

# PRONOUNCEMENT

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## Unveiling of Tombstones



### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Since ancient times, it has been the custom to mark the grave with a stone or monument - after Rachel died, "Jacob erected a monument on Rachel's grave" (Genesis 35:20). The marker or monument serves to identify the grave so that relatives will find it when they visit, honour the memory of the deceased, and identify a place of burial so that kohanim (priests) will avoid it as required by Jewish law. Jewish tradition makes no stipulation as to the size or type of marker or monument, but most cemeteries have specific guidelines. The Jewish teaching that all are equal in death often serves as a guide to choosing an appropriate headstone.

The marker usually includes: the English and Hebrew name of the deceased, the dates of birth and death in English and Hebrew, and the relationship to other family members (i.e., father/mother, husband/wife, grandfather/grandmother, sister/brother, etc.). Also, one often finds the Hebrew letters pay nun, standing for "po nikbar(ah), here is buried," and the letters tav, nun, tzadee, bet, hay standing for the phrase "May his/her soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life."

### THE UNVEILING CEREMONY

It is customary for the grave marker to be put in place and for an unveiling ceremony to be held after the Kaddish period [11 months for parents and 30 days for other close relatives] is over, but no later than one year after the death. While many families wait until almost the full year has passed to do the unveiling, it may be done sooner; in Israel the stone is usually placed soon after sheloshim [the first 30 days of mourning].

The unveiling ceremony consists of the recitation of Psalms, a very brief eulogy encapsulating the most salient characteristics of the deceased, removing the cloth covering the headstone, the El Maleh Rahamim [God full of compassion - a prayer] and the Mourner's Kaddish[a prayer in praise of God recited by mourners]. Traditionally, Kaddish is not recited aloud if no minyan [quorum of 10] is present.

It is customary before leaving the gravesite, to place a small stone on the marker to indicate that someone has visited the grave. This tradition may also reflect the biblical practice of marking the grave with a pile of stones. Or, it may be the end result of the custom of writing notes to the deceased and pushing them into crevices in the headstone just as notes are pushed into the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

When no crevice could be found, the note was weighted down with a stone. In time, the paper disintegrated or blew away leaving only the stone. Thus, some began to think that the leaving of a stone was the custom - and so it became the custom.

## THE VISITING OF GRAVES

While visitation of the grave is permitted at almost any time, excessive visits are discouraged. "The rabbis were apprehensive that frequent visiting to the cemetery might become a pattern of living thus preventing the bereaved from placing their dead in proper perspective" (*The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, Maurice Lamm, p. 192).

It is considered especially appropriate to visit the graves of loved ones on the last day of *shiva* [the first seven days of intensive mourning] and the last day of *sheloshim*, on *Yahrzeit* [the yearly anniversary of a person's death], on Jewish fast days, and before or between the High Holy Days. Traditional Jews will often recite psalms while visiting, study a short passage from the *Mishnah* [an early rabbinic legal code], or recite "El Maleh Rahamim."

## TRADITIONAL AFRICAN VIEW

At the heart of the rite of ancestor worship in African culture lays the **African Traditional Religion**. And to make it even more difficult, **ATR** is intertwined with African Culture in a broader sense. African Culture is a communal culture, a culture where the individual exist as result of the others. Taylor (1963:155) says: "...the African family is a single continuing unit, conscious of no radical distinction of being between the living and the dead". The individual's way of life is therefore dependant on that what is determined and predetermined by his/her ancestors and extended families. Amanze (1998:1) refers to the Tswana culture and then states: "...it is important first and foremost to understand Tswana traditional religion as a living faith among Batswana today...."

The cultural practices within the broader African culture are, as it is with some other main cultures of the world, intertwined with practices in ATR. This is important as it would do injustice to our question at stake to try and see it as something standing on its own - something that can be theologically evaluated and dealt with accordingly.

### **The Ancestors amongst the Sotho/Tswana/Shona people**

As this research has been done mainly under the Batswana, reference will be made in relation to their beliefs.

The ancestors in the Tswana culture are known as BADIMO. BADIMO is the plural of the word MODIMO, which is generally used and translated for “God”. BADIMO has been called by MODIMO to be with him. But because MODIMO cannot be the people, he assigns this responsibility to the BADIMO. To fulfill this task certain special powers have been assigned to the BADIMO. BADIMO is powerful but not all powerful. They are therefore the link between MODIMO and mankind, they provide guidance to people and they direct the lives of the African people (Dreyer & Mjwabe 1995:553; Amanze 1995:8; Mbiti 1971: 27,28).

This thought links up with the ATR and African cultural thought that although a person has died he/she still needs to be cared for in the spirit world. This responsibility first lies with the closest family of the deceased.

They need to visit the grave frequently. Offerings like bowl of food also need to be placed so that the ancestor will not get hungry in the other world. Communication with the deceased is also possible through the traditional - and witchdoctor (Daneel 1973: 46,48; Amanze 1998:9).

Practices differ however from sub-culture to sub-culture. The Shona culture for instance approaches the ancestors during rain-rites. The whole community forms part of this passage when each head of family is given an amount of sorghum for the brewing of sorghum-beer. The beer is then thrown onto the graves of the ancestors while leaders are speaking to the ancestors through mediums. The “great ancestor” is only approached at specific times (Daneel 1973: 52-53).

In the Tswana culture the ancestors mainly appear to the people in their dreams. Certain orders like the slaughtering of an animal or the drinking of beer is then conveyed (Amanze 1998:13; Dreyer & Mjwabe 1995:554).

It is however during the funeral ceremony that ancestral practice is the most prominent. One can miss anything but you cannot miss a funeral. Not only would you upset the family (because of the communal worldview), but you would definitely upset the deceased and the ancestors. The whole funeral-passage starts with prayer meetings during the days preceding the actual funeral. At the evening before the funeral the body of the deceased is taken to the house and kept in the room where the death has taken place. Candles are lit to keep the evil spirits away. Early the next morning the funeral takes place. After the funeral there is a meal at the deceased’s house.

From this it is evident that funerals are very time-consuming, tiring, emotional and expensive rites. One can actually refer to the Tswana-culture as a culture of funerals.

From the above discussion it has become now evident that COMMUNITY is practiced in many African cultures today. It forms such an integral part of the culture and lifestyle of the African people that a holistic approach is needed to make a proper evaluation.

### **The ancestors in the Xhosa culture**

Izinyanya/amadlozi/badimo/vadzimo/abeZimu - refers to those who have died and joined the spiritual world. The departed from this world, the ancestors, are believed and felt to be the mediators between the living and the spiritual world. Death is not understood as the destruction of life. It is understood as partial physical separation from the living because ancestors sometimes reveal themselves to the members of the family.

Consequently, to the clan members the deceased are not dead but only “asleep”.

The way in which ancestors are perceived in African life points to five fundamental beliefs and principles:

- A recognition that each human being is made up of not only flesh, bones and blood, but also of spirit or soul.
- Death only means the physical separation between this world in which we live and the spiritual world. Therefore only the human body dies and decomposes; the spirit (soul) does not perish. As a result even in the grave bone symbolize life.
- As ancestors are part of the community, human relations especially within the clan (family circle), do not die. People come and go - they are born and at some point die, but their relationship, once established goes on forever.
- In the light of the above, ancestors or the spirits of the departed, play the vital role of intermediaries between the God and human beings ([www.nalane.net/xhosa](http://www.nalane.net/xhosa): The Xhosa Virtual Resource Network).

### **WORSHIP OR VENERATION?**

Most of the African theologians (Mbiti 1971; Nyamiti 1984; Mosothoane 1973: 86-95; Taylor 1963) argue that ancestors are not worshipped, but just honoured. In contrast with this view are the classical protestant perspective of ancestor worship - and therefore a contravening of the 1st Commandment (Daneel 1973:57; Thom 1990:73).

Yet, as it has been already suggested, the answer is not as simplistic as it seems to be. From a biblical perspective the following reasons would then be given in support of the view that the ancestral rite is indeed in its roots, unbiblical.

## **The Trinity**

### **The concept of God**

It is clear that the African concept of a god is one that is foreign from the Biblical perspective. In summary (see Amanze 1998:4; Coetzee 1969:19; Idowu 1973:139; Mbiti 1971:27,28; Nyirongo 1997:27):

- The African god is a distant god. It is clear from the Bible that God, though sin has separated us from Him; still wants the presence of His people. This is not only evident in the New Testament but also in the Old Testament.
- This god does not communicate with ordinary people. The God of the Bible very much want communion and communication with His people. This is also evident in the Old Testament and New Testament.
- He makes use of the ancestors to communicate to the ordinary people. Yet it is never stated in the Bible that God made use of any ancestors to communicate messages to His people.

### **What the Bible does state is:**

- God used the history of the ancestors continually to warn and guide His people. God used living prophets in the Old Testament and apostles in the New Testament to carry His messages, e.g. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel.
- History is always evidence that what has been prophesied by the prophets did in fact happen.
- There are many examples in the Bible where God has made use of ordinary people to convey messages, e.g. Samuel to Eli in 1 Sam 3; Nathan to David in 2 Sam 12.
- There are instances where God made use of angels to appear to certain people, yet angels are heavenly beings that were created by God at the beginning of times, and can therefore not be considered as ancestors (Num. 22:21-35, 38; 1 Kings 13:18; 2 Kings 1:3-4; 2 Kings 1:15; 1 Chron. 21:18; Dan. 8:16; Dan. 9:21-22; Dan. 10:5-6, 10-11; Zech. 1:9; Zech. 2:3; Zech. 4:1).

It is therefore as a result of a misconception of the God of the Bible, that the worship of ancestors is taking place. The ancestor take the place of God, in fact becomes a god in itself. Just like the God of the Bible this ancestral god have powers to punish, powers to kill, powers to decide on a life - and therefore the fear for them.

### **The concept of Jesus**

It is necessary to say at this point that although Jesus is regarded as a very special figure in African Traditional Religion, and that there is indeed certain concepts regarding Jesus as a healer (Daneel 1974, 162ff), these concepts can only be regarded as a point from where the gospel can enter into a culture.

Fact of the matter, in the ancestral rite, there seems to be a total absence of any work Jesus has done on Calvary. As result of that Jesus is only regarded as a physical healer. He is the one that is an example, just as other ancestors, to the people (Nyamiti 1984). It is never evident that the risen Christ is being exalted above the ancestors and other mediums.

As time and place would not allow it, the message in the Book of Hebrews cannot be dealt with here extensively. Yet the message is clear:

- There is no other mediator than Christ (Hebr.9:15).
- Christ is the only one exalted to the right hand of God (Hebr 1: 13).
- Christ offered Himself so that there can be communion, communication and identification with the ordinary person again (Hebr 8).
- No more offering can convince God - it has been made in the death of Christ (Hebr 9).
- Christ is the ultimate, there is no need to look for anything else as Hebrews 10:11-14 says so beautifully:

*And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.*

Scripture is clear that he who disregards Jesus in any way is not worth the Kingdom of heaven - even more; he has no part in God's Kingdom.

### **The concept of the Holy Spirit**

The African is a spiritual being. He lives in a world where spirits control the wellbeing of the person and the community at large (Maimela 1985:71; Theron 1987:8). It is therefore not strange for the African to form a concept of another spirit, that of the spirit of God. Yet this spirit is seen as something separate from the triune God. It is not the Holy Spirit that comforts, that leads the person into God's presence. That is in essence the function of the ancestral spirits. Again the focus is away from the Trinity to that of ancestors. And that is in essence the worship of false gods.

### **Christ above culture**

This brings us to the statement that Christ is above any culture. In short this would imply that no culture has the authority to assume any cultural practice as above the work Jesus has done on the cross (the gospel).

Niebuhr calls the people in this group synthesis's because they desire to shape their ethics according to both Christ and culture. Culture is viewed as "both divine and human in its origin. Both holy and sinful..." (p.121) Also, the synthesist claims that "there are other laws besides the laws of Jesus Christ; and they are also imperative, and also from God." (p.122)

In Galatians 3:24-25, the apostle Paul compares the Law to a PAIDAGOGOS, a person who served as half teacher, half babysitter in Greek and Roman society. The idea is that the Law pointed the way to Christ and is then superseded by Christ. The synthesist looks at culture in much the same way. Although culture is affected by sin, it still acts as a restrainer against sin. Christ, then, is above culture and enables us to rise above the basic demands that culture makes on us.

The divine law revealed by God through His prophets and above all through His Son is partly coincident with the natural law, and partly transcends it as the law of man's supernatural life. The problem is that when synthesists call people to follow a culturally based ethic they often don't realize just how culturally-based it is. The accusation, then, is that the synthesist inevitably "become[s] more concerned about the defense of the culture synthesized with the gospel than about the gospel itself...and thus becomes a cultural Christian."

The work of Christ has already been summarized in the Book of Hebrews and is also evident throughout the New Testament. This is the borders within which the ancestral rite needs to be interpreted then. No matter how important or well established a cultural practice may be - if it is contrary to the gospel, then it needs to be changed by those very Biblical principles.

JS Mbiti (1978:281) provides a clear summary of the concept that the gospel (Christ) exceeds culture:

*“...we must also, without fear and hesitation, bring the gospel to bear upon our culture in order to evaluate it, to judge it, to transform it. Because culture is created man, and because man is sinful, what he creates, however beautiful, however great, however cultivated it might be, it nevertheless bears the imprint of human sinfulness... Culture has its own demons, which only the gospel is equipped to exorcise and disarm.”*

### **The danger of syncretism**

One can never allow any culture to interpret cultural practices from within the culture and then try to bring Biblical principles in, in order to try and make it kosher. This would lead to a weakened gospel, a gospel where the Bible then would be used as a type of spice to salt the cultural view. It leads to a distortion of the Biblical principles and a message that loses its power in the end.

As a result of a theology from below, and the fact that Christ is not seen as coming from above the culture, the ancestral practice has in many ways lead to syncretism. Distorted views of God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, the church, the family, the importance and use of Scripture, and the role of the religious leaders is evident.

The question that ultimately arises is whether COMMUNIO SANCTORUM should be disregarded and rejected and stopped completely within the African Traditional religions and culture.

In summary the following notes:

- Biblical principals are universal and cannot be bent to accommodate COMMUNIO SANCTORUM.
- COMMUNIO SANCTORUM as practiced in the African culture and the sub-cultures within it, should be evaluated and tested under the spotlight of evangelical Biblical principles.
- Elements of COMMUNIO SANCTORUM that can be used as a gateway to address the wrong perceptions and practices within the rite should be utilized.
- Elements which are contrary to the gospel should be discarded but needs to be done within the process of inculcation. In short this would imply that the unbiblical elements would be changed by the gospel by way of teaching and replacement of proper biblical cultural elements.

Mbiti (1978:313) sums this notion up as follows:

*“African Religion... has been a valuable and indispensable lamp on the spiritual path. But,... it cannot be made a substitute for the eternal gospel which is like the sun that brilliantly illuminates the path... The gospel has come to fulfill and complete African religiosity.”*

In conclusion it has to be said that from a Biblical perspective, and taken into account what is evident from an extensive study of the ancestral rite in the African traditional religion, that the rite is principally unbiblical. Yet some of the practices have already been renewed by Scripture through the ages and can be regarded as veneration of the dead. In the writing of a relevant Christian Africa Theology entry points need to be found that would serve as PREPARATION EVANGELICA for a Biblical practice which would be relevant within the African culture.

## **AFRICAN PENTECOSTAL PERSPECTIVE**

In a paper by Allan Anderson, read at the Annual Conference of the Southern African Missiological Society in January 1993, and published in MISSIONALIA 21:1 (26-39) under the heading **African Pentecostalism and the Ancestors: Confrontation or Compromise?**, he said the following:

*“The ancestors are believed to be those who have died, who exist in some usually undefined and unknown place to which the living has no access. There they look after their descendants’ welfare, and expect their cooperation in return. They have power to both help and harm their wards - although most people in our research believed that the ancestors’ function was to help and not to harm their families. Several of our respondents felt quite strongly that the ancestors never harm their wards; they are only there to help them and protect them. They only passively bring harm, by withdrawing their protection when their instructions have not been carried out. The ancestor cult is a family affair; and members of a particular family usually observe the family customs relating to their particular ancestors, at least once annually. Not every deceased family member becomes an ancestor. One man told us that ancestors are only those who are especially chosen to belong to the group of ancestors. Both his parents had died; but only his mother was an ancestor. He knew this because she was the only one who appeared to the family. Ancestors reveal themselves mostly through dreams, but also less frequently through (day) visions and through diviners.”*

With reference to the importance of ancestral veneration in present day Townships he furthers asserts.

*“The ancestor cult is the central feature of African religion, the heart of the African spirit world. It is not an outmoded belief which is dying out in South Africa’s urban areas. The veneration of ancestors is still widely practised in the black townships of South Africa; although the incidence of the ancestor cult among church members is not as high today as it was thirty years ago. Wherever we approached the subject of ancestors in Soshanguve, there was usually lively discussion. For a great many urban black people the ancestors are a reality, to be given due acknowledgement and to whom recourse is had for the provision of felt needs. Many respondents said that the ancestors were the benevolent guardians and protectors of people. One respondent said that even God was unable to do anything without the ancestors. Another said that a person could not pray to God without mentioning the ancestors; they were the mediators who would make the prayer successful. They were able to give a person power to pray to God.”*

With specific reference to the Pentecostals in the Townships in Gauteng where they conducted the empirical research, he continued saying:

*“Members of urban Pentecostal mission churches and independent Pentecostal churches (constituting 9% of the total population) were generally unqualified and unanimous in their rejection of the ancestor cult and all the rituals associated with it. The ancestors are believed to exist, but Christians do not need to do anything about them or to make ritual killings for them, because they have no power over Christians.”*

All but five of the 140 Pentecostals interviewed in our preliminary survey (97%) said that they were opposed to the practice of ritual killing. 132 (95%) said that they did not reverence the ancestors; and 134 (96%) said that they did not consult diviners. This indicates that it is the only grouping of black churches in South Africa which has almost totally rejected these traditional religious practices. It displays a radical break with what they regard as 'pagan' practices. Pentecostals were quite sure that a person who is 'saved' does not do these things. They represent the 'old life' out of which everything has become new. In this respect there is a marked contrast to most other types of church in Soshanguve. Pentecostals are more forthright in their rejection of those traditional practices which they see as incompatible with their Christianity, than the members of other church types is. Our research indicated that only 4% of the Pentecostals interviewed practised the ancestor cult in any way, compared to 43% in the mission churches, 54% in the indigenous Pentecostal-type churches, and 68% in the indigenous Ethiopian-type churches.

These figures suggest that the gap between members of Pentecostal churches and members of indigenous Pentecostal-type churches is wider than it appears on the surface. Western Christianity has definitely influenced the Pentecostals in a much greater way. The Pentecostal-type church members, who are less doctrine oriented and less inhibited to discuss ancestors than Pentecostals are, have a greater awareness of the African spirit world and therefore may be making a greater contribution to contextualisation in this respect. A black theologian once said in a personal interview that in actual practice, the Pentecostal rejection of the ancestor cult was ambivalent, and that it was very difficult for anyone to be disentangled from social practices connected with the ancestor cult, without separating oneself from being an African. My impression is that many African Pentecostals have in fact done just that - and it is highly unlikely that they would admit to having denied their Africaness."

He also quotes an unnamed AFM persona grata who hold the following view:

"I personally do not venerate the ancestors, but I believe that ancestors are there. Ancestors do exist; they are people who have fallen asleep. Before I was saved I used to venerate them; and I know what they can do in the life of a person. You really can become a slave of the ancestors. Even the Bible acknowledges that there are 'gods' and that we should not worship any other gods but our Father in heaven. They do have the power to help or harm you - that I saw when I was not yet saved... when I did what I was instructed, such as slaughtering a goat, then I saw things definitely improving. They have the power to harm you if you do not follow their instructions; and they have the power to help you if you follow them.... I believe that if people knew the power of the gospel they would not have anything to do with the ancestors. But because they are bound by the devil they are still in darkness.

*They go up and down buying goats, slaughtering cows - and nothing seems to come right. So if only people could know the power of the gospel and believe in Jesus Christ, they could be set free... now that they are still in darkness they must do as the devil commands them."*

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In the light of the historical background, the Traditional African View and the African Pentecostal Perspective one can make some remarks and recommendations with reference to the Unveiling of Tomb Stones and the accompanying practices that are in the order of the day.

Unveiling of tomb stones and the visiting of graves has a biblical basis, which is in some way still practiced in Judeo-Christian communities throughout the world. The purpose of the unveiling and visiting of the graves of loved ones as practiced by numerous communities is to do this in remembrance of those who passed on.

Some people do these unveilings and grave visits at the anniversary of the death of the loved ones, during special days such as Mother's/Father's Day, Easter, Christmas and or when they are attending the funeral of friends or family. One can only read the newspapers under the headings funerals and burials to become aware of these practices in other communities.

In some communities these events were related to close family, while in other communities these ceremonies were celebrated by church services where reflection and stories of the deceased would be recited in remembrance of the deceased.

The practice of the unveiling of tomb stones and the visiting of the graves of loved ones in some communities was linked to ancestral worship and or veneration. In situations where the practice of ancestral worship and or veneration was at the order of the day, the ancestors occupy the space that in biblical terms was reserved for God. If and when this happens the practices of the unveiling of tomb stones and the visiting of the graves of loved ones is contradictory to the Bible and should not be practiced by any AFM member.

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