certain divine functionaries who work as they are commissioned by Him". Some of the functions delegated to other divinities may include such issues as may affect human affairs, such as blessings and punishments, sunshine and rain.

The concept of 'diffused monotheism' can be described as the one Supreme God in vital union with the other gods on a horizontal plane (Mulago, 1991: 120). This 'vital union' is presented as a symbol of a circle which represents the universe (Kunene, 1981). Even though the other deities evolve form the Supreme God, they are all, including the Supreme God, in accord and synchronization in the symbol of a circle on the horizontal place. The symbol of a circle also shows the African God to be a god in community. The African view a "radically individuated God ceases to be a God. A God can only be a God in community, 'the total community' ... Even Christian theology is aware of this; hence the rather clumsy symbol of the Trinity (Kwenda, 2005).

Wiredu, in his study amongst the Akan people of Ghana, suggests that for too long the Akan God (and, more generally, the African God) was considered aloof and unresponsive to needs of the religious adherents. Such perceptions were held and promoted by European and other foreign writers, and emphasized by some indigenous

writers. "These foreign observers even had the impression that this attitude of the Supreme Being was reciprocated by the Akans when they (the visitors) found among them no evidences of the worship of God, institutional or otherwise" (Wiredu, 1998). In African tradition and understanding a God that does not connect with the community "ceases to be a God".

Wiredu maintains that the Akan people have indeed a strong sense of the compassion and generosity of God. This sentiment, however, is not supposed to be manifested through spontaneous interventions. Studies have revealed that the Akan people indeed have a definite belief in a supreme being. Some of the names given to the Supreme Being spells out the extent of its involvement in the life and times of the Akan people. The most common name is the word *Nyame,* which means "absolute satisfier" (Wiredu, 1998); or "the most important one" (Platvoet, 1982: 41). Another name is *Onyankopon*, which means, literally, "He who is alone great". There is also the name *Twediampon* (He upon whom you lean and do not fall). Probably one of the most important names by which the Supreme Being is known is *Oboade*, which can be translated as "Creator". Often the word *Nana* is also added to some of the names, giving it a title or a relation, such as grandparent, or ruler, or, in a more general sense, an honoured dignitary. These names are indeed loaded with meaning, particularly that of relationship and honour. Wiredu says that the concept of "grandfather" is most uppermost in the consciousness of the people as they call upon the name of their God (Wiredu, 1998).

The western understanding of the concepts of *natural* and the *supernatural* differs remarkably from that of the African people. For the Akan people, God is the Creator

of the world, but he is not apart from the world. The Creator and the creation together constitute the "spatio-temporal 'totality' of existence". Within the Akan cosmology there is no natural/supernatural distinction as understood within the western world. Within the Christian understanding (and also many other religious expressions), creation is understood as "bringing into existence out of nothing". The Akan God does not create out of nothing. For the Akan people and within the Akan language the notion of creation out of nothing does not make sense at all.

> The idea of nothing can only be expressed by some such phrase as *se whee nni ho*, which means something like "the circumstance of there not being something there". The word *ho* (there, at some place) is very important in the phrase: it indicates a spatial context. That of which there is a lack in the given location is always relative to a universe of discourse implicitly defined by the particular thought or communication. Thus, beholding a large expanse of desolate desert, an Akan might say that *whee nni ho*. The meaning would be that there is a lack there of the broad class of things that one expects to find on land surface of that magnitude. The absolute nothingness entailed in the notion of creation out of nothing, however, scorns any such context. This abolition of context effectively abolishes intelligibility, as far as the Akan language is concerned.

(Wiredu, 1998).

In Akan language there is no such thing as creating something out of nothing. As noted above, *Oboade* is translated as "creator". "*Bo* means to make and *ade* means thing, but in Akan to *bo ade* is unambiguously instrumental; you only make something with something" (Wiredu, 1998). To exist is to be spatial. To exist means that you must be in some location. "If God exists, he must be *somewhere*". The Akan God is the architect of the cosmos, rather than a creator out of nothing.

Ancestral Veneration

Ancestral veneration is a central feature of the African traditional worldview. Deceased relatives become known as ancestors or ancestral spirits as they continue to play a meaningful role in the life of the community. They are considered as mediators between the living and the higher god(s). An ancestor will remain an ancestor for as long as its descendants do not forget it, hence the desire to have many children "so that they will remember him and ritually communicate with him" (Nyamiti, n.d.).

Kinship is an important aspect of African ancestral relationship. The 24th meeting of the IMBISA Standing Committee, who met at Mahalapye (Botswana) in 1996, defined an ancestor as a person:

> -who died a good death after having faithfully practised and transmitted to his descendants the laws left to him by his ancestors,
>
> -who contributed to the continuation of the line by leaving many descendants,
>
> -who was a peacemaker, a *link*, that fostered communion between the living and the dead, through sacrifices and prayers,
>
> -A person who is the first-born is a candidate 'par excellence' to become an ancestor because he is able to maintain the chain of the generation in a long genealogy. The right of the first-born is thus an inalienable right.

(IMBISA Standing Committee, 1996)

Ancestors are endowed with a "sacred super-human status with special magico-religious powers" for the benefit of its earthly kin, or even to harm them (Nyamiti,

n.d.). The status of an ancestor is reserved for those who lived a morally good and an exemplary life within the community.

African traditionalist religion is not about pleasing a god or services to be rendered to a supreme being, nor is it aimed at securing an "eternal bliss" in the life to come. Rather, its primary concern is with human happiness and opulence within the person's own community in the here and now. The cosmic forces, nature, ancestry, sacred rivers and mountains, chiefs and headmen, community priests and religious rites are there to serve the human being. It is accepted that humanity is not by nature a sinful people, even though they can be tainted by cultic impurity. Religious rites, therefore, emphasize purification rather than reconciliation.

Mbiti, in his critique of African indigenous religions (as noted above), says that they are "extremely anthropocentric", and has "little, if any, concern with the distinctly spiritual welfare of man apart from his physical life". Africans, Mbiti says, only knows the present and the long past, with virtually no future. Platvoet and Rinsum interpret this as an absence of eschatology in Mbiti's analysis (2003: 129). Ancestral veneration can be viewed as a definite presence of eschatology within African indigenous religions. Kwenda says that it is every person's dream to become an ancestor. However, not everyone qualifies due to being childless, or an "unmarried adult", or some other complications (Kwenda, 2005). The point, however, is that ancestorhood is salvific to those who adhere to African indigenous religions. This is indeed a presence of eschatology. Kwenda further argues that the adherent who for some reason does not qualify to become an ancestor, cries out for justice to be done,

not only and not so much for the individual as it is for the "entire cosmic order" (Kwenda, 2005).

African indigenous religion and family are closely connected. Religious expression is seen as "a system of rites, rules, and practices that aims at preserving and strengthening the fellowship of people, the tribe and the family, and at increasing its power" (Thomson, 1994: 95). Appreciation is shown to ancestors in a wide variety of ways, one being the "polite act" of pouring "a bit of palm wine ... on the ground". This is also considered a prayerful supplication, "for health and bounty generally as well as for specific requests such as seeking victory in an intense land dispute". The importance of these rituals, however, is fundamentally to remain in relationship and connected to the ancestors, as much as it is also an occasion for family reunion amongst the living (Blakely & Blakely, 1994: 405).

An Africanist theory of religion will include a theory of ancestorship, which situates ancestors at the center of religious thought and practice. Kwenda (2005) differentiates between two kinds of ancestors based on the "way they accede to the status". The first one is called the "normative ancestor", or *normance*, and the second one the "protest ancestor", or *protance*.

The first one is acceding to the status of an ancestor as prescribed by the protocol and the "nature and form of the rituals that are held from time to time in the ancestor's honour". Kwenda regards this as the "ideal, the one everyone aspires to".

The second one is the "unusual" one, where a prospective ancestor is disqualified on a technicality, mostly beyond his control. Examples of these are: "the person was an unmarried adult, or was childless, or died a difficult-to-manage death". In such cases justice needs to be done, with the avenging spirits setting out to do the necessary. Kwenda argues that these spirits have often been tainted as "evil" due to the influence of missionary Christianity, which equates all aspects of vengeance with evil. Kwenda further argues that this call for justice is a "restoration of the moral order"; that it is the "ecology of life demanding the removal of blockages occasioned by injustice or misfortune".

Gable (1996: 104) argues that ancestral power "reflects and reinforces the rule of a kind of andro-gerontocracy". Women can never become ancestors. In his study amongst the Manjaco of Guinea-Bissau, Gable found that both men and women agree that ancestors cannot be women, because they "wander". "Women leave their natal kinship-corporation—what the Manjaco refer to simply as the 'house' (*kato*)—to marry and bear children in their husband's house. They are 'the gourd vine that grows under the fence to bear fruit.' Because they move at marriage, they cannot be ancestors". It has been debated that ancestors are largely a 'projection' of the 'palpable power of the living elders'[2]. The living elders are the old men in the community and the household. Women can never be part of that 'living elders' given the fact that they *wander*. If follows then that the ancestral powers, who reflect the authority and ownership vested in the living elders, cannot, by virtue of this projection, include women.

[2] See for example the summary of Fortes as given in Kopytoff (1971: 137).

Gable further argues that the ancestral powers are given voice by senior women. "The people who seem to have the greatest stake in conversing with ancestors ... are women, specifically out-marrying fathers' sisters" (Gable, 1996: 105). Women seem to be much more concerned with the relationships between the living and the dead (Gable, 112). Any funeral at their natal house is an excuse to bring 'rice offerings' to their parents.

Gable (196: 113-117) also records that in the Manjaco tribe the women seem to be more articulate and forthcoming in their approaches to the ancestors than the men. Women hold the ancestors to account! One of the elderly women, Dawinu, spoke at the ancestor shrine and called one of the ancestors, Domingo, to account, reminding him that he now "works for the company" and will only be "paid" (recognised as an ancestor worthy of sacrificial offerings) if he "acts in the interest of the living" (Gable, 117). Gable concludes that such conversations restore the power of the ancestors to have an effect on the living, but it also gives the "disenfranchised people—in this case, women—...to claim for themselves the morally superior voice of other-interest" (Gable, 119).

In conclusion, African life and African religion are communal in every respect, horizontally as they interact within their extended families, clans and chiefdoms, but also vertically as they are connected to the cosmic totality, which includes the Supreme God, all the deities and indeed the ancestors. African culture and African Religious experience can indeed collaborate and speak a common language. African religion starts with human life, located in time and space, reaching out to the rest of the world and influencing the world for the greater good. The rest of the world, the

forces out there, and the Supreme Being all act and work together for a better human being. This human being is shaped and moulded so that, once he becomes an ancestor, he too, having now become a mature and holistic being, can fulfill a role with other forces in acts of salvation. Salvation is not seeking reconciliation with the Supreme Being, but rather to become an instrument in the hands of the Supreme Being and be a saving agent of the cosmic world.

CHAPTER 4:

THE ELIADEAN THEORY IN THE LIGHT OF AFRICAN RELIGIOUS EXPRESSIONS

There seems to be a conspicuous silence about African religion and religions in the discourse of world religions (Chidester, n.d.: 3; Baum, 2005; Lewis, 1990). In this chapter we shall reread Eliade's theory of religion, with the intention of salvaging or rehabilitating some if its concepts in the light of African religious expressions. We shall see if there is any way in which we could hold on to part or all of Eliade's theory that speaks into the African experience and reflect the religious reality of Africans.

Eliade in Africa

In his book called Shamanism, Eliade writes extensively on the practice of shamanism within the contexts and on the continents of Asia, North and South America, and the Indian Ocean islands, yet fails to reflect on the shamanic elements within African religions and traditions (see footnote 116 in Eliade, 1972: 374), notwithstanding the fact that shamanism is very prominent in Africa. Lewis-Williams, as quoted in Chidester (1992: 3), refers to the "symbols of ecstatic dancing, trance visions, and images of power associated with sacred animal forms", displayed in the "archaic rock art found in southern Africa", as evidence of the presence of San shamanism in southern Africa. Chidester (2005: 172-189) speaks of the presence of shamanic

kratophanies. These are usually short-lived and can lose its power when it becomes known, or could be handled, or its place in the "primitive cosmos" could be explained. What is new, unknown and unusual are considered unnatural. This could include "any public calamity, or unusual misfortune, sin against the natural law, or incest" (Eliade, 1958: 16). Eliade records that these *taboos* could also be of a permanent type, examples of which are "those attaching to a king or a holy man, to a name or to an iron, or to certain cosmic regions" (1958: 16).

Amongst the Moroccan people this idea of taboos is extended to include food. "Certain food is so holy that it must not be eaten at all, or be eaten in small portions only"[1]. Eliade goes on to report that visitors to sanctuaries eat only very little of what they are offered. Eating small portions help to increase power (*baraka*), but too much may be quite harmful. "For the same reason if honey is too rich in *baraka* it is dangerous" (Eliade, 1958: 17).

Whatever is regarded as taboo derives from what is considered as or perceived to be powerful, or sacred. This brings about an ambivalence of the sacred, for as much as hierophanies and kratophanies are to be avoided (due to whatever danger these may hold), so too is there a yearning for strength and security of one's own reality "by the most fruitful contact [one] can attain with hierophanies and kratophanies" (Eliade, 1958: 17).

Ellis & ter Haar note that such an ambivalence is even shown to those in political authority.

[1] Westermarck, *Pagan Survival in Mahommedan Civilization*, London, 1933, as quoted in Eliade (1958: 17).

religion in South Africa, with reference to Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa, the Zulu Shaman. Southern African Indigenous religions show features characteristic of shamanism, such as evangelism, charisma and symbolism, and these are, at a local level, connected to ritual, symbolism and other practices related to magic, disease and healing.

In what follows I shall attempt to focus on some of Eliade's writing on African religion and measure it against some of the key concepts of his theory of religion.

Manifestations of Power: Strange, but Real

As we have established in the second chapter of this study, a *hierophany* is considered to be a place, or thing, or action that manifests the presence of the sacred. This is an awareness of, perceiving, or experiencing the sacred, even in the midst of the profane. It is a phenomenon that requires human involvement as it manifests itself to human consciousness.

The manifestation of the sacred, Eliade says, is always different from, or "separated in regard to itself, for it only becomes a hierophany at the moment of stopping to be a mere profane something, at the moment of acquiring a new 'dimension' of sacredness" (Eliade, 1958: 13). This may present itself as something *strange*, or *alien*, or *new,* if compared with the way the sacred is ordinarily perceived or experienced. This strangeness, even if it is to be venerated, can instill fear and be considered dangerous. It is a manifestation of a power or force that can be detrimental. Edwin W. Smith says that "it is especially strange, unusual things, uncommon sights, new-fangled habits, strange foods and ways of doing things that are

> Ghanaians readily assumed that their politicians are in communication with the spirit world, and that the connection may be to sinister. Political power, like spiritual power, is regarded as ambivalent since it can be used to do good or to inflict harm. Hence, successful politicians are both admired and feared. By the same token, religious specialists who can effect spiritual cures are also presumed to have the power to harm. The ambivalence of power reflects the ambivalence of the spirit world itself.

(Ellis & ter Haar, 2004: 91-92).

The people of Melanesia regard the strange and unexplained, but active power as *mana*. This power is restricted to certain individuals only (examples of which are heroes, men and things in some way connected to the sacred, such as sorcerers, fetishes, idols), but by and large belongs to "the souls of the dead and all the spirits". This force is *real* and can make all things powerful. For the African pygmies (Bambuti) this force is known as *megbe* (Eliade, 1958: 19, 21). Paul Schebesta writes:

> *Megbe* is everywhere, but its power is not shown everywhere with the same intensity, nor in the same manner. Some animals are richly endowed with it; one man may possess more *megbe*, another less. Capable men become eminent simply because of the amount of *megbe* they amass. Sorcerers too have a great deal. It seems to be power bound up with the soul-shadow, destined to disappear with it at death and either transfer itself to someone else, or become changed into a Totem.[2]

Tempels coined the phrase "theory of forces", understood to be the *power of life*, or, "the essence of being" in African religious expressions (see Chapter 3 above). This force is vital, and makes for dynamism and interconnectedness, "participation and mutuality". This concept seems to find resonance in the writing of Eliade, as set out

[2] Paul Schebesta, *Les Pygmeés* (French trans.), Paris, 1940, as quoted in Eliade (1958: 21).

above. There is a distinct and separate identification of being and power. The force or the power is recognized and acknowledged; and other beings participate in the force, each to a different degree, depending one their *rank* or their *place* in a hierarchical order. Eliade, as noted above, speaks of this force as attracting and repelling, as people recognize the need to be attached, yet also keep their distance in fear of the unknown.

African Belief in a Supreme Being

Eliade records that for Africa and Africans, the Supreme Being is "endowed with all the majesty of a heavenly, creating, omnipotent and law-giving God" (1958: 27). The Konde of Tanganyika is cited as an example, given their belief in Kyala or Lesa. This God, however, is not confined to the "epiphanies of the sky". It can manifest itself in anything great, such as a great ox or even a great he-goat, or a great storm. The voice of God can be heard in a louder than usual roar of the waterfall; the footsteps of God is understood to be the cause of an earthquake; and the anger of God manifests itself in lightning. God may even appear in the body of a lion or snake to observe the doings of humanity. "In the same way among the Shilluk, the name of the Supreme Being, Juok, is given to anything miraculous or monstrous, anything foreign, anything a Shilluk cannot understand" (Eliade, 1958: 27).

Eliade cautions that the integration of the "elementary hierophanies" into the "epiphany of the Supreme Being" should not be equated to idolatry. African people's belief, as shown in these examples, he says, is one that has not "experienced the severe systemization imposed by theologians or mystics". This is a case of spontaneity where the elementary is integrated with the complicated (1958: 27, 28).

Traces of a great sky god are to be found in many an African belief. Sky gods, however, are considered to be almost extinct or in the course of disappearing. In many an African cult the sky god has been replaced by other religious forces, in most cases by the veneration of ancestors. Sky gods are usually associated with celestial and/or spatial natural elements. Natural elements, such as sky, rain, thunder, lightning, etc are often given the same name as the Supreme Being, or have a name that is in some way connected to the Supreme Being. Examples of these are Nyakupon, the name of the Supreme Being of the Tschwis, which is also used to designate sky and rain; Leza, the Supreme Being of the Ba-Ilas tribe in the Kafu valley, a name used to describe meteorological phenomena such as rain and thunder; and Tororut, the Supreme Being of the Suks, which could also refer to the sky (Eliade, 1958: 45). These examples are all in accordance with Eliade's concept of sky gods, all of which express distance, transcendence and infiniteness. The sky, storms, thunder and lightning, rain, the sun, moon and other meteorological appearances are all indications of the transcendence of the Supreme God (Cave, 1993: 44-45).

Because of their distance, sky gods become disconnected from and more insignificant to the religious life of the African people (Deus Otiosus). The sky god "is too distant or too good to need worship properly so called, and [is invoked] only in cases of extreme need" (Eliade, 1958: 47). Examples of these in Africa are Olorun (literal meaning: 'Owner of the Sky'), the sky god of the Yorubas in West Africa; Nzame (which means 'creator and lord of heaven and earth'), the Supreme God of the Fang of the French Congo; and Ndyambi, the Supreme God of the Hereros of Namibia

(1958: 47). These divinities became functionless with no direct involvement in the life and affairs of human beings.

Eliade reports the presence of a divine couple in the creation myths of the people of the south in Africa. "[The] supreme sky god Nzambi has slipped into the background leaving in his place a divinity of earth who even bears the same name, and whose sacred secrets are revealed only to women" (Pettazzoni, as quoted in Eliade, 1958: 51). This is an example of a Supreme God *delegating* some of its responsibilities to a *lesser* god. In South Africa "the demiurge Unkulunkulu is the creator of the human race, but is subordinate to the supreme being of the sky Utikxo" (Eliade, 1958: 52).

Smith (2000) refers to these subordinate deities as presented in serial order. These, he says, are "transformations of sky-itself into supreme sky deities, and supreme sky deities into subordinate or fused deities". It is a metamorphosis of gods. These metamorphoses are neither in a chronological order nor a causal sense. It is for this reason that these examples are confined to, amongst others, African people, who, in Eliade's opinion, are considered "primary" or "primitive". In Saliba's (1976: 47-49) terminology: "The primitive man's behavior is definitely existential; that is, his main religious beliefs and practices are always centered around the fundamental problems of human life". Saliba asserts there are some differences and similarities between the "archaic" or traditional person and the modern person. The fundamental difference, he says, lies in the fact that "modern man considers himself constituted by the whole history of humanity", whereas the traditional person considers him/herself as "ahistorical". The traditional person sees him/herself as "indissolubly connected with the cosmos and the cosmic rhythms", and therefore has a greater awareness and shows

a greater appreciation of the sacred. The absence of cultic expressions and diminished mythologies add to the notion of *anthropologized* deities. Supreme deities will either "'degrade' into otiose deities, for most purposes disappearing, or, quite literally, petrify into idols" (Smith, 2000).

The Sacred Center Revisited

As noted in the second chapter, the sacred center is an important phenomenon in Eliade's theory of religion. At a center post the world of the sacred and the world of the profane are joined, so that life is being oriented around the sacred center. The sacred center is that place where the gods have already appeared, thus making it a place of order. Such places are used to build sacred temples and places of worship, which resemble and reflect the sacred, both in its construction but also in the manner of *being* sacred (Pals, 1996: 167). To what extent is this true of African Religious expressions? To assist in my investigation, I would like to propose a comparative study with Jonathan Smith's (1987) analysis of *place* in the Australian aboriginal myth. I will particularly look for themes in the Australian Arunta tribe that may appear to be similar to African Religious expressions, and to draw on these to see if we can make any inferences of the applicability of the sacred center to Africa.

Eliade and the Tjilpa Myth

Smith (1987: 1-13) sought to give an alternative understanding of Eliade's reading of the Achilpa[3] myth, by rereading the same sources on which Eliade depended. Eliade

[3] Hereinafter referred to as Tjilpa, as used by Smith (1987).

understood the pole to be a "'sacred center', the point of contact between heaven and earth, a locus of sacrality that [founded] the world for man". Smith remarks that the *pole as a sacred center* differs from Eliade's comparable symbolic of the ancient Near Eastern and Indian temples in that it is portable (1987: 2). For Eliade, the sacred center makes the environment "habitable", and a destruction of the center would result in "chaos" (Smith, 2). A portable sacred center, as in the case of the Tjilpa myth, increases the risk of chaos since it lends itself to a possibility of breakage and/or destruction. Eliade does not expand on this possibility.

Smith questions Eliade's interpretation of the withdrawal of Numbakulla (the high god), which, in true Eliadean tradition, and in accordance with his understanding of the otiose high gods, happens in succession to the creative activities of the supreme god. Eliade's understanding of this myth is one that has a" continuous narrative from primordial creation through to a return to chaos" (Smith, 1987: 4). Also, the withdrawal of Numbakulla is not in keeping with the usual Australian pattern of terrestrial transformation, for which there is no need to connect earth to sky, since the "ancestral disappearance is by a return to the earth whence they sprung" (Smith, 1987:5).

Eliade did not view the Tjilpa myth as a twofold structure of event and memorial, thereby missing the importance of the priority of the memorial. It is the memorial that gives explanation to the "topographical feature in the aboriginal landscape of today" (Smith, 1987: 10). The Tjilpa myth is not celestial, Smith argues, but rather terrestrial. The world was being continuously transformed by the never-ending

nomadic travels of the ancestors across the featureless, primordial surface of the earth (Smith, 1987: 10).

> Looking at the kernel of these frequently tedious [ancestral] narratives we are struck by one feature: in all of them *environment is made out of man's activity*... This is a man-made world. Environment is regarded as if it were derived from human beings" (Róheim, as quoted in Smith, 1987: 11)

The Tjilpa myth is based on and emphasizes anthropology, not cosmology. "It is the ancestral/human alteration of and objectification in the landscape that has transformed the undifferentiated primeval space during the Dream-time into a multitude of historical places in which the ancestors, though changed, remain accessible" (Smith, 1987: 11).

For as long as humans (the Tjilpa tribe) are mindful of the nomadic wanderings of the ancestors and the sacred pole, they will have objectification. The memorial explains the transformation of the space. Rupture happens when people forget (when there's no memorial), and not so much as a result of the breaking of the sacred pole (Smith, 1987: 13).

Eliade's understanding of the Tjilpa myth is largely influenced by the Near Eastern and Indic cosmology and its symbolism in the 'center'. The sacred mountain stands at the center of the world; that's where heaven and earth meet. The temple, or any other 'sacred' place, such as royal residence, or sacred town, is assimilated to a 'sacred mountain', and thus becomes a 'center'. These, in turn, are held to be the point where heaven, earth and hell meet, the axis mundi (Smith, 1987: 14).

Reflections and replications of these are found in 'sacred' man-made buildings and constructions.

For the Tjilpa, however, the world is as a result of "ancestral activity". This, Smith says, is clearly more about "marking [rather] than of making, of memorializing than of constructing. It is not a language of edifices, but of 'tracks', 'paths', 'traces', 'marks', and 'prints'" (1987: 18).

Smith concludes that the "Tjilpa and their pole" cannot be conceived of as an example of "Eliade's pattern of the 'Center'". The fact that the pattern of the 'Center' was "first generated from the ancient Near Eastern materials" also does not support this notion. The 'Center', Smith continues, is "clearly far from a universal (or even dominant) pattern of symbolization. ... The Center is not a secure pattern to which data may be brought as illustrative; it is a dubious notion that will have to be established anew on the basis of detailed comparative endeavors" (Smith, 1987: 17).

Eliade's Sacred Center and Africa

Using the Tjilpa myth as a yardstick, I shall now turn to Africa and its indigenous religious expression and measure it against Eliade's sacred center. We have ascertained, through Smith's analysis and his rereading of the Tjilpa myth, that Eliade's center could not be applied to the Tjilpa and their *pole*. Some of the reasons given for this are that the Tjilpa reality is constructed by ancestral activity; memory is given priority, rather than the event as portrayed in the myth; and sacrality is not derived from humanly constructed sacred places such as temples. The Tjilpa ancestors

were nomadic, and as such *founded* the habitable space of the Tjilpa people. It is also noted that the Tjilpa people were anthropological.

Eliade's center makes the environment habitable. Charles Long (1986: 68) defines it as "locus of reality". It is around this center that "other dimensions of life are organized; the center gives coherence to the common life, and through the center the common life participates in reality. The center holds together in symbolic forms human, natural, and supernatural realities. It is through the center that life receives meaning and value; the center is the source of human value" (Long, 1986: 69).

Charles Long acknowledges the power of the center, and its application in the constructions of western ceremonial citied traditions, with its political, economical and military power. As in the case of Smith's analysis of the Tjilpa myth, Long also remarks that this tradition of the center derives from "the detailed archaeology and historical analyses" of the world of the ancient Near East, Mesopotamia and India (1986: 69). Such patterns, Long asserts, stand in "marked contrast" to the "nomadic egalitarian traditions of the hunters and the gatherers of precitied cultures" (1986: 69).

Africa and African traditional religious expressions fall within this category. What makes the environment habitable is not the center as Eliade purports, but the act of "sacred spacing" as put forward by Kwenda (2005). We have already noted that the African mythical stories of creation are about breaking into the sacred space for the purpose of creating habitable human space (see chapter 3). This, Kwenda argues, is by negotiation with the gods. From an African point of view, humans are considered 'deal-makers', negotiating the best deal they can to their own advantage.

In the Tjilpa myth Eliade records that the withdrawal of the high God, Numbakulla, led to a return to chaos, death and destruction. Smith asserts that the Tjilpa tribe is one that is terrestrial rather than celestial, and that the notion of Australian gods withdrawing is always understood to be a terrestrial withdrawal rather than celestial. Africa, as we have seen above, considered the Supreme Being to be celestial, but too far removed from their reality and the livelihood. Deputized gods have taken its place. Cultic activities are directed to these lesser gods and especially the ancestors, who are considered much more *in touch* with humanity rather than the otiose high god. So, even though the Supreme Being has *moved on* as it were, for Africa and its people that does not mean anything chaotic or destructive. Their reality is given definition by their interaction with the gods who are in communion with them, including and especially the ancestors.

An ancestor will remain an ancestor for as long as its descendants do not forget it. The lifespan of an ancestor, then, is connected to the memory of its descendents. As in the case of the Tjilpa, rupture can only happen when the memory fades and the people forget. Rupture cannot happen as a result of a *non-existent* or *broken* center. It can happen as a result of a loss of memory and/or a break in the communication with the ancestors, for the coherence and viability of the community is defined by the interaction and communion of the people with their ancestors.

Africans, like the Tjilpa tribe, are anthropological. The nomadic lifestyle of the ancestors of the Tjilpa myth is one that the African people share. Sacralizing of their habitat is where the ancestors have trod. All property, including land, is communally

owned. As mentioned earlier, land is important in as far as it allows the human family to be connected, including those who have died and those who are awaiting their birth.

In Eliade's sacred center the gods take initiative. This "process of sacralizing" is the sacred being manifested. This is a phenomenon that shows itself to human consciousness, and invites human participation as a response. The homo religiosus is the subject, and the hierophany is the object. In the sacred center the divine acts and the human responds. Any initiation from the human side is considered offensive, rebellious and disobedient.

In African traditional religion all those included in the hierarchy between the gods and humanity (which includes ancestors, medicine men, priests and rainmakers, for example) can intervene and take initiative in the process of sacralizing. These functions are not confined to the divine beings only, but allows for all to participate in the welfare of the family, clan, tribe or community. Even the women, as shown in the Manjaco tribe (see chapter three of this study), take initiative as they approach the ancestors and hold them to account.

And so, in conclusion, the habitable environment for Africans and the order of the society is not derived from a sacred center. Africa recognizes the Supreme Being for its creative power that makes for productivity and life. It also recognizes other beings, each in its own rank and order, connected to the Supreme Being. A person is never a person in isolation. The community gives authenticity and brings wholeness to an individual. The key words in African religion are interconnectedness and relationality,

even amongst the gods. Even the gods are in accord and synchronization in the symbol of a circle on the horizontal place. The symbol of a circle also shows the African God to be a god in community. And it is humanity that stands in the center of all of this. All of the created order, the cosmological powers, the relationality with the known and unknown, are all in the interest and the welfare of humanity. This cannot be conceived as an example of Eliade's pattern of the sacred center.

Eliade's Sacred and Profane, and Africa

The words *sacred* and the *profane* are central concepts to the theory of Eliade, as we have noted above. The sacred and the profane are two distinct and different planes on which life operates, the one being the supernatural, and the other referring to ordinary life. Eliade's theory makes a distinct differentiation between the natural and the supernatural.

One of the hallmarks of the African religious expressions is the total involvement of the deity in the ordinary things of African life, including that which may be considered as mundane and unimportant. Kwenda, in considering the dichotomy of sacred and profane, poses the questions: "Do we start with a universe that is a sea of secularity out of which shards of sacrality leap out like shooting stars? Or is ours a wholly sacred universe where humans make habitable space by creating pockets of secular (profane) territory, rolling back the boundaries of sacred space?" (Kwenda, 2005). Indeed a good place to start. Considering the Christian understanding of the creation story, after each of the acts of creation, God considered the creation to be

good. What, then, shall one call such divine approval? Could it be *sacred*, since the Creator God himself has found it to be good, and, after all, it is a creation by the hand of the Divine? Or could it be *profane*, given the fact that the creation is only material and this-worldly. If one pushes Eliade's theory of the *axis mundi* a bit further, a theory which says that the profane can be sacralized when the divine has visited such a place, could one not, by the mere fact of the Divine creating the universe, claim the entire universe as an axis mundi?

Both positions, as posed in the questions of Kwenda, will not fit the Africanist religious position. Africa and African religious traditions do not perceive religiosity in different pockets of secular and scared. Kwenda, however, recognizes that something positive can come from this dichotomy, referring to Durkheim's notion of scared and profane. Kwenda (2005) says that it "recognises the importance of differentiation. The essence of creation is differentiation—land from water, earth from the heavens, and day from night. If humans are mandated to continue the work of creation where better to start than by bringing differentiation to limitless profanity or limitless sacrality?"

Durkheim's notions of *sacred* and *profane* are not to be confused with that of Eliade's. That Durkheim referred to society as *sacred* was indeed the key thought of his theory. "Sacred things always involve large concerns: the interests and welfare of an entire group of people, not just one or a few" (Pals, 1996: 99). Individualism, small and private activities are regarded as profane. Sacred is not to be confused with "good" and profane with "evil". For Durkheim, good and evil are present in both the sacred and the profane (Pals, 1996: 99). Society, however, becomes the emblem, the

logo, and the icon "that holds center stage. This is supremely sacred and communicates its sacred character to all around" (Pals, 1996: 102).

For Eliade the sacred does not of necessity occupy a belief in a deity or deities. It is not of necessity that there be a mediating concept or deity between the ordinary, profane experience and the extraordinary, sacred experience. For Eliade, the sacred is essentially a qualitative difference from the profane, even though the sacred is not "dualistically separable" from the profane. For Eliade, the sacred is at the same time contained in the profane and yet also qualifies it. "The sacred and the profane interact and interrelate dialectically, similar in function to the mutual complimentary of the Chinese polarity yin/yang" (Cave, 1993: 37).

For Eliade, sacred space and sacred time are aligned and associated with the divine. Profane space and profane time are confined to the material world. These are places and moments in which as yet no hierophany has been identified. Africa and African religion will sit more comfortably with Durkheim's understanding than that of Eliade. The *sacred* society of Durkheim places the role of religion right in the center of an "earth-based" life as experienced in the community. This would not be so much of a problem for Africa, since Africans are a communal people, and religion is practiced within the community.

In Africa, the individual represents a much wider framework that has impacted and shaped him/her, and into which he/she was born. These are groups such as family, clan, tribe, community, nation, etc., all representing characteristics of relationality and of social order. Society is the basic framework within which Durkheim considers and

confines his theory of religion. He claims that social solidarity and social life have "shaped the most fundamental features of human culture" throughout the ages. The very first possessions were not individually owned, but communal. Immovable property was considered sacred, and the whole tribe owned it. (Pals, 1996: 93-94). To be religious, for Africans, is to improve life in the here and now, and not so much an eschatological judgment based on one's actions and way of life now. The concept of the supreme God is one that works in and amongst the people of the tribe, the community, nature and the cosmic environment, albeit it indirectly.

Crafford says that for Africans,

> The cosmos is experienced as a sacral environment charged with powers and spirits which exert their influence on human life. Such powers have to be manipulated by ritual and magical activities. Some sacred forests, rivers and mountains are more charge than other places.
>
> The community is understood as a closed, sacral, tribal unit at the head of which is the sacral monarchy in which the chief is the mediator between the tribe, the Supreme Being and the cosmic powers. Sacral officials, such as shamans, healers and diviners, fulfill various religious duties. Clan and family heads are the community priests. Social and religious activities are not distinguished from one another.

(Crafford, 1996: 5).

Adherents to African religious expressions make no distinction between the sacred and the secular. The testing of religious tradition is located within the body as locus of spiritual reality. The person as a concrete totality represents the holistic relationships between mind and matter, body and soul, spiritual and the material, private and public, individual or social. Life is connected to particularities; embedded in an embodied world. Spirituality, consciousness and mind are located in the body, and, in

conjunction with the body, they collectively create and have the capacity to apprehend experience.

The point of departure in Eliade's theory is the sacred. The axis mundi tells us about the sacred visiting the profane world. Religion, for Eliade, is when the sacred becomes a reality in the lives and minds of its adherents. It is when the followers become aware and acknowledge the hand of the divine or the Supreme Being in the cosmic reality. For Eliade, the axis mundi is the center of the world.

Africans begin with their place in the cosmos; who they are and where they are. Within their context they begin to make sense of the rest of the world. They begin to see themselves in relation to the rest of creation, and some greater Creator. And this awareness of the rest of the world, and how they relate to the African, helps with the search of finding purpose and meaning of their existence. The African people become the center of the world, and all the cosmic powers and forces, ancestors, sacred places within nature, and the Supreme Being all contribute to the well being and the life of the African.

Kwenda (2005) in his article argues that those proponents that locate theories of religion in a dualism do so to ultimately promote "identification or assimilation with the divine". Salvation for them means being unified and joined to the divine as an eschatological goal. Dualism is being used to promote monism, which is seen as the basic condition of religion. When one considers Africans and African religious expressions, one must ask the question: what does salvation mean to them? In its most simplistic and, perhaps, most traditional sense, salvation for adherents of African

traditional religion means to become an ancestor in the life to come. That is what one's life on earth is preparing one for. Ancestorhood is a sign of the human being, the individual, becoming his full potential so that a positive contribution could be made to the rest of the cosmic reality for its survival and salvation.

Not only is the dichotomized concept of sacred and profane problematic to the religious sphere within African spirituality, it also dichotomizes the *whole* person in a religious sphere and a secular sphere. African religious expression, as we have noted above, is deeply rooted within African culture and community living. This dichotomized approach, I believe, can bring about a more *institutionalized* way of being an adherent of a particular faith. And the more a particular religion is institutionalized, the more one finds the threat of a dualistic world of the sacred and secular looming in the background. Institutionalized religion (such as Christianity) separates the ritual and all other expressions of the faith from the homestead and / or the chiefdom. The community cannot *own* the religion as it were; it belongs to an institution *separate* from the community.

For Africa and Africans religion is a real phenomenon that affects every aspect of their life and culture. Religion can never be separated from the society. Religion is an intimate part of being African. Thomas refers to African religion as a "spiritual force that has been operating in the lives of African people for thousands of years" (2005: 5). African people are firmly rooted in their culture and religion. The one does not necessarily threaten or contradict the other. Thomas maintains that "African religion and culture are so intertwined within traditional African societies that we can speak of African culture as a religion or at least as serving a religious function (2005: 11).

Although many Africans may have converted to and/or embraced the Christian or Muslim religion, they still reflect values that emanate from traditional African culture and religion (Oduyoye, 1995: 12). Platvoet observes that "African societies and their religions should ... not be viewed as sharply demarcated" (1996: 51). Mbiti says that the African carries his religion "to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony," and again; "African peoples do not know how to exist without religion," and "religion is their whole system of being" (1990: 39). Witvliet remarks that African anthropology is one of the sources of African Theology. African religious life places a strong emphasis on "human life and human determination has a central place" (Witvliet, 1985: 91).

CHAPTER 5:

CONCLUSION

What is it in Eliade's theory of religion that we could save or rehabilitate, if viewed from an African religious perspective? The sacred manifesting itself in hierophanies, kratophanies or epiphanies is authentic and real to the people of Africa. The Supreme Being, endowed with all attributes of a creator god, is the force or power that animates and gives fecundity and life. Subordinate and other divinities derive their power and divine functionaries from the Supreme God. Sometimes these manifestations may appear to be strange or uncommon, but they remain real and authentic.

Eliade's view of the **sacred** as **real** resonates with African religious expressions. For Africans, the sacred must have an impact upon the lives of the people. The reality of the sacred is made manifest in the everyday lives of the people. The focus, for them, as also Eliade understands it, is on the human experience of the sacred. It is the "*...intentional object of human experience which is experienced as the real*" (Rennie, 1996: 21). The sacred experience is the experience of a reality. Most African religious expressions make allowance for the presence of a Supreme Being, even though the focus of worship and ritual is on a mediating concept of the deity. Whereas in the dominant western religious discourses (for example Christianity) the idea of eschatology is to have an eternal life of bliss and happiness with the deity, in African religious expressions eschatology means to become an ancestor, or, if you like, a mediator, thus becoming part of the community of gods, albeit a lower rank in the hierarchical order of the divinity.

The sacred center in Eliade's theory is those places where the gods have appeared. There seems to be a direct connection here between the gods and the places, perceptions or experiences in which they manifest themselves. This is indeed, in Eliade's understanding, what gives rise to sacred centers. Such sacred spots are acknowledged and recognized as centers that have a hold on its surroundings, giving rise to the order and meaning of human living. In the western world (who derived their perception of religiosity from Mesopotamian, ancient Near Eastern and Indian world) these are given more concrete expression with the erection of sacred temples or buildings. Such manifestations are absent in African religious expressions. The gods reveal themselves through the agencies of other divinities, ancestors, and even priests, rainmakers and medicine men. It is such communication and relating that makes for the definition of order and community within African society. Memory plays a very important role here. For as long as the descendants will remember, coherence to the common life is guaranteed by the intervention and active involvement of the ancestors. An absence of Eliade's center means chaos, death and destruction. An absence of ancestral contact in African traditional religion means chaos, death and destruction. The sacred center, for Eliade, is a place where there is a total manifestation of the sacred. The African religious discourse does not accommodate the conception of a sacred center that defines the environment for human occupation and/or the order and structure of society. Community is given its definition by the direct involvement of the divine mediators, such as the ancestors.

Eliade holds that the sacred and the profane operate on two distinct planes, the former being the world of the sacred, and the latter the world of the ordinary and mundane. Such a concept may

have contributed to the institutionalized practice of world religions such as Christianity. Institutionalization, on the other hand, may have contributed to a separation of every day life from that of religious life. For Africa and Africans religion is a real phenomenon that affects every aspect of their life and culture. Religion can never be separated from the society. Religion is an intimate part of being African. African people are firmly rooted in their culture and religion. The one does not necessarily threaten or contradict the other. Africans embrace their Africaness, as much as they embrace their religion. African Religious experience concentrates on the real hustle and bustle of life, the simple relational activities such as laughing, crying, cuddling, eating, sleeping, loving, caring, etc. The African identity makes room for feeling, intuitiveness, hospitality, loyalty, forgiveness, etc. (Kwenda, 2005). These are qualities that build the family, the tribe, and the nation. These are qualities that express human solidarity and community. Religion is indeed an intrinsic part of the African community. Therefore, the duality of the sacred and profane of Eliade will not hold for the African experience of religion.

Ejizu expresses his view of African communal living as follows: "The sense of community and humane living are highly cherished values of traditional African life. ... For traditional Africans, the community is basically sacred, rather than secular, and surrounded by several religious forms and symbols. A visitor to Africa is soon struck by the frequent use of the first person plural 'we', 'ours' in everyday speech" (Ejizu, n.d.). The individual finds his/her place and identity within the community. The African community seeks to emulate the community of the gods, who are believed to be in harmony and synchronized. Conceptions such as community, society and relationality are notions that are absent in Eliade's theory of religion. This could very well be as a result of Eliade's strong stand against reducing the study of religion to other disciplines of

science and research, such as psychology, physiology, sociology, and other forms of academic research. He argues that religion is autonomous and can be studied completely and independently within its own field. (Pals, 1996: 161). That is not the point I wish to debate here, but simply to highlight the fact that such a stance may minimize, or not take into account at all, the role of community and relationality within the African religious discourse. Africans are a communal people, and religion is practiced within the community. The African traditional community is symbolically viewed as both a society of people bound together, and a unity of the visible and invisible world. It is the world of the living, and it is also the world of the "ancestors, divinities and souls of children yet to be born" (Ejizu, n.d.).

Eliade recognizes Africa's awareness and response to the manifestations of the sacred (whether hierophanies, kratophanies or epiphanies), and their distinctive relationship with a Supreme Being, generally considered as the creator. The fusion of the sky god with the Supreme Being and the delegation of *divine functionaries* to a subordinate god falls within Eliade's fourfold analysis of deities, and in the case of Africa, this analysis moves down to the fourth level, and the most anthropological level (Smith, 2000). The African Supreme God is a god in community, and if not, it will be anthropologized and cosmosized until it is degraded into otiosus[1]. This will make space for subordinate and/or other divinities, to which religious group expressions of faith are offered. African religious expressions do show ambivalence to what is strange, uncommon and unknown as far as the manifestation of the sacred or a force or power is concerned. These manifestations are dealt with very cautiously. These are real and essential to strengthen and

[1] This thought falls in line with Kwenda's argument of Africans being 'dealmakers' with God, even creating their own space for habitation (see Chapter 3 of this study).

secure the reality of the people, yet it is also to be avoided, for too much may be detrimental, even fatal.

Mircea Eliade in Africa is an area that requires much more research and debate. Eliade's theory of religion has certainly contributed tremendously to the academic world of religion and comparative religious studies. In Africa religion is definitely a force to be reckoned with. Its task, purpose and significance are clearly visible in African communal living and human solidarity. This study is a modest attempt to interact, understand and dialogue with Eliade's theory from an African perspective. I trust that it will encourage and invite more debate on Eliade's theory within the context of Africa.

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