

**THE AFRICAN PERCEPTION OF
DEATH, WITH SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO THE ZULU:
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

NOZIZWE MARTHA JALI

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Supervisor: Prof. AA van Niekerk

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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this assignment is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature *M. Gali*

Date *9 February 2000*

SUMMARY

Death is a universal phenomenon and each culture develops its own ways of coping with it. The reaction of people to death also involves a complex network of relationships. To appreciate their responses to this phenomenon requires an understanding of the socio-cultural context in which these responses occur because they influence the individual's responses to issues of life and death.

In the African context and indeed in the Zulu culture, death is a continuation of life in the world hereafter. The deceased renews his relationship with his ancestral relatives. Various rites and ceremonies are performed to mark his reunion with his ancestral relatives. For the living, the rites and ceremonies mark a passage from one phase of life to another requiring some readjustment. The belief in the existence of life after death also affects the nature of these rites and ceremonies, the social definition of bereavement and the condition of human hope.

The belief in the existence of the ancestors forms an integral part African religion and its importance cannot be over-estimated. This belief flows from the strong belief in the continuation of life after death, and the influence the deceased have on the lives of their living relatives.

The contact between the living and the living dead is established and maintained by making offerings and sacrifices to the ancestors. The ancestors, therefore, become intermediaries with God at the apex and man at the bottom of the hierarchical structure. However, for the non-African, the relationship seems to indicate the non-existence of God and the worshipping of the ancestors.

Women play a pivotal role in issues of life and death, because African people recognize their dependence and the procreative abilities of women to reconstitute and to extend the family affected by the death of one of its members.

Social change and Westernisation have affected the way the African people view death. Social changes have been tacked onto tradition. A contemporary trend is to observe the traditional and Christian rites when death has occurred. The deceased is then buried in accordance with Christian, as well as traditional rites.

The belief in the survival of some element of human personality is a matter of belief and faith. It lessens the pain and sorrow that is felt upon the death of a loved one by giving the believer hope that one day he will be reunited with his loved one and thereby easing the fear and anxiety of death.

Thus, the purpose of this investigation is to critically analyse the African perception of death and its implications with special reference to the Zulu people. The objective is to expose the complexities, diversities and the symbolism of death. The essence is to demystify the African perception of death and to indicate that the perception of death is not necessarily unique to African people in general and to the Zulu people in particular. Other groups like Christians have perceptions of death particularly with regard to the world hereafter.

The aim of the investigation of the topic is to reveal some of the underlying cultural beliefs in death, enhance those beliefs that are

beneficial to society and discard those that are anachronistic. Since culture is dynamic, not everything about African tradition will be transmitted to the future generation; there is bound to be cultural exchange.

OPSOMMING

Die dood is 'n universele fenomeen en elke kultuur ontwikkel sy eie manier om daarmee om te gaan. Mense se reaksie op die dood geskied binne 'n komplekse netwerk van verhoudinge. Om mense se reaksie op hierdie fenomeen te begryp, is 'n verstaan van die sosio-kulturele konteks nodig waarin hierdie reaksies plaasvind, aangesien dit die individu se reaksie op lewe en dood beïnvloed.

In die Afrika-konteks en ook in die Zulu-kultuur word die dood beskou as die kontinuasie van lewe in die hiernamaals. Die oorledene hernu sy verhouding met sy voorouers. Verskeie rituele en seremonies vind plaas om hierdie gebeurtenis te identifiseer. Vir die oorlewendes is die rituele en seremonies die oorgang van een lewensfase na 'n ander en vereis dus 'n mate van aanpassing. Die geloof in die lewe na die dood beïnvloed die aard van hierdie rituele en seremonies, die sosiale defenisie van rou en die toestand van menslike hoop.

Die geloof in die bestaan van die voorvaders vorm 'n integrale deel van Afrika-religie en die belangrikheid daarvan kan nie oorskat word nie. Die geloof vloei voort uit die sterk geloof in die hiernamaals en die geloof aan die invloed wat oorledenes op hulle lewende nasate het.

Die kontak tussen die lewendes en die lewende oorledenes word daargestel en onderhou deur offerandes aan die voorvaders. Die voorvaders word dus gesien as intermediêre skakel in 'n hiërargie met God aan die bokant en die mens aan die onderkant. Maar, vir nie-Afrikane, dui hierdie struktuur op die nie-bestaan van God en die aanbidding van die voorvaders.

Vroue speel 'n deurslaggewende rol in kwessies van lewe en dood aangesien Afrikane hul afhanklikheid besef van vroue se voortplantingsbekwaamhede om die familie wat deur die dood geaffekteer is te herkonstitueer en en te vergroot.

Sosiale veranderinge en verwestering affekteer Afrikane se houding teenoor die dood. Sosiale veranderinge is bo-oor tradisie geplaas. 'n Hedendaagse neiging is om Christelike sowel as tradisionele rituele na te volg na 'n sterfte. Die oorledene word begrawe in ooreenstemming met sowel tradisionele as Christelike praktyke.

Die geloof in die oorlewig van elemente van die menslike persoon is 'n kwessie van geloof. Dit verminder die pyn en lyding na die afsterwe van 'n geliefde deur aan die gelowige oorlewende die hoop van 'n herontmoeting te bied - en verminder dus die vrees en angs wat met die dood gepaard gaan.

Dus is die doel van hierdie ondersoek om 'n kritiese analise te maak van die Afrika-siening van die dood en die implikasies daarvan, met spesiale verwysing na die Zulu-nasie. Daar word probeer om die kompleksiteite, verskeidenhede en simbolisme van die dood aan te toon. Die essensie hiervan is om die Afrika-houding teenoor die dood te de-mistifiseer en te wys dat die siening van die dood nie noodwendig uniek van Afrikane in die algemeen en spesifiek van die Zoeloes is nie. Ander groepe soos Christene het beskouinge oor die dood met spesifieke verwysing na die hiernamaals.

Die doel van die ondersoek is om sekere onderliggende kulturele oortuiginge aangaande die dood te onthul, om dié beskouinge wat voordelig is, te versterk en om die anachronistiese beskouinge aan die kaak te stel en so te diskrediteer. Aangesien kultuur dinamies is, sal nie alles wat betref die Afrika-tradisie oorgedra word aan toekomstige generasies nie; daar sal noodwendig kulturele interaksie wees.

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CHAPTER 1

ORIENTATION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

We live our lives in a specific manner because we know that life has a purpose; it comes to an end. We also give meaning to the present in relation to our past and our future. As Rowe (1994:44) puts it “I am what I am because of what happened in the past and I do what I do now because of what will happen in the future”. Our present world encompasses not only our past but our future world as well. Though we often ponder about our past, it is our future that we constantly worry about. We do so because we know that life has an ending. If life was infinite, there would be no need to worry about the future. But because death is a reality, it helps us to be more focused on our future plans. Most of us believe that the purpose of life is to create some mementos and so we engage in different social, cultural and religious activities because we believe that to live “unnoticed is to die” (Rowe 1994:50).

Although we may fulfill our purpose in life and overcome our fear of death by being involved in the abovementioned activities, we all know that one day death will cross our path. It snatches away without any warning, those that are dear to us and around whom our plans revolve. We may also prefer not to think about the subject, but death is a certainty; it lies in wait for us. We wonder about what will happen to the soul after death and we begin to ask: “Is there life after death?” (Awulalu 1978:35).

When a baby is born there is jubilation in the family. The newborn grows up and undergoes the different initiation rites (developmental stages) which enable him to be accepted as a mature, responsible, and an active member of his society.

Marriage allows him to become a reproductive member of the same society. Death on the other hand becomes the last inevitable step in his life that stands between the visible and the invisible world of spirits. Iloanusi (1984:154) calls death a paradox because “it is a physical separation but not total annihilation or extermination in the hopeless nonexisting world of the spirits”. In the African context, though the deceased is cut off from the physical world, he becomes incorporated into the invisible world of his ancestors. The elaborate rites that are conducted by those that he leaves behind are meant to ensure that this process becomes successful.

In all cultures death is respected and as such, it is marked by special acts that the survivors carry out. For example the one time President of the United States of America (USA) Jimmy Carter once scolded the Iranians for displaying as trophies the bodies of American soldiers killed in their attempt to rescue the American hostages (Rowe 1994:45). South Africans also respect death. This has particularly been demonstrated during the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) when relatives of those killed during the liberation struggle insisted that they at least be given a chance to bury the last remains of their loved ones according to their cultural beliefs. Bodies have been exhumed in various parts of the country and handed over to the relatives of the deceased enabling them to pay their last respects and to bury their remains where other members of their families have been buried.

The fear of death is so great among people of all societies that we speak about it in soft voices leaving no doubt that it is the most feared phenomenon. Gero (1968:13) says illness and death among the Azande (Sudan) are thought to be caused by witchcraft, sorcery or the ancestors. It is only in few rare cases where they admit that some deaths are caused by God. This is especially the case in the death of an elderly person whom they believe has been called by God. However,

they pretend that they believe that the death was caused by witchcraft because if they did not do so, they would meet disapproval from other members of the community. Thus to the Azande the direct cause of illness and death is witchcraft or sorcery or the anger of the ancestors and the indirect cause of death is God. On the other hand, the Turkana (Kenya) also fear death to the extent that a critically ill person is taken away to an undisclosed place known only to the closest member of his family.

In this study I will critically analyse the African perception of death with particular reference to the South African society and its impact on the bereaved. I will challenge the belief that the bereaved should perform certain rituals because the departed would have liked them to be performed. The objective of this study is to expose the complexities, diversities and the symbolism of death in particular. The essence of this is to demystify the African perception of death and to indicate that the perception of death is not necessarily unique to Africans. Other cultural groups - Christians in this regard - have perceptions of death particularly with regard to the world hereafter. They believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross so that man could enter heaven and enjoy eternal life. To a Christian the world hereafter is a place where man shall experience neither pain nor suffering. When the day of judgement comes, his soul shall either enter heaven or hell. The traditional African on the other hand, believes that the dead join their ancestors in the world hereafter and continue with their lives very much as they did here on earth. "Existence on earth is a carbon copy of the world of the ancestors" (Iloanusi 1994:220). Man's soul assumes the mediatory powers between the living and God. Death is thus seen as a continuation of life in the spirit world with the ancestors. For this reason, every African wishes to be accepted in the family of his ancestral relatives. This belief in a future life with one's ancestors is fundamental and universal aspect of every traditional African and

hence his wish to be buried where his ancestors have been buried (Awulalu 1978:41-42; Rowe 1994:45-52). In this study, the concept “traditional African” refers to an African who has not been westernised while “an African” refers to an individual who has ancestral roots in Africa and who owes cultural allegiance to Africa. The concept “man” should be understood as a neutral reference to human beings in general. The same applies to “he” and other similar references which usually indicate gender.

My hypothesis is that the analysis of the topic will reveal some of the underlying cultural beliefs in death and in the process enhance the beliefs that are positive and discard those that are anachronistic. This hypothesis is derived from the fact that culture is never static. It is forever changing with the evolution of mankind and his needs. In the process of this change, not everything about African culture will be (or must be) transmitted to the future generation. Living in a multi-cultural society like South Africa (SA) there is bound to be cultural exchange.

Since death is one of the most universal and mysterious occurrences facing mankind, it is not surprising that in African religion there are various myths that attempt to explain its origin. Man knows the inevitability of death and he is so afraid of it that he creates myths that deny it (Rowe 1994:193). Cassiers in Rowe (1994:193) says “myths and religion in general have often been declared to be mere products of fear”. Through these myths man learns how to express and organise his deeply rooted instinct, his hopes and fears. It is also through the myths that he begins to understand one of the great mysteries which encompass his frail and transient existence on earth. He begins to understand the cause of his own personal morality (Iloanusi 1984:155).

In the second chapter I will focus on how a traditional African perceives death, with special reference to the Zulu people. The discussion will also deal with the different viewpoints of the meaning, the myths and stories that are told about the origin of death, the cause and the rituals that follow when death has occurred. Special attention will be given to the discussion of the world of the ancestors who, it is believed, are responsible for the welfare of the living. The world beyond is the achievement of paradistic immortality; it is the union with the ancestors and with God. Death has to occur for someone to regain this blissfulness. It is by means of the ancestral cult that communion and communication between the living and the spirits of the dead are established. The ancestors are real and they influence and watch over the daily activities of their descendants. The contact between the living and the departed is established and maintained by pouring of libation and making sacrifices to the ancestors. To this end, the existence of God in the African context and the various perceptions of the body and soul will also be examined, for example: the Zulus' perception of the ancestral spirit which is believed to consist of the body and soul and the Karangas' (Zimbabwe) conception of the black shadow and the white shadow respectively.

In the third chapter I will critically analyse the implications of the African conception of death with reference to the South African Society in general. Personal experiences and practical examples will be used in the analysis. The following questions will guide this study:

- * Why do Africans perceive death the way they do?
- * Is it possible for any human society to be without any perception of death?

The fourth chapter will be my findings and conclusion.

CHAPTER 2

TRADITIONAL AFRICAN PERCEPTIONS OF DEATH

2. ORIGIN OF DEATH

2.1 Introduction

Death is one of the most universal and mysterious experiences facing mankind. It is, therefore, not surprising that there are myths that attempt to explain this phenomenon. These myths attempt to lessen the fear of death by making it to be a less unbearable physical fact and to become understandable.

2.2 Origin of Death

There are several myths about the origin of death and one of the commonest myths in Central, Eastern and Southern Africa is the "chameleon myth". God sent a chameleon to man with a message of "immortality" and "resurrection". The chameleon being a slow animal was overtaken by a lizard that overheard the message. It took advantage of its swiftness over the chameleon and arrived at man with the message of mortality. When the chameleon arrived later to deliver its own message, no one believed him, hence the origin of death. Mbiti (1970:116) refers to the same myth in a different manner alleging that man was intended to live forever and God gave him three gifts, namely: immortality, resurrection and the ability to be young again. But man lost all three gifts and death came to mankind. There are several versions of this myth in Africa. For example, in Sierra Leone the same myth is told that God sent a dog with a message of immortality and a toad with a message of death. The dog delayed while stopping to eat. The toad reached man first and

delivered its message of mortality. The BaPedi (SA) also have a similar myth about the origin of death (Mönnig 1983:46; Mbiti 1992:116).

There are also myths that view death as punishment. The Bambiti (Congo) allege that God created the first man and allowed him to eat fruits from all trees in the forest except from the (tahu) tree. A pregnant woman with a strong desire to eat the forbidden fruit persuaded her husband to get the fruit from the tree, peeled it and hid the peels under the foliage. But, the moon was watching everything and reported to God. He (God) was very angry and sent death to mankind as punishment. The Karanga (Zimbabwe) believe that man did not know death and lived happily with God giving commands. Then man failed to obey God's commandments and He then sent death and witchcraft into the world. Thus pain and death became the results of disobedience and sin against God. The Chagga (Tanzania) have a similar myth though told differently (Mbiti 1970:113; Aschwanden 1987:213).

There are also myths about the creation of man and one of these myths alleges that the first human beings who were husband and wife were created in heaven and were sent to earth. The Zulu (SA) believe that uNkulunkulu (God) "broke off the nations from a bed of reeds (ohlangeni)" (Mbiti 1970:113). The same myth, with variation, is found among the Ndebele, the Swazi and the Tsonga. The South Sothos allege that all true BaSotho originate from a reed bed. The Lobedu (SA) believe that the Khuzwane, the creator of all things, left his footprints on certain rocks when these rocks were still soft. The BaVenda also speak of creation in relation to Raluvhimba (God) who is connected with the beginning of the world. The BaPedi (SA) on the other hand, believe that Modimo (God), also known as Kgobe, created the world and all that lives upon it. His son, Kgobeane, then created man. Mönnig (1983:45) states that the BaPedi conceive creation in two successive and independent stages

although nowadays these stages are considered to have been one process and God was responsible for it.

Abrahamson (1951:73) asserts that there are also myths about man's desire for death and the core of the myth is that man desired death which henceforth remained in the world. He sometimes got so tired or disgusted with life's difficulties that he preferred death to life. This myth is common among the Ngala and Yoruba (Nigeria).

Myths are also told about the origin of funeral rites. When death occurred for the first time, some people wept while others danced and sang hence the burial ceremonies found particularly among African societies (Abrahamson 1951:129).

In addition to the use of myths, some people visualise death in personal terms while others view death as an animal and others regard it as a spirit. In Uganda people believe that the spirit of death never laughs because "its work is to kill, destroy, take away and terrorize people everywhere" (Mbiti 1992:117).

Mashabela (1979:15) states that the myths and stories that are told about the origin of death sometimes have chants and choruses which facilitate participation and also help to instil in the minds of the participants the moral of the myth. Mbiti (1970:170) asserts that many myths are told about the origin of death but there are no myths that tell us that one day death may be overcome. Thus, in the African context death spoiled the original paradise of mankind. It brought the separation of God from man and the arrival of sorrows and agonies upon man (Mbiti 1992:117).

2.3 Meaning of Death

According to Tonybee and Koester (1976:3) 'death is the price paid by life for the enhancement of the complexity of a live organism structure'. It is, therefore, natural for those people who believe that man lives and dies once only to be afraid of death. For them, death is viewed as a departure from a familiar world to an unknown destination which "may be either extinction or a shadowy after life which will be neither blissful nor painful, but will be dreary" (Tonybee and Koester 1976:29). To the believers in re-incarnation death does not have the same finality because there is still a chance of rebirth in the familiar psychosomatic form. Death, therefore, becomes less terrifying.

The Karanga on the one hand, view death as a natural everyday experience sanctioned by God. They believe that death occurs because God wishes it to happen even though they believe that death is caused by witchcraft. From this perspective death is concrete and its existence is expressed in a special way. For example, children are told about death at an early age. Ordinary names of plants and animals refer to death and everybody is aware of their meaning. The names do not express bitter experiences of the past, but also serve as protective shields against death. The Karanga, therefore, maintain that they do not fear death because it is a gateway to the world of the ancestors. They view death not as an end of human life but as a transition to another existence. To the Karanga death becomes the beginning of the highest level of development. The continued existence of the individual and the transition are guarded by special rules. For example, the belongings of a dead man are not distributed immediately and his wife remains officially married to him until after a special ceremony has been performed.

On the other hand, the Karanga view death as a most unhappy event. From this perspective, death is seen as alienating man from himself and from God. It is also seen as something that has brought evil into the world. Thus, when the Karanga view death as evil, they tend to say that there is no natural death at all. This belief is in line with their general belief that death is an invasion of the world. The contradictions found in their perception of death are better explained from their myths, which view death as a punishment from God for failure to obey His commandments. Thus to the Karanga death and witchcraft befell the world as punishment from God. Death becomes real; they fear death and for this reason they will investigate every cause of death and how to stop it from happening, "so that it does not return to us and does not kill others among us" (Aschwanden 1987:214). The two beliefs are important to the Karanga and are represented in their rituals and symbols (Aschwanden 1987:212-214).

The image of death as a doorway is common among African societies. Death is viewed as a "passage" from the world of the living to the world of the ancestors. Death is a doorway to a nobler and higher life as well as a transition for both the deceased and his living relatives. For the living, it marks a passage from one phase of life to another requiring some readjustment. By being related to the deceased, the relatives share his misfortune. Krige (1950:159) states that the Zulu (SA) believe that death within a family makes the relatives to "have heavy knees and their bodies are weak". It causes interruption in man's normal pattern of life. The relatives must, therefore, be fortified with strengthening medicine before they can resume normal life in the society. For the deceased, the correct and proper rituals have to be performed to ensure that he receives an orderly transition from previous life to the new existence and also readjusts to the altered relationships with the relatives. Thus death is associated with ritual impurities (ditšhila - BaPedi) and (isinyama -

Zulu). Certain rituals must be performed to purify them (Mönnig 1983:53; Krige 1950:159; Berglund 1976:79).

Berglund (1976:79) states that in Zulu culture there are two conceptions of death namely, a timely death which is expressed as “ukugoduka”, “ukudlula”, “ukuhamba” and “ukuqhubeka”. All these concepts give a notion of passing on, a continuation. The Zulu also respect death hence the use of such euphemistic words. The other conception is that of an untimely death referred to as “ukufa” which implies a breaking off from life.

All African societies accept death when it comes at the correct time in life. Death is not regarded as evil in itself but is regarded as a natural continuation of man’s existence. “When a man has completed his work in that he is old and of ripe age, then he is happy because things have gone well with him” (Berglund 1976:79). He is not fearful of death because he has descendants to survive him. He may also express a wish to die. Thus, the death of an old person is not mourned because it is viewed as a natural stage of development which must be accepted as such. However, the death of a young person is regarded as a tragedy and a moment of great sorrow and mourning. It is also viewed with great suspicion and anxiety. It is even worse if the deceased does not have an heir to succeed him (Berglund 1976:79-80; Awulalu 1978:35-37).

According to Lloanusi (1984:218) all African societies value life because life is the most precious of all gifts God gave to man. There is joy in the family when a baby is born because a birth in the family is seen as an extension of the ancestral lineage. When death comes, it is received with mixed feelings, hence the deep mourning (which to an outsider appears exaggerated) even though death is perceived as a

gateway into the ancestral community. Lloanusi (1984:226) also divides the phenomenon of death into three phases, namely: **separation** which is seen as the second birth, **transformation** as the journey to the after life and finally **incorporation** into the ancestral community.

Mashabela quotes Matsepe's poetry to indicate that old age, illness and death are man's archenemies. Man loves life though he pretends to accept his fate when he says "he is a sojourner on earth" (Mashabela 1979:96). At the same time in his poetry Matsepe views the three, old age, illness and death, as blessings in disguise because they enable man "to cross" the sticky path of life quicker than he would otherwise do (Mashabela 1979:96).

Matsepe's poetry associates death with the grave. Death kills and the grave swallows. Death is "destructive, insatiable and inexorable" and the grave is described as swallowing faster and faster as death sows destruction over the earth" (Mashabela 1979:48, 98). Matsepe also foresees a day when death will ultimately die and "the grave will starve". He seems to be expressing the day of the resurrection of the dead when death shall be vanquished. His attitude towards death is both traditional and Christian because he expresses the fear of death and also finds consolation in the Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead. However, the inevitability and certainty of death is seen when God did not grant Moses immortality of life. "Lord God you have just begun to show your servant unparalleled greatness and might. Let me cross over so that I may see the good land which is on the other side of Jordan" (Wandel et al 1996:130).

2.4 Causes of Death

In the Western world view, events are explained in terms of cause and effect which explain how things happen and not why they happen to one person and not to the next person (subjected to the same condition). Most African people, on the other hand, have no concept of chance in their world view. All deaths and misfortunes with the exception of old age are believed to be caused by external forces. They believe that sickness, misfortune and death produce a state of imbalance. Divination, religious rituals and protective magic are used to bring about equilibrium. Thus most Africans believe that death is caused by unnatural forces (Hammond-Tooke 1974:335).

2.4.1 Death by Sorcery and Witchcraft

Most African people believe that death is caused by sorcery, witchcraft and evil magic and when someone has died people will try to establish the cause of death. In some instances, the suspect may be beaten to death, fined or thrown out of the village. Relatives of the deceased may also seek revenge by also using sorcery or witchcraft.

In the Mambila culture death is believed to be caused by the ancestors and witchcraft is seen as a contributory factor. To the Baganda, the causes of death are sorcery and witchcraft. This belief is also common among all African cultures particularly among the Nguni (Ndebele, Xhosa, Swazi and Zulu). As a result they are afraid of the dead and the corpse is regarded as contaminating. They, therefore, avoid touching the corpse.

When a man was too old, the Zulu assisted him to die by a custom known as “ukugodusa”. He would be sent home. An elderly woman would also be assisted to die if she was too old and unable to look after herself, was very ill and unconscious. In the BaVenda culture, the duty of assisting the elderly person to die was carried out by an aged friend and never by a relative. The practice was carried out purely for humanitarian reasons to lessen the pain of death and to set free the spirit of the dying person. This practice has become obsolete (Stayt 1968:161; Berglund 1976:79-80).

The Azande (Sudan) also believe that death is caused by witchcraft and sorcery. It is only in a few rare cases where the Azande admit that some deaths are caused by God or ancestors. Even in such cases, they behave as though the death was caused by witchcraft because if they do not do so, it would be construed that they did not take an interest in the deceased. When someone is critically ill, a diviner is consulted to establish whether he will die or not and also to establish the cause of his illness and death. Means of averting the death include informing the community of the suspected witch. The critically ill person is also asked to make a public confession of adultery if any. Sacrifices are also done to appease the ancestral spirits (Berglund 1976:80; Mbiti 1992:117; Eliot 1990:127; Gero 1968:15-18).

2.4.2 Natural Causes of Death

Some African people believe that God may call old age people though only a few societies entertain this belief. However, Aschwanden (1987:15-16) states that it is a mistake to conclude that Africans in general do not explain death naturally. The Karanga, in particular, believe in natural causes of death due to environmental factors. Harmless everyday diseases such as headache, diarrhoea and minor

accidents sustained by children are thought to be caused by God. But if the injury is caused by witchcraft, then the evil associated with the disease can be transferred to others by the shadow of the injured person.

This perception is congruent with their belief that all that exists comes from God. Their myths about disease and death also explain that God sends disease and death to the world because man disobeyed Him. But to the old Karanga, God is a benevolent God who never sends as punishment a debilitating illness that would cause great suffering. Thus, as soon as an illness becomes serious, they are quick to associate it with the ancestors or with witchcraft.

To the old Karanga, death is viewed as a natural phenomenon which helps in controlling population explosion. The cause of death is explained in terms of one's experiences in his environment that relate to sowing of millet: "One would like to let all the shoots grow, but to keep down numbers some have to be removed" (Aschwanden 1987:16). This also helps in explaining their attitude towards the death of a child who dies before his first birthday. Such a death is regarded as a natural death. However, if many children die then the cause of death becomes witchcraft or sorcery. Though the death of an old person is taken as natural, the Karanga watch out for witchcraft justifying their actions that God is not likely to kill an old person (Aschwanden 1987:15-17).

According to Mbiti (1992:118) there are physical causes of death which include old age, diseases, accidents, earthquakes, floods, lightning and many others. But most African people believe that a person will only die from one of these causes because some or other agent has brought about the death by means of a curse, witchcraft or magic. People often want to know both the physical and mystical causes of death

by consulting diviners and medicine men. To the Karanga, God does not kill but He decides whether someone should live or should die. They also believe that witchcraft will kill someone only if God wills it to happen (Aschwanden 1987:13-17).

2.4.3 Disease caused by Sin and Disobedience

To the Karanga, disease and death are also caused by sin and disobedience. Sin is an act directed against the laws of God and of the ancestors as well as one's own conscience. Disobedience, in contrast, is seen as a minor sin. The difference is made in terms of whether something is done intentionally or unintentionally. For example, if someone forgets to perform a ceremony either through indifference or genuine forgetfulness then that action is disobedience and the punishment is light. But if the ceremony has been intentionally forgotten then the consequences thereof can be very serious. The comparison of pain to fire attempts to explain the complexity of disobedience and sin as follows: "If we light a fire it will cook our food and keep us alive. But, if we are not careful, then fire can destroy us. God gave us life but we acted carelessly and our sins brought destruction through disease, pain and death" (Aschwanden 1987:17-18).

2.4.4 Disease from the Ancestral Spirits

The ancestors are loved, respected and honoured but they are also feared. They are loved and valued mainly because they form an invisible permanent defence against evil spirits and witches. Thus, most African people believe that illness and misfortune caused by the ancestors are bad but not necessarily evil. Illness caused by ancestors is curable while illness caused by sorcery and witchcraft tends to kill.

The anger of the ancestors towards their descendants is like that of a father admonishing his offspring for neglected duties. The Zulu are almost emphatic about this. They believe that if the ancestors are hungry they cause suffering in the lineage to draw the attention of its members who are expected to conduct the specified ritual. Hence the saying in Zulu that “idlozi alibulali liyathusa nje” (ancestors do not kill, they merely threaten) (Berglund 1976:97).

The Karanga also believe that any illness that is caused by the ancestors will be harmless without any complications particularly if the person concerned complies with the expected norms. If he fails to comply with the norms, disease will set in because “the wall around the village collapses. The door is open and witches and vengeful spirits enter” (Aschwanden 1987:38). The ancestors might cause the person to be ill but would never cause him to die. An ancestor may, however, cause death in his own family without allowing witches to enter. Witches and sorcery are seen as entirely evil and they are the products of hate, envy, revenge and malice (Aschwanden 1987:37-43; Hammond-Tooke 1974:335-336).

2.5 When Death Occurs

In every African society death is viewed as a moment of great sorrow and mourning. People are very particular and sensitive as to what is done in the family because death marks the physical separation of the individual from other human beings. Complex and long rituals and ceremonies are performed to draw attention to the permanent separation of the individual from other human beings. Death also brings about a critical change in the life of both the deceased and his living relatives. To the living relatives, it leads to conflicting emotions which sometimes threaten the cohesion and solidarity of a family. Thus the rituals and ceremonies assist the

survivors to slowly reorganise and adapt to the new condition brought about by the death. To the deceased, the funeral rites are preparations for the journey to the land of the ancestors which is believed to be long and sometimes dangerous. Meticulous care is taken to carry out all the funeral rites to avoid offending the ancestors (Mbiti 1992:119; Mönnig 1983:138).

In principle, the burial rites are the same for everyone but the funeral customs vary greatly depending on the status of the deceased. When a child dies, the funeral rites are simple and affect only family members. The death of the head of a family, on the other hand, affects all members of the lineage and society as a whole. It is also accompanied by more complex funeral rites and a much longer period of mourning. The higher the social status of the deceased, the greater the blow and the longer it takes to reinstitute equilibrium in the family (Krige 1950:160; Mönnig 1983:138).

When a person is critically ill and there is still hope, the Karanga will attempt everything possible to save his life. For example, he is taken to a traditional doctor or the traditional doctor may be asked to visit the sick person at his home. The sick person is also placed next to a fire because fire symbolises life. They also pray to the ancestors beseeching them to help fight against the witches. The Karanga also remove the dying person from the village to a secret place known only to the closest relatives and to those that are trusted by the family members. He is put into an open enclosure known as musasa. This action is undertaken as an attempt to give the dying person a last chance to overcome evil. It is also done to protect him from the influence of the witches and also to "shield him from the influence of the people's shadows; they can aggravate the disease" (Aschwanden 1987:221). The Karanga believe that the very ill person must be protected from danger arising from sexual relations should the sick person be visited by people who have had any sexual

relations. The sick person is also protected from any kind of evil that is found in man.

When death approaches among the Karanga, the oldest and most experienced people stay close to the dying person to listen to his last wishes. Signs of death include a dry mouth and the heart beat is checked by feeling for it. Eyes and mouth are checked constantly because nobody should die with his eyes and mouth open. Prayers are also said to the ancestors beseeching them to receive their child and not to leave him in the dark and dry places without water. Ancestors are also requested to take him "to the great court where God (nyakumusorosoro) is" (Aschwanden 1987:222).

The Ashanti (Ghana, Ivory Coast) give the dying person a sip of water to enable "him to climb the hill of death" (Parrinder 1969:10). And when he is dead, rum is poured down his throat or on the floor for his ancestral spirits.

When death is imminent, particularly among the BaVenda, where possible, every relative makes a point of attending the death bed. Anyone who is unable to visit the dying person without a sound reason may be suspected of complicity in the death. In rare cases, the fear of death becomes so great that when death is imminent, the dying person is taken away to the bush so that his hut may not be contaminated.

Immediately after death, the BaVenda cut a piece from the tsindi in the case of a man or ludede in the case of a woman and roll it up with a piece of grass from the roof of the house. This is hidden outside the house ready to be taken to the diviner to ascertain the cause of death (Stayt 1968:161).

2.6 Handling of the Corpse

In most African societies, close members of the family handle and prepare the corpse for burial. There are rituals that are performed in preparing the corpse for burial. In some places it is washed with either water or with water and herbs particularly among Zulu people of South Africa. It is also shaved and in the case of a woman, her hair is plaited beautifully. Of significance, the Azande wash the corpse while it is supported in somebody's arms and with the Karanga, a woman's corpse is washed by her female relatives and never by her husband or his relatives because after death her body belongs to her consanguines who renew their ties by washing it. Great care is taken when washing the corpse to ensure that it is admitted into the ancestral community. People believe that if it is not properly washed, it will wonder around as a ghost (Awulalu 1978:39). Aschwanden (1987:229) states that the ritual of washing the corpse is symbolic where anything unpleasant in the world is washed off. In a murder case or when the person has been killed by lightning, the corpse is not washed because he is to return for revenge. Thus, he must maintain his ties with the world.

All Karanga women wear a belt around their waists known as mutimwi which protects them from evil spirits. Upon death, the mutimwi must be untied because the woman came to the world naked. Her husband is not allowed to remove it lest he be suspected of killing her. Should the corpse be buried in the absence of her relatives, it might be exhumed to check if her mutimwi has been removed. These measures are taken because it is believed that it might be used for witchcraft. The mutimwi symbolises a bond between blood ties and the woman's tasks. Upon her death, her duties end and she returns to her consanguines. The mutimwi is either buried with the corpse or burnt (Aschwanden 1987:228-233).

Mbiti (1970:256) states that in some parts of Africa, the body is anointed with oil which is also put in the mouth, nostrils, ears and other body orifices. The Karanga in particular, do not anoint the corpse with oil. It is only done in exceptional cases such as murder cases or people killed by lightning to make them strong for revenge (Aschwanden 1987:218-222).

The Azande dress a woman's corpse in her best clothes with all her bracelets, anklets and all her beads around the neck and all her fine girdles. This is also typical of the Ashanti who also tie the corpse's wrist with money for the journey to the next world. The body is then laid in state and public mourning begins. Clan members put money in the coffin and prayers are said to the dead for health, long life and children. The Azande then cover the corpse completely with a new native cloth. Many Karanga cover the corpse with a black and white cloth that represents both shadows (Gero 1968:22-23; Parrinder 1969:107).

In the olden days before the corpse became stiff, it was prepared to adopt the embryonic position and the whole body was bound firmly with a blanket or a hide of an ox slaughtered for the funeral. This practice was noted among the BaVenda, BaPedi and the Zulu (Krige 1950:161; Stayt 1968:161; Mönnig 1983:51; Ngubane 1977:84).

2.7 Burial

In many parts of Africa, burials are long and complex because various rites are performed during the burial. Mbiti (1992:121) states that the size and importance of a funeral varies according to the person concerned. The higher his social status, the more is the preparation which involves a great deal of pomp and more money

is spent on the funeral. For example, a dead head of state (or president) is given a pompous and costly funeral which is attended by other heads of state and diplomatic representatives. Mbiti (1992:121) further states that these rites are intended to send off the departed peacefully, to sever his links with the living and also to ensure that normal life continues among the survivors. People also believe that these burial ceremonies are important because they are the last transitional rituals which serve to introduce the dead into the world of the ancestors. They also serve to "draw attention to the uniqueness of the individual. They tell him and the world around that he matters, that he is valuable, and that he is a member of the wider community. They also separate him from one status and introduce him to another" (Lloanusi 1984:63).

Generally, burials took place the same or the following day because of the heat which made the body to decompose fast. However, nowadays, the corpse is kept in the mortuary for several days while preparations for the burials are made and relatives from far places are awaited. On the day of the funeral relatives and friends from far and near come together to pay their last respects.

In most African societies the corpse of the head of the family or an important person was wrapped in the hide of the ox which was slaughtered for the funeral. According to Mbiti (1970:256) this was done to protect the soul from the hot sun on the way to the ancestral world which it was believed to be long and dangerous. In the Zulu culture a corpse of a woman is never wrapped in an ox hide (Krige 1950:161).

In most African societies burials were carried out in the homestead or the original place of birth because people believe that the burial of a corpse at the common cemetery was casting him out and losing contact with him. Such a burial will also

prevent regular ancestral veneration. In towns burials are now done in public cemeteries. A recess was dug in the side of the grave and a number of mats or cloths lined the grave. The corpse was then buried in a sitting position. Krige (1950:161) states that in many cases the grave was made sound proof with medicinal herbs against witches especially if foul play was suspected. These practices were reported among the Zulu, BaPedi, BaVenda, South Sothos and the Ashanti people of West Africa. The Zulu conducted their burials after sunset or at night as a precautionary measure against witches while the BaPedi conducted burials at night because the body could no longer cast a shadow (Krige 1950:161; Mönnig 1983:138; Ngubane 1977:84). However, some of these practices have been modified.

In all African societies, a specially constructed exit at the back of the hut opposite the doorway was used to take out the corpse from the hut. The opening was closed later after the burial. Among the Zulu in particular, the practice was carried out as a precautionary measure against witches while the BaPedi carried it out to safeguard the cattle against contamination and also to make it possible for women who were otherwise barred from the kraal to attend the burial at the kraal. The Ashanti believed that it was unlucky to take death through the door. Before the corpse is taken for burial, it is laid in state to allow people to pay their last respect. Public mourning also begins (Hammond-Tooke 1974:105; Berglund 1976:364; Krige 1950:162; Mönnig 1983:139).

In many parts of Africa, when the corpse is buried, belongings such as spear, bows, arrows, money, utensils, clothing, silver and many other objects are also buried. It is believed that the departed will need these various items on their journey to the ancestral land. They will use these items to start a new life in the next world. The

dead are also expected to carry on and enjoy life in the world hereafter with the same social and economic advantage.

At the burial, various rites are performed such as throwing of earth before the coffin is lowered and slaughtering of an animal and its blood poured over the grave.

People, especially women, weep, lamenting the death and usually recalling the good things that the deceased said or did and also reminding themselves that he continues to live in the next world (Mbiti 1992:120-121; Awulalu 1978:40-41).

2.8 Purification Ritual

Death in the family is associated with impurity or defilement. It is also associated with a condition of darkness (*isinyama* - Zulu, *Sefifi* - Pedi) which is thought to contaminate anyone who comes into contact with the corpse or attends the funeral. It therefore, becomes important that all those who attended the funeral symbolically cleanse themselves from *isinyama* by washing their hands at the homestead of the deceased.

There is usually feasting which is done partly to comfort the bereaved family and to bring life back to normal and also to thank all those who have attended the funeral. Mbiti (1992:121) states that in some parts of Africa, there is usually feasting which is broken by fasting after the funeral. Of significance among the BaPedi the meat of the animal slaughtered for the burial must be cooked plain with no salt or other additives (Mönnig 1983:141).

All relatives and children of the deceased must go through a special ritual which is carried out a day after the burial. Krige (1950:163-164) states that the Zulu believe that every member of the family is weak and in danger of being called by the deceased. Therefore, all family members must be fortified by taking fortification medicine that has been specially prepared by the family medicine man. The fortification medication is considered important for the health of all family members. Stayt (1968:164-165) states that the BaVenda carry out the fortification ritual to prevent the spirit of the dead from causing trouble among his children. The medicinal preparation is also added into all food as well as into the drinking water. If a relative happens to be away at the time of the death and was unable to take part in the purification ritual, upon his return, the Zulu will not give him food until he has undergone a ritual where he is given water mixed with ash (*amanzi nomlotha*).

In principle the burial rites that are performed are the same for everyone with some minor variations depending on the social status, age and sex of the deceased. For example, the death of a child not yet initiated into the larger lineage does not affect many relatives beyond the family group. The death of the head of the family on the other hand, affects many relatives beyond the family group. It is believed that death has altered the relationship of all members and it has to be reconstituted (Mönnig 1983:138).

2.9 The Mourning Period

According to Krige (1950:166) the mourning period (*ukuzila* - Zulu) begins at death and all relatives affected by the death are considered to be in a condition of darkness (*mnyama* - Zulu, *Sefifi* - BaPedi). They are, therefore, expected to abstain from sexual activities and other social pleasures. Work is also stopped for a few days as

a sign of respect for the deceased. Thus no festivities should be planned during this period, the length of which depends on the closeness of the relationship. The mourning period for the widow is longer and stricter than for any other relatives because it is believed that she has given her best in terms of love and understanding. In general African people recognise their dependence on the procreative abilities of women to reconstitute and extend the family that has been affected and depleted by the death of one of its members. She however, continues to be in mourning and must observe all behaviours associated with *ukuzila* until she is ritually released. This usually happens after three months if the deceased was a baby or child, six months if an unmarried adult and one year if her husband. The other members of the family are released much earlier from mourning depending on the status of the deceased. If he was a married man and a head of a family, the relatives are released after three months or earlier by a hunting ritual known as *ihlambo* (the washing of spears) which is done by the male relatives of the deceased. For the Karanga, the mourning period can last from six months to two years. But if a man has a second wife his head is shaved after two months to allow him to resume his sexual life (Mönnig 1983:141; Krige 1950:166; Ngubane 1977:82).

In most African societies, it is usually customary for members of the immediate family to have their hair shaved off to symbolise that one member of the family has been separated from them. Mbiti (1992:121-122) states that the shaving of hair symbolises separation, indicating that one of the family members has been separated from them. At the same time it also indicates the people's belief that death does not destroy life and this is shown by the growth of new hair which symbolises the continuation of life as the new hair grows again. Shaving of hair is, therefore, interpreted as preparation for happiness and prosperity brought by sowing and

general contentment (Aschwanden 1987:236). Various other signs and symbols are used to indicate that death has occurred in the family.

During the period of mourning, the widow is usually dressed in dark clothes and should she dress in bright clothes, it is taken as a sign that she had some interest in her husband's death. She is expected to sleep in her own homestead and she may not remain overnight away from home. She may not enter any courtyard unless given permission by the owner of the house she is visiting. She is also expected to abstain from sexual relations for the stipulated period lest the man she comes into contact with suffers from makgoma in (Pedi). However, a young widow is given a special medication which is believed will protect her from the disease. She also gives the medication to her man to chew when he visits her at night. The concession is made to a young widow because it is considered unnatural for a young woman to abstain from sexual relations for a long period (Krige 1950:166; Mönning 1983:141-142; Mbiti 1992:121; Gero 1968:50; Aschwanden 1987:233).

During the period of mourning, a diviner is also consulted to establish the cause of death. The BaVenda place all the shaved hair into the nest of the thaba bird which is buried into a hole in an anthill. The burial of the nest in an anthill symbolises the end of crying and mourning for relatives because they are satisfied with the findings of the diviner regarding the cause of death (Stayt 1968:165).

Various other signs and symbols are used to show that death has occurred in a family and some of these include people smearing themselves with white clay, wearing a small, dark piece of cloth or a cord and many others. These rituals are important because they enable people to come to terms with the pain, sorrow and family disruption caused by death. "By ritualising death people dance it away, drive

it away and renew their own life after it has taken away one of their members” (Mbiti 1992:122). All these symbolisms serve to point out the extraordinariness of death as well as indicate how much the deceased was loved (Aschwanden 1987:237).

2.10 Ihlambo and the end of Mourning

According to Krige (1950:167) the cleansing ceremony (ihlambo - Zulu; goboola - Pedi) is performed a month after the burial. The Nguni (Swazi, Zulu, Ndebele, Xhosa) believe that the spears have gone rusty from disuse during the period of mourning. They must, therefore, be symbolically washed for reuse.

During the cleansing ritual beer is brewed and a beast is slaughtered which is eaten together with some specially prepared medicine “to cleanse the people from the defilement of death and to show the end of the mourning period” (Krige 1950:167). All the belongings of the deceased are also cleansed with medicinal preparation because they are considered defiled (Sefifi - Pedi; isinyama - Nguni).

The Karanga also fear the belongings of the deceased almost as much as his body. His property as well as his wife are considered as potential transmitters of defilement. It is believed that “that which killed the dead man is with him” (Aschwanden 1987:238). It also adheres to his belongings as if they had been “infected”. They believe that the fatal agent adhere to his belongings because they have been in contact with the deceased.

All the possessions of the deceased including his house are, therefore, cleansed by sprinkling them with water mixed with medicinal preparation. All members of the family are also expected to wash with the medicinal mixer which it is believed offer them resistance. Afterwards the dead man's belongings may be used again (Aschwanden 1987:238-239).

All relatives and neighbours are invited to attend the ritual which "finally reconstitutes the relationship of the groups" (Mönnig 1983:142). A joyous feast with meat and beer follows to signify the restoration of the equilibrium. All restrictions of the mourning period are lifted and normal activity resumed (Mönnig 1983:142; Krige 1950:167).;

2.11 Final Aggregation of Widow and Widower

At the end of a year the widow is purified by the family diviner and the treatment given for the purification differs from one diviner to the next. It should be noted that a widow may not remarry before a year has passed and should she engage in illicit sexual intercourse during this period, it is believed that her behaviour may bring defilement or disaster upon the whole family.

Relatives and neighbours are also invited to attend the ritual and are expected to give the widow small gifts. Beer is also brewed and a beast slaughtered. After all the rituals have been performed a joyous feast follows to signify the restoration of the equilibrium.

After the purification ritual, the widow may remarry if she so wishes. She may also be courted by one of the brothers of the deceased man who are eligible to marry their deceased brother's wife if she so wishes. This custom is known in Zulu as ukungena. Its main objective is to maintain the stability of the family. This custom is common among the BaVenda, BaPedi, Zulu and Karanga. Among the BaPedi, children born from this relationship remain the children of the deceased (Mönnig 1983:142; Krige 1950:168-169; Aschwanden 1987:320-322).

2.12 The Spirit of the Deceased is Brought Home - Ukubuyisa idlozi

In the Zulu society every person who has died has a sacrifice performed after the period of mourning. This ceremony known as ukubuyisa indlozi (to bring home the spirit of the deceased) is usually performed for those family members who become effective ancestors that is who have jural rights to punish or reward and had such jural rights while still alive. It is particularly performed for the head of the family because it is believed that he will continue to take care of his family even in death as he did while still alive. For other members of the family, it is performed to integrate them with their family ancestors. This means that they are brought home in the company of their ancestors. The Zulu also believe that the deceased becomes an ancestral spirit after death, but only after the ceremony of ukubuyisa idlozi has been performed (Ngubane 1977:55; Krige 1950:169). Hammond-Tooke (1974:328) states that it appears to be a typically Nguni ceremony though the Lobedu (SA) have a ritual for bringing home a spirit but it is not associated with the funeral rites. Aschwanden (1987:288-299) notes that the Karanga perform the same ceremony six months to three years after the funeral. In the past one had to wait for two to three years but nowadays the intervals are much shorter. Of significance is that it is performed for both the deceased husband and wife. The deceased wife becomes an

ancestral spirit in a non-consanguine clan which is of particular importance among the Karanga people.

If the deceased was a man, a goat and an ox are sacrificed and if the deceased was a woman, a goat and a cow are sacrificed. A goat is only usually sacrificed if the deceased was unmarried and a minor. What is slaughtered usually depends on the diviner's instructions. Beer always accompany any sacrifice to the ancestors. Among the Xhosa, the deceased is also incorporated as the ancestor of his homestead in a similar manner as in the Zulu culture. A white goat (umkhapho) is sacrificed to accompany the deceased to his ancestors. An ox known as (umbuyiso) is also sacrificed to bring back (ukubuyisa) the spirit of the deceased as an ancestor to watch over his homestead (Ngubane 1977:28). Relatives, friends and neighbours join this joyous occasion which is characterised by dancing and singing particularly favourite songs of the deceased.

Close members of the deceased carry out the specific ritual in the main bedroom of the deceased under the direction of the family diviner. Choice portions of meat are place at umsamo - a sacred place in the bedroom associated with the ancestors while part of the meat is also burnt with some medicinal preparations as burnt offering. During the ritual, the name of the deceased is included in the praise of the ancestors for the first time after his death and he is specifically requested to return to his home and to take care of his descendants. To ensure his return, the officiator, who is usually his eldest son or his brother takes a green branch of umlahlankosi (a tree whose branches are used to place on a chief's grave) and drags it from the grave into the house, all the time addressing his ancestors. (Nowadays this ritual has been modified.)

Since it is a special ceremony for the deceased who is brought home from the grave, special means are also taken to keep him within his homestead; hence the scattering of gall of the slaughtered animal. Gall is used because in the Zulu culture, it is believed that the ancestors like licking it. Girls are never sprinkled with the gall lest they take away the spirit with them when they marry. The gall bag of the sacrificial beast is split to form isiphandla and is worn on the wrist by the first born son (Krige 1950:169-170; Hammond-Tooke 1974:327-328; Aschwanden 1987:288-295; Ngubane 1977:49).

All what has been discussed thus far is rooted in religion. I will therefore, discuss the conception of religion and the belief in God.

2.13 Conception of Religion

It is very difficult to describe man's religious life and according to Hammond-Tooke (1974:318), the "Southern Bantu" of Africa like people everywhere attempt to provide answers to "big questions" : how and by whom was the world created? What happens after death? What is man's purpose in life? What causes misfortune? and how does man attempt to cope with misfortune? It is by means of religion that man attempts to find answers to these questions. What then is religion? According to Junod (1938:138) religion essentially emanates from man's feeling of dependence on some higher powers of a spiritual nature and a longing for communion with these spiritual forces in a personal way by means of prayers and appropriation. These spiritual forces are also perceived as having a personal nature. Religion enables man to relate to God or to higher spirits. African religion is, therefore, an attempt to get in touch with the spiritual world, particularly the spirits of the ancestors. It is by means of religion that Africans begin to express their

intuitions about the Supreme Being and His relation with mankind. "As soon as the individual believes in spiritual forces with which he can come into personal contact, through rituals, sacrifices or prayers, we have a manifestation of religion (Junod 1938:125). Junod (1938:138) further states that through religion the Bantu are able to express some of their intuition about the Supreme Being and His relation to mankind. These intuitions may seem childish but they satisfy the desire of the human soul to participate in a higher mode of life. They also provide "the ground in which the seeds of more beautiful religious manifestations will blossom" (Junod 1938:138).

Mbiti (1992:13) states that religion is part of the African heritage which cannot be understood without its religious part. It is also the result of the thinking and experiences of our forefathers who developed religious beliefs, observed religious ceremonies and rituals.

Since African religion is part of the African heritage; a person must be born in a particular society to follow a particular African religion. When African people migrate in large numbers from one part of the world to another, they take religion with them. When they are converted to another religion, like Christianity, they do not abandon completely their traditional religion. They often integrate their traditional religion with the newly acquired one. In this manner they believe that they are not losing something valuable but are benefitting from both religious beliefs (Mbiti 1992:14-15; Mönnig 1983:43-48).

The medicine man plays an important role in African religion. He controls every human activity from birth to death. He performs all rituals involving sacrifices. As we have noted, it is his duty to cleanse the defiled and make the sacrifices more

acceptable to the ancestors. All family members have to use his medicines and charms to guard against witches. He communicates with the ancestors to ensure happiness, fertility and rain. Without the medicine man, African religion is incomplete (Mashabela 1979:218-221).

2.13.1 Belief in God

According to Mbiti (1992:45-46), all African societies believe in the existence of God and this belief forms the centre of African religion dominating all other beliefs. God is placed in the highest possible position. He is so awesome that man dares not approach Him and is hardly ever referred to in daily conversation, nor does He ever feature in rituals of any type. He is not approached directly, but He remains at the back of people's mind. Maibelo (1989:25) further states that "all the societies in black Africa have the notion of a supreme being who is responsible for the existence, workings and continuation of all creation, no matter the different names used to address him".

The African people do not know where God originate from but Mbiti (1992:45) proposes three possible explanations. Firstly, that people came to believe in God through reflecting about the universe. African people believe that the universe has been created and this simply means that there was a Creator of the universe who is acknowledged to be God. Secondly, man acknowledged his lack of power and knowledge particularly when confronted with death and misfortunes and other forces of nature which were beyond his control. He found himself completely dependent on an absolute being greater than himself (Lloanusi 1984:51). And thirdly, people came to believe in God because they observed forces of nature such as the weather, thunderstorm and lightning and the phenomenon of sunlight and

darkness. People depend on them for light, warm, rain and many others. They could not reach the sky yet they depend on it so much. They then began to associate it with the one whom they eventually called God. They also began to believe that he lived in heaven hence the association of God with the sky and heavens.

Various names are used to refer to God and these names indicate clearly that African people believe in God or that they have definite ideas about God: uNkulunkulu (Zulu) also known as uMvelinqangi (the one who sprang first) is regarded as the Creator of all things. UNkulunkulu is also regarded as a supernatural being who “sprang from a bed of reeds” and who created all wild animals, cattle and games, snakes and birds, water and mountains, the sun and the moon (Magubane 1998:62; Mbiti 1975:21; Krige 1950:281).

Berglund (1976:35) states that the Zulu believe that the Lord of Sky is not an ancestor. Ancestors live underneath but uMvelinqangi lives in the sky. He is also not a man. Ancestors live among their people and they intercede on behalf of their children to God.

To the BaVenda, God is known as Raluvhimba. Stayt (1968:230) states that the BaVenda have a real idea of this great power because they associate God with the beginning of the world and “all the astronomical and physical phenomena”. He lives in heaven and is perceived as travelling through the sky, using the stars and rain as His instruments. But, beyond this, their conception of God is rather elusive particularly to the ordinary man who believes in the ancestors (Stayt 1968:230).

The BaPedi refer to God as Modimo and as Kgobe though the latter name is no longer used due to the influence of Christianity. They believe that Modimo created the world and all animals and plants found in it. He is also closely associated with the elements of nature such as winds, rain, hail and lightning. Mönnig (1983:47) states that of significance among the BaPedi is that the noun Modimo does not fall in the personal class but it falls in the third class of nouns which usually refers to natural objects. Mönnig (1983:47) further states that the BaPedi do not have shrines nor any material evidence of worship directed to God. The nearest contact they have with Him is in the divination bones, one of which represents Modimo. However, there is no evidence to suggest that this bone presents God directly. It is completely magical and does not represent the Supreme Being. They do not render any service to Him. "They do not pray to Modimo. They have no direct contact with him in any way". Mönnig (1983:47) further states that God also has no contact with the BaPedi man. God has no bearing on his daily life though He is regarded as the giver of life and death. However, He is not considered to be the cause of death. Though He is the giver of rain, He is not prayed to nor thanked for rain. Mönnig (1983:48) further states that the BaPedi have a vague conception of God though they regard Him as the "Creator, the beginning of all and, therefore, the Supreme Being" He is considered to be a "figure head topping the list in the structure of the supernatural world but of very little importance to man in his daily relations to this world" (Mönnig 1983:48).

The Xhosa people of South Africa also believe in the Supreme Being referred to as uThixo who created heaven and earth and all that live in it. They do not know where He lives but it is thought that He lives in the clouds or even inside the earth. However, Elliott (1970:126) states that in a more general sense, where it concerns the people's everyday life with regards to health or the prosperity of their crops and

cattle, the Xhosa seek more to the blessings of their ancestors than to God's blessings (Hammond-Tooke 1974:318-320).

God is also regarded as unique and as the king giving Him absolute supremacy and majesty indicating His uniqueness. The Barotse (Zambia) call Him the Great-First One". All these names place God in a position of greatness and pre-eminence, far above all other spiritual beings.

God is also perceived as the one who keeps and upholds all the things He has created, meaning that He takes care of all the things He has created. Thus, He is often called the Protector, Guardian, Pastor, Caretaker and Saviour. African people also believe that the world will never end because He keeps and sustains them. Though individuals are born and die, human life has no ending because "God is its Protector and Preserver" (Mbiti 1992:51-52).

He is also perceived as the ruler of the universe, the Ruler, Master, Lord and Judge. He is acknowledged in prayers as the Ruler, Master and the Governor of the Universe. He is called the Ruler of the universe meaning that there is no place in the universe that is hidden from Him and which is not under His control. As a Judge He rules in perfect justice. Sometimes He punishes the wicked but He forgives those who ask for forgiveness.

In African Religion God is also perceived as if He has human characteristics which enable us to understand Him. However, these mental images of God do not in any way mean that the African people perceive God as a human being. But these mental images enable people to have a working understanding of God and also assist them

to communicate their ideas about Him. They also assist people to feel closer and to approach Him even though He created them (Mbiti 1992:53).

In most African societies God is perceived as a Father and people as His children. This perception shows a closer relationship between people and God. It also implies that He did not only create man but He also takes care of the creatures that He made as a father would take care of his children.

The perception of God as the Parent is evident in prayers which people offer Him. The communication between people and God through prayers becomes similar to that of children speaking to their parents about their needs. For example "Our Father who art in heaven".

Some African societies also perceive God as someone who has ears, eyes and wings. The sky, sun and moon are perceived to be His eyes implying that God sees everything and everywhere. Nothing can be hidden from Him (Mbiti 1992:53-54).

But who is God in the African context? According to Mbiti (1992:54) people acknowledge that nobody has seen Him and knows Him. Therefore, nobody can describe Him. However, African people have certain ideas about the nature of God.

He is described as a good God because of what He has given mankind and his approachability. For example, He gives mankind rain. In Ghana people say "God is good, because he has never withdrawn from us the good things which he gave us" (Mbiti 1992:55). His goodness never ends.

God is also thought to be merciful and kind. As people pray, they often say "May the God of mercy remain with you". Referring to His special blessing, particularly after escape from danger, people often say "God is good and had mercy on me, I would have died".

He is also perceived as holy and pure. He is faultless and never fails. In Kenya God is referred to as the "possessor of whiteness" (Mbiti 1992:56).

African people also perceive God as all powerful and Almighty. He is the Almighty because He does what cannot be done by any man. He created heaven and earth and therefore He is more powerful and more mighty than all the people and creatures He has created.

He is the Wise One because he possesses wisdom, knowledge and understanding which are without limit. He understands and knows everything; He hears and sees everything and people refer to Him as the "Big Eye" and someone with long ears. His wisdom and knowledge penetrate everything and nothing can be hidden from him.

God is perceived as self-existent. He created all things but He is not created; He is self-existent. According to Mbiti (1970:79) the Zulu refer to God as "He who is himself" or "He who came into being of himself".

People also believe that God has no father or mother. He is neither a child nor an old man. So the question of how God originated is irrelevant because it has no answer. He is not created; He is not begotten. He exists of His own.

He is the same everyday, He never changes. In Nigeria people say “nobody has ever heard about the death of God because he never dies (Mbiti 1992:59).

The above description indicate that God cannot be explained. He cannot be fully known and very little is known about Him. His real nature remains a great mystery and great wonder. According to Mbiti (1992:59) “God is only God : no more and no less” (Mbiti 1970:3-42; Mbiti 1992:45-59).

2.13.2 The Nature of the Ancestral Spirits

The belief in the existence of the ancestors is found all over Africa and its importance cannot be underestimated. Ancestors form an integral part of African religion. People are also deeply aware of their ancestors and this awareness affects their outlook and experiences in life. This belief in the ancestral spirits follows from the strong belief that human life continues beyond death and the influence the departed have on their living relatives. Mönnig (1983:54) says, “contrary to the belief in God - Modimo - which leads to no active religion, the belief in continued life after death forms the basis of the real and vital religion of the Pedi”.

Various names are used to refer to the ancestors. For example the Tsonga-Psikwembu; the BaPedi and South Sotho - Modimo; the BaVenda - badzimo, the Xhosa - izinyanya and the Zulu - amadlozi or amathongo (Berglund 1976:89-90; Mönnig 1983:55; Stayt 1968:240).

Ancestors are the spirits of the dead members of the lineage who are recalled two to three generations back. Heads of families may be remembered for five generations back. Mbiti (1992:77) refers to the people who died recently as the

spirits of the living dead. Generally people are emotionally attached to the spirits of those who have recently died because they are in their memories. In the African context the living dead are considered to be members of their families and that they look as they did when they were still alive. They are also considered to be living where they lived when they were still alive.

Each lineage has two sets of ancestors, from the patrilineal and matrilineal lineage. Ancestors from both patrilineal and matrilineal lineage are equally important though among the Nguni and Sotho it is believed that ancestors from the patrilineage are more important and more effective. The BaVenda and Tsonga believe that ancestors from both paternal and maternal lineage are important and both have influence over their descendants. But, among the BaVenda, only the paternal ancestors are normally addressed. Among the Xhosa, a married woman is influenced by ancestors from her own lineage and those of her husband's lineage (Mbiti 1992:77; Hammond-Tooke 1974:326-327).

According to Berglund (1976:119) all Zulu human beings are potential ancestors. But the importance attached to each ancestor differs depending on the social status, age and number of children a man may have prior his death. Children also become ancestors though they still remain children with no power in the homestead. This belief is also common among the BaPedi (Mönnig 1983:55). The Karanga also believe that children never become ancestors because they die without any feeling of revenge because they do not know evil. The Karanga believe that upon death children go to their creator. An adult on the other hand does not leave the world immediately after death because he leaves behind his family with which he has a family bond which he must protect. He might also have to revenge himself on those who caused his death (Aschwanden 1987:37-38; Mönnig 1983:55).

All African people believe that the ancestors are real and they take real interest in their lineage. They are regarded as heads and part of the families and communities. Thus, they continue to bear their titles of relationship. For example father, mother, aunt, uncle etc. Though they continue to be members of their families, they are no longer possessing the same body as those who are still alive. They are considered to be superior and powerful and cannot be challenged by any living person. Aschwaden (1987:37) further states that ancestors are loved and honoured but they are also feared, their power lies in that fear. He further states that the love, respect and fear that the descendants feel towards the ancestors is of equal proportion. However, the Karanga fear the witches and evil spirits more than the ancestors who in fact form an invisible protective wall around huts and villages against evil. Therefore, the ancestors are loved and valued because they protect their descendants against evil spirits.

Ancestors are considered to perform certain functions, such as protecting their surviving family members from danger and also attending to their needs. They are also custodian of morality. In turn, the ancestors want to be remembered by means of sacrifices and offerings (Hammond-Tooke 1974:325-330; Krige 1950:283; Krige and Krige 1965:231; Mbiti 1992:77-79).

According to Hammond-Tooke (1974:331) the ancestors are not only benevolent but they are also jealous and are easily offended. They often complain of neglect particularly the neglect of customs. Krige and Krige (1965:231) also state that ancestral complaints form the basis of the Lobedu religion. Thus, many of the religious rites are performed in response to ancestral complaints. Among the Nguni, ancestors often complain of hunger; hence, the slaughtering that is often done. On the other hand, the Lobedu ancestors never complain of hunger but they want to be

remembered and never to be forgotten. But, Mbiti (1992:79) states that generally, the ancestors are benevolent towards their families as long as they are not forgotten.

In all African societies, dreams form an important channel of communication between the survivors and their ancestors and some of the dreams are also accompanied by visions. In dreams, the ancestors become real, intimate and concrete. The ancestors also appear in dreams to warn their descendants against unsuspected enemies or against looming danger. The descendants, on the other hand, communicate with the ancestors through sacrifices, offerings and prayers. (Mbiti 1992:126; Berglund 1976:98).

Mönnig (1983:57-58), referring to the BaPedi, also states that the main method of communication between the ancestors and their living descendants is dreams. Not all dreams are important but those that the person remembers are assumed to be to be most probably a sign of his ancestors. They are always recognised because they carry a message from his ancestors. Diviners play an important role in the interpretation of the dreams and inform the owner of the dream regarding the sacrifice necessary to appease the ancestors. The use of dreams as a method of communication between the ancestors and their living descendants cannot be overemphasised among the Zulu culture as well. Without dreams, true and uninterrupted living is not possible. People become anxious when they no longer have dreams at night. These beliefs are also common among the BaVenda (Steyt 1968:241; Krige 1950:286-287; Mbiti 1992:126; Berglund 1976:97-98).

Ancestors may also reveal themselves in the form of animals. There are well known kinds of snakes that the Nguni clan regard as representing the ancestors. The spirit

snake is identified as such and when it moves around the house, it is not feared. Instead, it is thought to bring happiness in the family. The BaVenda associate a lion with the ancestors (Berglund 1976:97; Hammond-Tooke 1974:332).

The ancestors can also express their desires through certain signs. A whirlwind is interpreted as a sign of discontent and when it appears during ploughing time the BaPedi people will leave ploughing and bring offerings to their ancestors. Hail is also considered to be a bad omen from the ancestors and when it occurs people will take a day's rest during which time offer sacrifices to their ancestors (Mönnig 1983:58).

All African societies have certain places which are considered sacred places because they are associated with the ancestors. Among the Nguni people, the cattle byre where all killings are done is associated with ancestors. The BaPedi have no shrines, but apart from the graves of the ancestors there are sacred places that are associated with the ancestors and where sacrifices may occasionally be made. The cattle byre is also associated with the ancestors as well. The BaVenda have various ritual objects which are associated with the ancestors and these include large cylindrical river stones, copper, cloths, axes, hoes etc. The Tsonga have an altar which is a small pot at the right side of the village entrance. The BaVenda, BaPedi and the Zulu in particular have selected livestock that is considered sacred. In some societies the grave itself may also be used as a shrine. Mashabela (1979:221) states that all the articles and livestock are not considered ancestors but are taken as symbols of the presence of the ancestral spirits (Hammond-Tooke 1974:333; Stayt 1968:242-249; Krige 1950:233).

2.13.3 Body and Soul

According to Mbiti (1992:124) all African societies believe that a person is made up of a body and a spirit (soul, life, breath) which are joined together to make a living person. Some African societies believe that the body and the spirit are joined during conception, while other African societies believe that the two are joined sometime before birth or shortly after birth. In other African societies, people also believe that a person has two souls one of which may wander while he is asleep.

Junod (1938:326) also states that all African societies believe that a person is composed of a body and a soul. The South Sotho believe that a person (motho) is composed of two elements namely: corporeal body (Mele) and the corporeal (moea) which can also mean wind depending on its usage.

The BaVenda believe that a person is a combination of breath and a shadow which disappears after death. They also believe that a corpse has no shadow because it forms an integral part of a living person. At death, the soul leaves the body and wanders about looking for a place to rest. They also believe that the soul may stay in the grave with the body for some time but sooner or later, it will wander around. This may cause bitterness of the spirit towards its earthly descendants (Stayt 1968:241).

To the Zulu people a human being is composed of a body (umzimba) a spirit or soul (idlozi) and the shadow (isithunzi) which refers to the individual's moral weight, influence, personality and prestige. It also refers to the shadow cast by a person. When a Zulu says "isithunzi sesimukile" (literally meaning isithunzi has departed) it indicates physical death. This means that he has died. "When we say that

isithunzi has departed we mean that isidumbu is left behind. The man has gone to his place. The corpse is left. The corpse is put into the earth. That is the burial. But isithunzi has gone to its place” (Berglund 1976:86-87). The isithunzi (shadow, man) goes to the ancestors, but after the ukubuyisa ceremony has been performed during which the spirit is “brought home”.

According to Mönnig (1983:48-49) the BaPedi have a clear conception of the biological processes inherent in the conception of the physical body. They believe that a human being is composed of the body (mmele), soul (moya) and spirit (seriti). The soul and the spirit are clearly distinguishable from one another and at the same time overlap. The soul is closely connected with the breath and the spirit (seriti) with the shadow. The soul and the spirit are the two real life giving attributes which a person receives from God. Whereas the body belong to the biological, the soul and the spirit belong to the supernatural. “The Seriti in its unified existence with the moya attains such supernatural powers that it is worshipped by living people” (Mönnig 1983:54). The spirit (seriti) also refers to personality, person’s image or reflection. It also refers to a person’s psychological make-up.

Mbiti (1992:125) states that African people believe that death separates the spirit from the body and when breathing stops the spirit has gone or that it goes through the mouth, nostrils or eyes. Though the body remains behind after death, the spirit remains identifiable because it bears the same features it had when the person was alive. However, Mbiti (1992:125) further states that African ideas are not very clear on this issue.

2.13.4 The World Beyond

According to Mbiti (1992:122) all African societies believe that upon bodily death, they will enter into the spirit world and entry into this world is not dependent upon any final judgement. They also believe that this world is very much the same as the present world. "For most people the world of the departed, wherever it might be situated, is very much the carbon copy of the countries where they lived in this life. It has mountains and valleys, rivers and lakes, forests and plains. The activities there are similar to those of human life here, so that the departed work in the fields, look after cattle, get married and bear children, fight and quarrel" (Mbiti 1970:259). The world beyond is sometimes idealised as the land of plenty, where the grass is ever green, the cattle plentiful and fat and where everybody is happy. Thus the world beyond is considered to be a reflection of the living world and may also be considered to be part of the social order forming the superior part of this order (Mönnig 1983:55-56). Awulalu (1978:41) states that life in the spirit world is like the ordinary and there is no indication that it is more enjoyable than life on earth. The only difference is that the departed have greater power than they had while alive and they have the ability to see their descendants at will, to bless them or to curse them if they are disobedient. It cannot be seen through the naked eye though it is believed that the ancestors are able to see and watch over their descendants. Awulalu (1978:41) further states that the world hereafter is different from the Christian world which is viewed as a place of happiness where there is no hunger, sin or sorrow. Lloanusi (1984:174) views the similarity of the present world and the world hereafter as indicative of a positive attitude towards death. For if it were not so, man would hate the thought of death and if there was no personal immortality, life would "be meaningless and unintelligible" (Awulalu 1978:40-41; Mbiti 1992:122).

There are many views regarding the location of the world of the ancestors. In some African societies, the spirits of the departed remain in the neighbourhood around the homes of their descendants where the spirits linger around either indefinitely or for a while. They still form part of the family and the surviving relatives feel their presence since their graves are nearby. This conception is common among the Bamileke, Bemba, Azande, Zulu, BaPedi, Xhosa and many other African cultures.

Some also believe that the ancestral world is situated somewhere underground, underworld, in the woods, the bush, the forests, on special mountains, in rivers, waterfalls, pool and many other places. These places are often avoided so as not to disturb the departed.

Few cultures believe that the world of the departed is situated somewhere in the sky, in the moon and stars. These include the Cape Bushmen who consider the stars as the ancient people or former animals. The Zulu believe that the stars are the eyes of the ancestors looking down at the world.

The dead are also buried with food, ornaments and weapons because they have to travel for days to reach their destinations. Some societies believe that the dead do not die but return to God. Awulalu (1978:40) puts it as follows: "the essence of man does not die, it has to return to its maker".

All these views make it very difficult to state with certainty as to the location of the ancestral world. But what is certain is that wherever the world beyond might be situated, life continues more or less as it did in the present world. Once a person has died, he cannot return to the world on earth in his total being; hence the funeral rites that mark his separation from the living even though it is believed that life

continues more or less the same as in the present world (Mbiti 1975:259; Lloanusi 1984:179; Awulalu 1978:41-42; Mashabela 1979:219-220).

2.13.5 Communication between the Living and the Departed

In African religion, various rituals and ceremonies are performed, a ritual being “a set form of carrying out a religious action or ceremony” (Mbiti 1992:131). It is a means of communicating something of religious significance through words, symbols and actions.

In the African culture, various rituals that are performed are concerned with the life of the individual from birth to after death. These rituals provide those who perform them with a sense of certainty and familiarity. They also provide continuity and unity as well as a degree of identity to those who perform them. They also enable them to exercise and to feel a sense of control over the forces of nature (Mbiti 1992:131).

This section shall concentrate on the act of communication between the living and the dead which is called ancestral cult and ancestral worship. The BaPedi call it go phasa badimo (to appropriate the ancestors) while the Zulu call it ukuphahla, umsebenzi or ukuhlabela amadlozi (slaughtering for ancestors).

The belief in the existence and the influence of the ancestors is deep rooted among Africans and it remains unshaken even by Christianity. The existence of the Zulu, indeed any African is intertwined with the ancestors, making the living and the dead to be interdependent of each other. If one of these is excluded then an African man dies (Berglund 1976:197).

According to Mbiti (1970:367) every African society has some means of establishing and maintaining contact between the living and the departed which becomes more meaningful because of the belief in the continued existence of man after death. The contact, communion and fellowship are established and maintained by the pouring of libation, giving offerings, making sacrifices, appropriating, praying and fulfilling requests made by the ancestors. All these serve as symbols indicating that the departed have not been forgotten.

They also symbolise welcome and hospitality towards the departed. They are also the means of appeasing the departed especially if they have been offended and angered. They are “the “good” which a person renders to another when asking a favour since the departed may act as intermediaries between God and men” (Mbiti 1970:67). These sacrifices and offerings are also carried out because people believe that the ancestors have more powers and they are able to regulate the forces of nature, and so it becomes important to approach them through these sacrifices and offerings before any undertaking as well as serve as a means of gratitude and commitment (Junod 1938:130; Krige 1950:289).

In most of the African cultures, particularly Zulu, communication with the ancestors is maintained through the medium of cattle. A goat or fowl may be substituted particularly because many homesteads no longer have cattle. Sheep are never preferred because they do not bellow when slaughtered thus calling the ancestors. If possible, the sacrificial animal should have one colour.

African societies associates life with blood. Thus, when blood is shed during a sacrifice, it symbolises that human or animal life is given back to God who is the ultimate source of life. Therefore, the purpose of a sacrifice is taken seriously and

is considered a more effective means of communication between the living and the departed (Mbiti 1992:63; Berglund 1976:219).

Communion with the ancestors is also maintained through the medium of beer-drinking. In the Zulu culture minor events are celebrated with beer-drinking and bigger events are celebrated with both beer-drinking and ritual killing. A man is expected to drink and eat with his ancestors (Berglund 1976:219).

All members of the family are expected to attend the ritual celebration (umsebenzi). Neighbours and friends are also invited but the ritual celebration is first and foremost a family concern (Hammond-Tooke 1984:352; Mbiti 1992:63-66; Berglund 1976:209-219).

The communion act of communication with the ancestors is invocation. It takes place at the cattle byre or in the main bedroom of the head of the family who is usually the officiator. He addresses all the departed members of his lineage and continues with the family tree as far back as he can recall following the order of his generation as closely as possible. In Zulu, the invocation is referred to as ukubonga, (to give praise). Particularly when the family is in a satisfactory economic situation, good health and adequate protection. Requests are also made for ancestors intercessions with specific problems and during times of crisis. At the end he requests the known ancestors to inform all those that he has not mentioned and does not know. The circumstances and reasons leading to the sacrifice or offering are enumerated in detail and this is known as ukubika (Zulu) that is, to report. This is done to avoid misunderstanding between the living and the departed. Everything must be reported clearly, so that everything is known (Berglund 1976:230).

The Nguni, BaPedi, Batswana and South Sotho believe that the male head of the family or his substitute should officiate because he is the link between his family and its ancestral spirits. The paternal aunt (kgadi - Pedi) could also be delegated to communicate with the ancestors. But of course the family is also under the male senior member of the family through whom all offerings and sacrifices must be made (Berglund 1976:231; Hammond-Tooke 1984:347-348; Stayt 1968:240; Mashabela 1979:11).

Among the Nguni people, selected portions of the slaughtered animals are placed at the umsamo of indlunkulu (topside of the main bedroom) which symbolises the meeting point between the visible worlds to be licked by the ancestors or be blessed by them. The brewed beer is also placed next to the meat. Afterwards the meat and beer is eaten and drunk by close relatives. The licking of meat is symbolical, indicating the affection and good will the ancestors show towards their descendants (Berglund 1976:230-233).

African people believe that they cannot approach God empty handed and that He will not literally eat or make use of their sacrifices or offerings. But the food serves as a symbol of their (people) humbleness before Him. Mbiti (1992:66) also states that the offerings and sacrifices are also carried out to draw God's attention to the people's needs and to ensure the safety and well-being of humanity. However, these sacrifices and offerings are not given directly to Him. They are given to the lesser spiritual beings, divinities and ancestors who mediate between God and men. "They are expected to receive the offerings and sacrifices and then relay people's request to God" (Mbiti 1992:65). Mashabela (1979:35) states it differently that the line of communication between the ancestral spirits and its descendants is hierarchical, "man at the bottom, the ancestors above him and God at the Apex".

The ancestors serve as stepping stones towards God. They are the intermediaries through whom men is able to make contact with God. God knows about man through the ancestral spirits.

The communal act of communication with the ancestors is often accompanied by singing and dancing because African people enjoy celebrating life. They express their feelings of joy, sorrow or thanksgiving in singing, clapping of hands, beating of drums and dancing. Through singing, people are able to participate emotionally and physically in their prayers. "The music and dancing penetrate into the very being of the worshipping individual" (Mbiti 1992:67; Berglund 1976:235).

2.14 Judgement

According to Mbiti (1970:259) most African people do not expect any form of judgement in the world hereafter. Judgement occurs all the time during one's earthly life. The ancestors can and do punish members of their families by means of death. But to the Yoruba, the final judgement rests with God (Olodumare) "to whom all return in the first instance and Who decides those who are good and those who are evil" (Awulalu 1978:43). The good go into good heaven (O run re re) and the evil go to bad heaven (O run biruku).

Every soul returns to God who is the Presiding Judge in heaven. Each individual gives an account of all that he has done on earth. Judgement is then passed. If he had been good, he goes into good heaven where he is united with his ancestors. A bad soul is sent into bad heaven where there is suffering. Such a soul wanders in lonely places and the descendants of such a soul do not commemorate him and his spirit is not invoked during veneration.

The Lodaga (Ghana) believe that on the arrival of the spirit of the departed in the ancestral world, the spirits pass judgement in accordance with one's behaviour on earth. God is not directly involved in this judgement, but He passes judgement only when the wicked and bad plead for mercy. He then puts an end to their suffering.

The Bachwa (Congo) believe that upon death, the individual goes to the city of God where he lives happily and free from suffering. However, such a life is not seen as a reward but simply the nature of the life in the world hereafter (Mbiti 1970:259-261; Awulalu 1978:43).

2.15 Re-incarnation

According to Mbiti (1970:265) most African people believe in the re-incarnation. A newborn baby resembling a particular spirit in terms of trait characteristics, personality or physical marks will be named after that spirit. The name of the deceased is not given to more than one child. This means that the same spirit does not re-incarnate in a number of times. The Yoruba even consult the diviners to find out which ancestor has re-incarnated and if a baby is born immediately after a death within a family, the Yoruba believe that the soul of the immediately deceased is back.

It is important to note that the whole person who has died is not reproduced and Awulalu (1978:44) calls this type of rebirth a partial re-incarnation because the entire person who has died is not reborn. He continues to live in the spirit world and from time to time sacrifices are made to him. Mbiti (1970:265) concurs with Awulalu that the deceased person does not lose his separateness or his existence in the ancestral world. He further states that partial re-incarnation is possible

genetically. Awulalu (1978:44) views this state of affairs as paradoxical because while African societies believe in re-incarnation, they also believe in the existence of the ancestral spirits who continue to live in the spirit world. Also of significance is that the soul of the departed does not undergo any process of re-incarnation. However, the living are satisfied that they do see part of their departed ancestor in the newborn. At the same time they are happy that the ancestors are in the spirit world and can give help to their children on earth.

It is believed that only good ancestors re-incarnate and bad ancestors re-incarnate in lower animals or in bird. They also wander around in neglected and lonely places.

According to Mbiti (1970:265) African people do not look forward to re-incarnation. But this belief is refuted by Awulalu (1978:44) who states that among the Yoruba, a child who resembles his deceased grandfather or grandmother feels particularly happy.

The belief in re-incarnation has been reported among the Akemba, Akan, Lango, Luo, Ndebele, Rukuba, Sebei and Shona (Mbiti 1970:265; Awulalu 1978:44; Mbiti 1990:125).

CHAPTER 3

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

3. INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, the origin and the meaning of death, its causes and the handling of the corpse were discussed. The burial and the rituals that African people perform when death has occurred were also discussed. Also discussed, was the African belief in the existence of the world hereafter and the communication that seem to exist between the living and the living dead. The discussion also focused on the African perception of religion as well as the notion of God.

In this chapter, I intend to give a critical analysis of the African perception of death as outlined in Chapter 2. More attention will be given to the discussion of life in the world hereafter and the communication between the living and the living dead. The discussion will also focus on the role that a married woman plays in birth and in death.

3.1 The Quest for Reunion

The desire to be united with one's ancestors is the most fundamental aspect and the religious aspiration of every African person in general. Hence it becomes a great misfortune to die and be buried in a foreign land because it is believed that the spirit of the dead cannot rest in a strange land. This has been recently demonstrated when the remains of one of the greatest statesman in Africa, Julius Nyerere were buried in his ancestral land.

To fulfill this desire most Zulu people strive to live their lives according to the dictates of their ancestors so that they can be able to reach the goal of immortality in the company of their ancestors when they die. They face the journey to their ancestral land with confidence that they will be welcomed into their ancestral community. A fitting burial ceremony and proper completion of the burial rites grant the deceased entrance into the spirit world. The remaining relatives are also happy and satisfied when the ceremonies have been duly completed because they see their efforts as the last earthly tribute to the deceased.

These elaborate funeral rites also acknowledge the final exit of the deceased from this world into the next and at the same time enable the survivors to restructure their relationships so that they give meaning to their lives. They also serve to emphasise the worthiness and the dignity of human life symbolically. He is also buried with some of his worldly important items which, it is believed, he will need in the world hereafter. With the influence of Western civilisation, this practice has been modified. Sometimes these items are placed on the coffin during the church service and then removed during the burial. Symbolically, these behaviours serve to indicate respect and friendship to the deceased. They are a sign of sympathy to the bereaved family and a symbolic indication of pain and sorrow. They are also a service to the deceased and to make it possible for him to have a happy future with his ancestors (Bujo 1992:124).

Because of the importance of the burial rites, the relatives of the deceased incur huge debts in order to provide the deceased with a proper funeral ceremony. The higher the social status of the deceased, the more elaborate the funeral ceremony.

In the olden days, the hide of the slaughtered beast served as both a shroud and a coffin. The carcass was then cooked and eaten saltless by the mourners and sympathisers to emphasise the remorsefulness of the occasion. Nowadays a beast is slaughtered in accordance with custom but the carcass is cooked and a sumptuous meal is served with other delicacies. This establishes an atmosphere of festivity which is contrary to the objectives of a funeral as traditionally perceived. People attend funerals with expectations of a delicious meal. Funerals then become social gatherings of old friends. Apart from missing the objective of accompanying the deceased on his journey home, modern funerals tend to be a great financial strain on the bereaved family who not only have to provide a delicious meal but must also provide drinks. This exerts more financial pressure particularly on those families that cannot afford it. (Lloanusi 1976:227; Mashabela 1970:213).

Every time there is a burial, the dead is buried facing the East because the deceased is set in readiness for a journey back where he came from - "Where the sun comes from" (Setiloane 1986:7). Social change has had no impact on this tradition. My husband's aunt was buried according to Christian tradition but after the coffin was lowered, it was noticed that the head of the deceased was facing West. The coffin was taken out of the grave and positioned properly. This serves to illustrate that even though the deceased is buried in an expensive coffin, meticulous care is still taken that he is buried facing East so that he is ready to resume his journey which Setiloane (1986:7) refers to as the "journey east in search of Modimo". There is a belief that if the deceased was to be buried facing West, he would rise from the grave only to be lost to his people forever.

3.3 Analysis of the World Hereafter

Existence as we know it, is in terms of space-time dimensions. When we talk of space-time dimensions, we are talking of boundaries. Thus, the absence of these physical boundaries means that the content of an existence is not placed; it is not limited by the space-time boundaries. Any perception of the world from a point outside the physical body collapses space-time boundaries (Geis 1995: 54).

The issue of immortality requires that we must look for that feature in man that is incorruptible. Death is bodily corruption and it is our surest indication that upon death the body must be buried and in due course decomposition will occur. Is there an element in the person now dead that does not corrupt? Such an element should be intrinsic to his life and activity as a human being for its incorruptibility to have any personal significance. It should be that element of man that made him human, the person he was, without which he would not been the person he was. The major issue debated by philosophers, therefore, is not what death is, but rather what element of a person survives death. To put it differently, the fundamental issue is the relationship between the body and personality.

Before we attempt to examine this question, we need to understand what personality is. The "self" is the core constituent of one's uniqueness. It is the beginning of one's personhood and is expressed through personal existence. It is what makes everything I do mine and what differentiates me from every other person. My conscious experience of the world is my unique perception of this world; it is my personality (Geis 1995: 54, 61 - 62).

In death the body corrupts and the self it is believed, continues to live in the world hereafter. Anything that lives outside the physical boundaries is not limited by these boundaries. This means that the “self” is not limited by the space-time boundaries. Perrett (1987: 103) asserts that a being without any orientation to time and space will not be the original me. A timeless being is unable to deliberate and reflect because these are mental exercises that require time. A timeless being is also unable to anticipate or have any intention because these activities require such a being should have a temporal position in relation to what is anticipated or intended. Such a being cannot remember because he does not have a past. There are many other activities that a timeless being is incapable of performing. As such, it is even doubtful that such a being should be considered a person at all. If he were to be seen as a person, how much of a person? This question impinges directly on both the identity and adequacy conditions that have to be satisfied for personal immortality to be worthwhile, namely: that it is me who survives for ever (identity condition) and that my eternal future must be adequately related to the life I have led and the aims and values that I presently hold (adequacy condition) (Perrett 1987:93). Firstly, even if the timeless being is a person; is he enough of a person to be me? Secondly, even if the timeless being is me would such a mode of living be worthwhile? With regard to the latter question, the timeless being would not only be unable to carry out many activities, but he would also be unchangeable. The former question will also not satisfy the identity condition because clearly a timeless being will not be me. Thus, it is obvious that the idea of timeless being cannot be adequately expressed. (Perrett 1987: 103 - 104).

Most African people believe that the world hereafter is a carbon copy of the present world. The living dead carry out their activities as they did when they were still alive. They enjoy the same social and economic status which they possessed in the

world hitherto. There is also no indication that it is more enjoyable than life on this earth. The new ancestor is reunited with the old. Messages given by the living to those that have gone before are delivered. Hence in the Pedi tradition, it is common to give messages to the deceased in the form of a praise song (Sereto) to relay them to those that have gone before him. The deceased is bade farewell and informed of all his relatives that have gone before him. It is believed that the deceased will live in the company of his ancestors while at the same time being not separated from the living (Berglund 1976: 115; Bujo 1992: 125).

It is a certainty with all cultures that at death the body ceases to exist. However, with regard to the personality, the African tradition particularly the Zulu tradition finds itself in a difficult situation because man is composed of the body (umzimba) and the spirit or the soul (idlozi) which are viewed as a unity. This is a monistic position. When he dies, his body is buried and his personality (isithunzi) which is the whole of man goes to the place of the shades and this is a dualistic position. Thus, the African tradition is not clear on issue although it maintains that upon death the body is buried and the soul “departs from the body in the form of the body although invisible” (Ngubane 1977: 50). It is also not explicit whether the soul endures forever or for how long. However, if life in the world hereafter is the same as life hitherto in terms of space-time dimensions, we can safely conclude that life after death continues indefinitely but it is different from this life which is space bound. A being without any orientation to time and space will not be the original me.

Even though life were to continue regardless of the space-time dimensions, would such, a mode of existence be valuable. An African person believes in the existence of the world hereafter and that life in the world hereafter is similar to this life. If

eternal life is similar to this life[;] presupposes that eternal life has value because life hitherto has value. In the African perception of immortality, there is no quest for perfection since ordinary human existence is characterised by imperfection and incompleteness. This is unlike Christianity and indeed Western thought where perfection is an intrinsic value. The only desire of the agent is to be reunited with his ancestors. However, such a life would offer no new challenges and rewards. Even if the present life has value for me, the infinite repetition of it need not necessarily have any value. Moreover, what makes life valuable are the qualities it exhibits and not necessarily its infinite extension.

Another difficulty with the African perception of immortality arises when we consider that such a being can have no memory of his previous life on earth because memory of his previous life would make him different from who he is now. He also cannot have any memory of a life that he has not yet lived. But with no memory of my previous life, would it be “me” who continues to live eternally? Of course personal identity can survive memory gaps in this life. But can it also survive memory gaps in the eternal world as well? Yes it can, especially if the notion of personal identity is taken as a matter of degree and not in its strongest metaphysical sense. This is what Parfit calls the “complex view in which the connections between the past and the future selves are a connection of similarity, a relation that admits degrees”. (Perrett 1987: 95). The argument meets the requirements for the identity condition.

With regard to the adequacy condition, it should be borne in mind that the agent has no memory of having lived his life before so there is no boredom even though there is an infinite repetition of the same activities. A difficulty that seems to arise is that life in the world hitherto is goal oriented and eternal life seems incompatible with

the goal directed life of this world. If a life is thought to be meaningful only if it meets a particular goal, then eternal life, given the eternal recurrence of events, either that goal can never occur or it has already occurred an infinite number of times.

Suppose that we can argue that an African person enters the eternal world with the knowledge of the eternal repetition of events. Would such knowledge change anything? It is doubtful that such knowledge would change anything particularly in as far as the eternal repetition of events is concerned. However, Nietzsche thought that such knowledge might be liberating (Perrett 1987: 96). If endless repetition of events is your eternal life then what matters is what you do eternally. Such a life would be enjoyable to you because it is meaningful to you and affirms your eternal existence.

The African perception of immortality though plausible, has a pessimistic outlook. The knowledge that I will have to endlessly repeat all what I have done could very well lead to emotional apathy. Endless repetition of the same activity ceases to have the significance it originally did. Besides, most actions in life include wrong actions. The prospect of an infinite repetition of such wrong actions has serious moral implications.

Perhaps these difficulties are encountered with eternal recurrence because each recurrence is an exact replica of the last. Generally in life, a person performs a variety of different activities. If eternal life is a carbon copy of life in this world, then such a life would not be boring because the agent would not have any memories of his past life in this world. However, there seems to be some difficulty with the identity condition. Would it be the same person in all respects? The

prospect of carrying out different activities infinitely may also be viewed pessimistically as the prospect of infinite repetition of the same activities prove depressing (Perrett 1987: 94 - 97).

It is obvious from the discussion that the African perception of immortality though plausible has a pessimistic view of the eternal life. Even though normal life has value, this, however, does not imply that the infinite repetition of such a life would be valuable and that it will be the original me who continues to live indefinitely. Thus, such a life does not guarantee any meaningful life. There are, however, many stories about death and immortality that have similar strands that indeed death is the irreversible separation of the conscious self from the physical body. "This conscious self survives intact, it finds itself released from any pain; it experiences feelings of freedom and lightness; and it expresses itself through a body identical in form to the physical body but not subject to its limitations of space and time" (Lorimer 1984: 292). This is to say that, there is a strong prima facie evidence which suggests that the human personality is not always extinguished at death.

Perhaps it is prudent to conclude this section on immortality with a quotation by Wittgenstein. "Not only is there no guarantee of the temporal immortality of the human soul, that is to say of its survival after death; but, in any case, this assumption completely fails to accomplish the purpose for which it has always been intended. Or is some riddle solved by surviving forever? Is not eternal life just as much of a riddle as our present life. The solution of the riddle of life in space and time lies outside space and time" (Lorimer 1984: 120).

3.4 Analysis of the Communication Between the Living and the Living Dead

The bond that exists between a Zulu man and his ancestors is very strong and as such he communicates with them anytime. Such communication has both an internal and salvational dimension because of the interdependence that exists between the living and the living dead (Bujo 1992:24). The living dead are happy when their descendants remember them and they exercise great influence on them because they are more powerful and stronger than the living.

The relationships of a Zulu with the living dead is not of fear as it was formerly thought. Hammond-Tooke (1974:331) states that the living dead among the Nguni are “capricious, jealous and easily offended”. Mönnig (1967:60) also states that the Bapedi rituals are specifically carried out “to keep them away and also to get rid of them”. This is a gross misinterpretation of a people's belief system. The relationship between the living and the living dead is that of close relatives who live intimately together sharing both the good and the bad things that happen to them. It is characterised by intimacy, mutual understanding and interdependence. Since the living dead are thought to be perfectly moral, just and impartial and are regarded as the guardians of morality, the relationship is like that of a father taking care of his children. The living are conscious of their presence and nearness (Setiloane 1986:20).

Berglund (1976:198) attributes the misinterpretation of the Zulu culture to the linguistic misunderstanding of the words used. For example, *ukuthetha nedlozi* (to talk to the ancestor) gives the listener the impression of an aggressive kind of relationship, which is *ukuthethisa idlozi* (to scold the ancestor). The aforementioned interpretations do not have the same meaning.

There is also a belief that traditional Africans, in general, worship the living dead. Krige (1950:281) states that “it is thus often wrongly thought that uNkulunkulu is worshipped when in reality it is an ancestor that is being propitiated”. In Zulu society, people do not worship the living dead, instead, they simply talk to them. “We do not worship (khonza) the shades. We simply speak to them (ukuthetha), telling them everything” (Berglund 1976:109). Ukukhonza (to worship) in the English translation refers to worship and when the Zulu use it in a transcendental sense, it is used in relation to God.

Mbiti in Westerlund (1985:29) also states that to see African religion as ancestral worship is to miss the point. The pouring of libation and the giving of food to the departed are symbols of fellowship, hospitality and respect. They are symbols of family continuity and contact. It is thus blasphemous to refer to these acts of family relationship as worship. It cannot be denied on the other hand, that there exists a fairly complex ritual of communion between the living and the living dead. Generally, a Zulu is also concerned with earthly life and his emphasis is on good fortune and blessings. At the same time, he is also concerned with the eternal dimension because he is concerned with the world hereafter and the living dead who have the key to the fate of the living.

Generally in African societies, communion with the living dead is central in the people’s world view. They are conscious of the presence of the living dead whenever they enjoy the fullness of life be it good health, many children and abundant crops which are believed to be blessings from the living dead. In the Zulu context, a man who has enjoyed such blessings will therefore offer thanksgiving (ukubonga) to the living dead. This is not only unique to the Zulu or Africans, people all over the world consider the world to be good when they have good

relations with their families and their fellowmen, good health and they are in good economic standing. All these things enable them to achieve a balanced relationship and to be in harmony with their own world. A Zulu man also needs the blessings from his ancestors to enable him to maintain balance. In turn he communicates his gratitude to the living dead through the medium of sacrifice (Ngubane 1977:58).

In a traditional Zulu home all beer brewing was done for the purpose of communion with the living dead. However, it must be acknowledged that due to urbanisation, there is a definite shift of emphasis. More emphasis is now placed on the intoxicating effects of beer and this has changed the way in which beer is brewed. While previously the emphasis lay on beer as being “the food of men” (including the living dead) emphasis today is put on the intoxicating effects of beer.

The diminishing number of animals for slaughter for rituals has also led to the shift in emphasis. Slaughtering for rituals is less frequent than before and if any slaughtering is done, it is treasured and it also becomes an occasion for feasting which is incongruent with the traditional Zulu belief. Western civilisation exerts pressure on the Zulu thought pattern forcing him to make a distinction between secular and religious practices (Berglund 1976:213-214).

It is important to note that menstruating, pregnant or breast feeding women are not allowed to brew beer because they are considered defiled or hot. If they prepare the beer, the living dead may take offence. This point will be dealt with further in the subsequent section.

A Zulu believes that the sacrifices he makes are given to God though symbolically. He feels small in the sight of God and cannot approach Him directly and empty-handed. Just as in social life, it is often customary to approach someone with a higher status through an intermediary. A Zulu person, therefore, feels that it is better and easier to approach God through someone whom he knows and who is part of his life and shares his needs and concerns. The living dead are, therefore, used as intermediaries. They act as a link between God and man. They are expected to receive the sacrifices and then relay them to God (Mbiti 1992:66). The above statement, however, does not imply that God is never approached directly. In times of crises He can be approached directly.

The idea of intermediaries is congruent with the Zulu perception of the world view that there are two worlds: the visible and the invisible worlds, each with its own life and population. Life in both worlds is the same though life in the invisible world is somewhat higher than life in the visible world, but God is above all. The living dead therefore, are stepping stones which enable man to reach God. In Christianity Jesus Christ is the mediator and through Him man reaches God.

There are however, criticisms to the African perception of the world view that it is tied to the here and now; it is also tied up with the past. Every present experience points back to the past. "History moves backwards" which seems to indicate that Africans do not believe in progress. Neither do they plan for the future nor dream about it because their lives are intricately bound to the past (Bujo 1992:28).

There are however, arguments against the above stated theory. African people and the Zulu people in particular are not only focussed on the past. The fact that they constantly communicate with their ancestors by means of sacrifices and offerings

serve to indicate that they are also concerned with their future. Ancestors are also believed to be custodians of morality and the constant appropriation of the ancestors indicates that Zulu people are also concerned with their own death. This in itself is future oriented.

The repetition of the rituals and the re-enacting of the past also helps to strengthen the belief that the prosperity of his future generation is guaranteed. What is important is not only the repetition and imitation of the behaviour of the living dead but the traditional actions also bring about strength to the living enabling them to live better in the future.

African people in general and the Zulu people in particular are not only concerned with the present and the past, but are also concerned with the future. The present does not exist on its own. It is always shaped by the past events which to a large extent, have been decisive for the shape which the present must take. Every present is derived from the past and in every present there is already the intimation of a future.

The belief in the existence of the living dead and the communion that exists between the living and the living dead has been wrongly approached or misunderstood from the beginning particularly by the missionaries who were themselves biased because they were promoting their own belief system. Their experience of spirituality which they were promoting was also totally different from that of the African people.

The above discussion leads us to the analysis of the notion of God as far as a Zulu is concerned.

3.5 Notion of God

As far as the missionaries were concerned Africans did not have any perception of God. If they did, it was very vague. Africans believed in spirits, divinities, ancestors and magic. Africans also live in perpetual fear of the ancestors. The African continent and its inhabitants were also considered to be in darkness and were still awaiting for a full revelation in Jesus Christ. They had to be initiated into the belief in God.

This misunderstanding and the misinterpretation of the African people was further compounded by the misinterpretation of the African languages. A similar misinterpretation led Mönnig(1967:60) to conclude that the BaPedi do not render any service to God (Modimo).

Most Africans believe in the existence of the only absolute God who controls and cares for His children. Although there are other divinities, people recognise the Oneness of God. That they accept the existence of God presupposes that they realise that there are certain phenomena that are beyond their own understanding. "They take their belief in God for granted and it is at the centre of African Religion and dominates all other beliefs" (Mbiti 1992:45).

African culture is generally respectful and protocol plays an important role particularly in the patriarchal social system of the Zulu. For example, a child may not approach his father directly. His mother acts as an intermediary. The same principle applies with regards to God. People feel small in His sight and they cannot approach Him directly. They show respect, esteem, honour and courtesy towards Him. People also fear His greatness and they fear to come close to Him. By

making use of intermediaries, they feel protected. People also believe that though He can be approached directly, it is easier to make use of the intermediaries because they have easier access to Him and they speak both the languages of the visible and invisible worlds (Westerlund 1986:35).

Sacrifices and offerings are made to God through the ancestors because people feel that they cannot approach Him empty handed. The symbolical use of sacrifices and offerings indicates man's humbleness before Him. Such interactions between man, ancestors and God are interpreted by outsiders as worship of the ancestors which misses the point.

The intermediaries are not intended to cut off God from people, but they are channels through which people come closer to Him. The Zulu understand that God is not an ancestor. The shades are underneath (the earth). But Umvelinqangi is in the sky. They know each other, the shades bowing and praying on behalf of their children before the face of Inkosi ye Zulu (Berglund 1976:35).

In Christianity on the other hand, God is Omnipotent and Omnipresent. People communicate with Him through Jesus Christ who also acts as an intermediary between Him and man. God is worshipped through His son Jesus Christ. The use of intermediaries in African Religion does not in anyway reflect a lack of faith in the part of African people.

Christianity places more emphasis on the idea of a priori faith while African religion is sceptical and its emphasis is on the ancestors. They speak to the ancestors as though they are still alive because of the interdependence that exists between the living and the ancestors.

African religion differs from Christianity in that it is firmly rooted in social structure and membership is determined by birth with God at the apex, the ancestors in the middle and people at the bottom. While Christianity accepts suffering as inevitable, African Religion, on the other hand, is concerned with the attainment of good life on earth and not salvation.

3.6 Mourning as Part of Ritual

Though the question of mourning is thought to be sanctioned by society and the ancestors, it seems rather more patriarchal in nature. Men are not expected to undergo vigorous rituals, whereas women are expected to adhere strictly to the stipulated rituals and any failure to carry out these rituals is frowned upon. It is also believed that such a failure will be a bad omen for the woman concerned. It is, therefore, important that the discussion should also focus on the role a woman plays in birth and in death.

The period of mourning (*ukuzila* - Zulu) begins at death and all relatives that are affected by the death are considered to be in a condition of darkness (*isinyama* - Zulu). When used metaphorically, to symbolise death, it can be translated to mean pollution which is viewed as a marginal state between life and death (Ngubane 1977:78).

As indicated in Chapter 2, *isinyama* is conceptualised as a mystical force which diminishes resistance to diseases and predisposes the bereaved to misfortunes (*amashwa*). It is usually associated with many events such as, child birth, menstruation, after sexual intercourse in which case both men and women are associated with it and death.

During the mourning period, all members of the bereaved family are expected to withdraw from social life, to abstain from all pleasurable experiences, to avoid quarrelling, fighting and making noise and wearing any fancy clothes. Failure to adhere to these restrictions is said to result in some form of neurosis which is known as (ukudlula). It means to become incorrigible in flouting social restraints and social expectations as if by involuntary compulsion (Ngubane 1977:82).

The period of mourning is usually longer and more intensified for the chief mourner who is closely associated with the deceased. Invariably, the chief mourner is always a married woman (a mother and a wife). For example, if the deceased nearest relative is a man, a woman nevertheless, becomes the chief mourner (Ngubane 1977:82). At a funeral of my husband's aunt at Nquthu, the daughter-in-law to the deceased was the chief mourner because her husband is the first born in the family.

The restrictions imposed particularly on the chief mourner are similar to the restrictions that are imposed on a woman who has recently given birth (umdlezane). She is also thought to be susceptible to diseases and is also in the condition of darkness (umnyama). She is also considered dangerous to herself, to her baby and particularly to males whose virility will be affected should they eat any food that she has prepared. As such she is kept in her own bedroom for three days. Her husband is also restricted to visit her bedroom until the baby's umbilical cord has fallen off. After ten days she may go out of her room, but she is still considered dangerous until after the puerperal stage.

The lactating woman goes out of her home if she must, but on return and before breast feeding her baby she must squeeze out drops of milk from her breasts. This is done to protect the baby from (isinyama) because it is thought that the mother's

condition of darkness may be easily passed from the mother to the child through breast milk.

Restrictions are also imposed on a menstruating woman who is also thought to be in a condition of darkness (*isinyama*) though of low intensity than a woman who has recently delivered a baby.

Various other restrictions are imposed on women though these restrictions are no longer adhered to as strictly as before particularly by modern women.

I want to pay more attention on the chief mourner who becomes the central figure as soon as a death has occurred. In the Zulu culture, she is expected to sit on the floor with her face covered in a blanket until the day of the burial. She is expected to talk only when it is necessary. During the burial, she remains covered until the coffin has been lowered into the grave.

The chief mourner and the woman who has recently given birth are in similar positions. Zulu rites indicate that man came into this world through a woman and will return to the other world through her as it is the woman who plays a central role during the mourning period (Ngubane 1977:85).

At conception, a married woman moves into a marginal state because though the unborn baby identifies with her and she nurtures the unborn baby until after birth, it is however, different from her as it belongs to a different patrilineage. She is only a passage through which the child is born (Ngubane 1977:85).

Likewise, the chief mourner carries out all the stipulated rituals to facilitate in particular the integration of her deceased husband with his ancestral community in the other world. She acts as a link between this world and the world hereafter. This world is profane and the world hereafter is sacred. In the Zulu context the sacred world refers to the ancestral world which is “sacred with spiritual power over the living”. The “sacred and powerless” on the other hand, refers to the incomplete spiritual state as represented by the unborn and the recently deceased until the ritual of ukubuyisa idlozi has been performed (Ngubane 1977:88).

A woman as a “mother of birth” (umdlezane) and a “mother of death” (umfelokazi) is not only dangerous because she is in a marginal state. She is also dangerous because she is impure. This arises from the fact that she straddles this world and the other world which is thought to be sacred but powerless (Ngubane 1977:88).

In the Zulu context a man is considered to be the authority of his homestead; he has power within his family. His potency is shown in his ability to control his reproductive fluids and the powerless state of a woman is illustrated by her inability to control her menstrual flow. In this sense he is in complete control of the situation; his virility is a symbol of power. Hence, if he plans to undertake a risky enterprise or performing a sacrifice, he has to abstain from sexual intercourse because he needs all the power he can acquire. This and many other examples indicate his virility, strength and energy (Ngubane 1977:93).

The submissive and powerless role of a woman is further demonstrated by the ceremonial and communal wailing (isililo). Weeping and wailing are associated with helplessness and therefore submissiveness, while power is demonstrated by courage and aggression and are associated with men. Whereas women wail, men

mark the end of mourning by performing the ritual hunting (ihlambo) which is an act of courage and aggression. Though the wailing of women can be seen in a positive manner as symbolising the rebirth of the relatives of the deceased as reconstructed after death, it is however, the woman's reproductive ability that also serves to illustrate her submissive and powerless state (Ngubane 1977:93).

Both the chief mourner and the woman who has recently given birth fulfill important social roles of forming a bridge between the two worlds and as such they are thought to be dangerous and impure; they are also marginal and ambiguous. Hence the use of insulating materials. The chief mourner is covered in a blanket; she dresses in dark mourning clothes indicating a condition of darkness (isinyama). She may not enter any courtyard unless given permission by the owner of the house she is visiting. She does all this in order to protect herself from the dangers to which she is prone and also because she is liable to contaminate others. By observing the right behaviour she sees herself as engaged in a procreative activity to benefit society as a whole, while at the same time such behaviour restricts her freedom of movement in terms of space and time. This, puts an extra stress on her subordinate role as a woman in a male dominated society (Ngubane 1977:99).

Notwithstanding the above, death in a family brings about an imbalance and instability. It also brings about a critical change of life for both the deceased and his surviving relatives. The correct and proper rituals are performed to facilitate an orderly transition of the deceased from this world to the next world and also to readjust the altered relationships of his relatives. Through these rituals the remaining relatives are slowly reorganised and adapt to the new condition produced by death. Losing a loved one through death produces a sense of loss which lingers

for sometime and many readjustments must be made (Krige 1950:159; Mönnig 1983:138).

In the Zulu tradition the respect given to a person is also important. Death does not in any way diminish his worthiness. In fact, death enhances his respect and worthiness, regardless of his social and economic standing much more so that upon death he is viewed as a potential ancestor until the ceremony of ukubuyisa idlozi has been performed.

CHAPTER 4

4.1 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Death is a universal phenomenon and each culture develops its own ways of coping with it. The reaction of people to death also involves a complex network of relationships. To appreciate their responses to this phenomenon requires an understanding of the socio-cultural context in which these responses occur because they influence the individual's responses to issues of life and death.

In the African context and indeed in the Zulu culture, death is a continuation of life in the world hereafter. The deceased continue to live in the world hereafter with his ancestors. He renews his relationship with his ancestral relatives and he also enters into another system of role relationships. Various rites and ceremonies (Symbolic or literal) are performed to facilitate his passage and adjustment in the behaviour of the new role incumbent and of those with whom he relates. The belief in the existence of life after death also affects the nature of these rites and ceremonies, the social definition of bereavement and the condition of human hope.

Relatives of the deceased perform these elaborate rites and ceremonies to serve as acknowledgement of his final exit from his set of role relationships in the world hitherto. They also serve a purpose of enabling the relatives to restructure their relationships so that order and meaningfulness can be continued. These funeral rites also inform the members of the community that the deceased has departed and that his bereaved family members are now in new unaccustomed role status and that they should not be expected to perform their normal roles for a while.

From a societal point of view, funeral rites and ceremonies serve as means in which an individual's social life as it relates to the role the deceased played and the position he occupied are evaluated. This is evident in the obituary that is read during the funeral. The apparent pre-occupation with the past, reviving treasured memories and honouring the deceased lend itself to criticism that Africans people in general and the Zulu people in particular, tend to focus on the past and are not future oriented. As stated in the previous chapter, African people are also future oriented. The communication between the living and the living dead serves to indicate that they are also concerned with their future because the communication indicates that the living are concerned with their own death and this in itself is future oriented. A more positive view of funeral rites and death attitudes is that of assisting survivors to restructure their relationships and to continue with their lives in the absence of the deceased. Death has taken away someone from an established set of relationships. It becomes essential to reorganise these relationships that relates to the future and not the past.

Generally African people and the Zulu people in particular, mourn the death of their loved one and this behaviour is also often criticised. Mourning is an expression of grief and a manifestation of personal loss. Mourning and grieving serve to unite the living, to reaffirm important social values and also to reaffirm relationships among family members. By mourning and grieving the family and society are able to reconstruct their lives so that they can continue with their lives. It is also therapeutic. The Western behaviour that the bereaved should mourn the death of their loved one as quickly as possible and within the confines of family members is fast taking its roots particularly among the affluent African people.

Women play a central role in issues of death, mourning and funeral rites. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Zulu tradition is oppressive in nature and this prevents women from aspiring and taking leadership positions within the society. To be liberated from such a position, women should begin to be vocal and critique those cultural practices that tend to undermine their potentials. Culture is dynamic and is also influenced by both economic, social and political aspects that are in operation everytime. Those cultural behaviours that are empowering and life sustaining should be preserved and treasured, discarding only those that are detrimental to the growth and development of society as a whole.

Community is another central value in as far as African people and in particular the Zulu people are concerned. Man is linked with his fellowmen and with the world around him (Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu). The basic idea is of sharing and partnership. Hence, death becomes a community event. In a Christian family, the home of the recently deceased becomes a place where all Christians gather to pray and also to convey their condolences to the bereaved family members. All these gestures are indications to members of the deceased family that the community shares in their grief and sorrow. In this way the community also confronts death directly, tries to cope with it and also attempts to integrate it into their lives.

Family and community solidarity is also demonstrated by the fact that people from far and near come to share in the grief and thus attempting to ease the pain of losing a dear person through death. With the influence of urbanization and industrialization people return to their places of work soon after the burial and that tends to restrict the social support that is important in African Communities.

In towns and cities, community solidarity is also evident. Men and women form burial societies which offer financial and emotional support in times of death and other crisis situations.

Family and community solidarity persist after the burial. People do not leave the bereaved family alone after death. One or two people, particularly relatives remain with the family and serve as a support system. However, due to industrialization and urbanization, this practice is fast disappearing. The decline of the extended family has also significantly affected the way in which bereavement is expressed and experienced.

The belief in the existence of the world hereafter and that the deceased continue to live in the world hereafter tend to influence African people and in particular the Zulu people in accepting death. This, however, does not imply that Zulu people do not fear death. They fear death just like all human beings. However, people are to some extent reconciled to the fact of death by the belief in the continuation of life after death. This has practical significance. It gives them a secret hope that the dead are able to take part in the world hitherto and this helps to ease the fear and anxiety of death. However, God seems to be far off and the world is under the control of the ancestors who are seen as intermediaries between man and God. God is at the apex of the hierarchical structure and his relationship with man is congruent with the Zulu social system.

The impact of social change is evident in African and Zulu societies in many respects. However, African religion is still evident. Its continuation is still apparent. It is not uncommon to attend a funeral service in which both Christian and African traditions are practised simultaneously. Both religions have impacted on

each other in a significant manner. For example African societies place more emphasis on a befitting funeral ceremony to ensure the acceptance of the deceased into his ancestral community and also not to offend the ancestors. Funerals are therefore, important features of African societies and that attitude has been carried over into Christianity. In South Africa, a church burial has become a status symbol; it is a climax of a funeral. In more urbanized societies priests are even paid a fee to conduct a burial service according to Christian rites. A contemporary feature in many deaths is a memorial service which also serves as a status symbol. Another contemporary feature in a death is the use of a casket which also serves as a status symbol. Even though there is simultaneous practice of both religions a secretive attitude toward some of the African rituals seems to have developed. For example, offerings and sacrifices to the ancestors are done under the disguise of a social party with the rituals having been performed in secrecy.

Death has become an institutionalized business. There are now death experts who provide all the needed trappings according to the deceased relatives' ability to pay for all the expenses incurred. However, this is disguised as providing service. Thus the tone of contemporary funerals is avoidance of sorrow and grieving because these issues are made to appear simple and uncomplicated. The psychological need for grieving and its therapeutic effect are thus lost.

The belief in the survival of some element of human personality is all a question of belief and of faith. It is dependent on an individual's philosophy of life and his coping mechanisms. A particular philosophy of life enables the believer to live according to the dictates of that philosophy which serves as resources to rely on in times of crisis situations. Death is a crisis and a personal philosophy that incorporates one's perception of death will provide him with a sense of resources

against the threat of death. This belief also provide him with a way of accepting and coping with the death by lessening the pain and sorrow that is felt upon the death of a loved one. The belief in immortality also gives the survivors hope that one day they will be reunited with their loved one thus, easing the anxiety and fear of death.

Eschatology has received very little attention because death is a taboo subject. Any discussion about death is regarded as depressing and people wonder whether anyone investigating it may have perverse motives. When we begin to view death as part of life and we begin to talk about it, then as people, we shall be able to come to terms with our own anxieties and we shall begin to find ways of coping and of making sense to the many mysteries that surround life and death.

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