

# **THE CONTINUITY OF LIFE IN AFRICAN RELIGION WITH REFERENCE TO MARRIAGE AND DEATH AMONG THE ZULU PEOPLE :**

## **Chapter one : Introduction**

### **1.1. Parameters of this dissertation (research question or statement)**

This dissertation aims to investigate the continuity of life, as it is evident in the rites of marriage and death among the Zulu people.

If there is belief in life after death, is it the result of the influence of the other religions of the world, like Islam, Christianity, Judaism and others? Or has this belief always been part of the religion of the people of Africa? These and other questions have to be addressed in this study.

There is some limitation to this study. It is limited to the field of Religious Studies. Religious Studies is a broad field of study for there are many religions of the world.

This study is therefore within the scope of African Religion. Even within this scope of African Religion there is a problem since there are many beliefs and practices in the African continent. This study focuses on one group of people : the ZULUS.

### **1.2. Relevance of the topic**

African Religion sustained the people of Africa for centuries before the advent of other religions into the African continent.

The political changes in South Africa have resulted in a new interest in the different religions, particularly in African Religion. This is evident in the South African way of life in the new democratic order. What is African for example: cultural practices, beliefs, norms and values like ubuntu – humanness, African renaissance, African heritage, the understanding of the good news (gospel) from an African perspective are revisited. It is in this vein that Idowu has posed a very pertinent question: “With the modern understanding of religion, can African Religion still be regarded as simply an illusion?” (1973: X). He goes on to say “... the eyes of African people, especially scholars, are being opened to the fact that they have a certain God-given heritage which has its own intrinsic values.... These are the values they are seeking to recover or refurbish” (1973: X).”

The above mentioned insights have prompted the researcher to take a closer look at two rites of passage in an African life: marriage and death, and see how the Zulus in particular expressed their understanding of the continuity of life as a sacred entity through these rites.

All religions, including African Religion are now given exposure in South Africa and have influence on the lives of the peoples of South Africa. Although religious diversity has always been present, it would seem that South Africa has become more multi-religious than before.

The multi-religious nature of this country is highlighted in the TV religious programmes. All faiths are given an opportunity to address the viewers.

This religious nature of South Africa is the phenomenon that should not be ignored.

### 1.3. The reason for a particular interest in the continuity of life

Why this particular interest in the “continuity of life”? This concept clearly spells out that African Religion expresses the African’s understanding and experience of life. It is the religion of the living and the living dead (ancestors). The interaction and relationship between the living and the living dead is very strong. The life of the living is empty and meaningless without the contact with the living dead. The life of the living dead becomes a dangerous curse to the living if the living ignore the ancestors.

The concept “continuity of life” further highlights the corporate nature of the African world-view, according to which life is lived and celebrated corporately. Alive or dead, an African belongs to the clan and this results in a happy life. Hence the African maxim, “I belong, so I am”.

### 1.4. Personal interest in the continuity of life

There are two reasons: Firstly, the researcher has been exposed to the Christian religion from birth. The impression, which has been imprinted in his mind, is that Christianity is the only true religion. All other religions find their fulfilment in it. Worse still, the researcher has been taught that African beliefs and practices are the works of darkness and mere figments of imagination.

But with more publications on African Religion coming out, it has become clear that African Religion is also a religion with a full status like the other world religions. For instance, Christian teachers teach that human life is sacred for its source is the Creator God. This life does not end at death. It continues even in the hereafter. African Religion and other religions like Islam have a similar claim. Hence the decision to investigate this concept: continuity of life.

Secondly, the researcher is particularly interested in the continuity of life because the whole of African Religion – the beliefs and practices – pivots around the relationship between the living and the living dead.

#### 1.5. The reason for concentrating on the Zulus

The researcher is a Zulu by birth and therefore familiar with the Zulu rituals and customs.

Another reason for concentrating on the Zulus is historical. This goes back to the days of King Shaka who built up the Zulu nation to be a force to reckon with. Many Zulus were scattered all over Southern Africa as a result of King Shaka's turbulent reign. As they scattered all over Africa, the Zulu rituals and beliefs were introduced in their adopted countries. This enhanced commonality that was already there in African beliefs and practices. For the researcher the Zulus then became the obvious choice when he decided to write on the topic at hand.

#### 1.6. There are four main components to the theme under investigation:

- a. The idea of continuity of life as a religious phenomenon.
- b. African religion as a religious tradition with its own right and integrity.
- c. The significance of marriage and death in Zulu culture.
- d. A brief outline of the religion of the Zulus.

##### 1.6.1. The idea of the continuity of life as a religious phenomenon

All accepted religions have the idea of the “continuity of life” as an important aspect of their religious teachings.

## Islam

Life belongs to the Supreme Being, ALLAH. The Muslim believes in life after death. The human destiny is either heaven (with Allah) or hell (where Allah is not found) J.S.Kruger et al 1996:247

## Hinduism

Brahman (Creator) is the source of life. Life is therefore sacred (animal, plant and human). The Hindu believe that the soul survives after death. So life finds its fulfilment in Brahman. J.S.Kruger et al 1996:75

## Buddhism

There is no clear indication of the origin of human life. But the continuity of life is implied in the Buddhist's belief in re-incarnation. There is also belief in the heavenly bliss or happiness (Nirvana) as the highest goal. J.S.Kruger et al 1996:115

## Judaism

God (YAHWEH) is the source of life. For the Jew, life lived in God here on earth continues after the physical death. J.S.Kruger et al 1996:164

## Christianity

God is the source of life. Human life begins and end in God. The Christian believes in life after death. Eternal life in God here on earth and in the hereafter. John 3:16

There is a definite commonality regarding the “continuity of life” between the different religions.

This “continuity of life” is also a prevalent belief amongst the primal religions of the world. For instance in Asia the Chenchus believe that the soul returns to the creator after death; the Gonds honour the ancestors; the Konds believe that a decent funeral assures the dead person of a continued peaceful existence (Thorpe 1992: 15)

In Oceania and Australia people believe that the spirit returns to the sky where it came from, and Melanesians believe in life after death and sacrifice to the ancestors. (Thorpe 1992:88, 90)

In Central and South America the Incas, Aztecs (Mexicans), Karingang (Eastern Brazil) and the Trumai (Central Brazil) all believe in life after death – Thorpe 1992: 71)

In North America the Eskimo also believe that the deceased person travels to the land of the dead where there is plenty of game. (Thorpe 1992:50)

In Africa, the Zulus and some other tribal groups believe that people do not die. They “sleep”, “pass on” or are “silent”.

## 1.7. African religion as a recognized religious tradition

This dissertation seeks to argue that African religion stands out as a religion in its own right. It is not a subsidiary of some world religion. African Religion displays characteristics which are common in all the religions of the world, religions like Islam, Judaism and Christianity. They are:

### 1.7.1. African Religion places emphasis on the belief in a Supreme Being

Almost all known tribal groups in Africa: hold a passionate belief in the Supreme Being. The terms “*deus otiosus*” and “*deus remotus*” (distant and absentee God) are based on a limited understanding of the Africans’ belief in the Supreme Being. The idea of a distant or absentee God is a chimera to the African. For the African the presence of the wholly other pervades all aspects of life. Life is therefore sacred. The African walks on holy ground every day.

#### 1.7.2. African religion places emphasis on social harmony and well-being

Individualism is not highlighted in African Religion. Individuals are part and parcel of a larger group. The individual life is lived and influenced by “the extended family, clan or tribe, ancestors, God and nature” (Thorpe 1992: 34). There must be peace and harmony in all these areas if individuals are to develop into wholeness and shalom (peace and contentment). Health, balance, harmony, order and continuity are ideals for which people should strive (Thorpe 1992: 111)

#### 1.7.3. The adherents of African Religion believe in the existence of spirits

These spirits can be divided into three categories: ancestral spirits, nature spirits and deities.

The ancestral spirits predominate in the greater part of the African continent. The tribal groups in Southern and Western Africa communicate with the living dead, with only a few exceptions e.g. the Ga, Nuer and TIV people (Thorpe 1992: 34).

The nature spirits are simply a belief that the whole of the natural universe is imbued with spiritual power.

The ancestral spirits play an important role as mediators between the living and the Supreme Being.

Amongst these spirits there are also harmful spirits, which are manipulated by witches in order to harm the living people. These are evil spirits.

#### 1.7.4. Other features

Apart from the above mentioned features of African Religion, there are other features which African Religion shares with other traditional religions of the world.

##### 1.7.4.1. Use of myths

All societies use myths as the basis for their beliefs and practices. The myth (i.e. story whose origin is unknown) conveys the truth, even if the story is not historically correct. What is important is the truth behind that story. This truth guides the clan in its beliefs and behaviour. There are many myths about the origin of things.

Two examples from the Zulu people are:

People originated from the reeds or bed of reeds, hence the corporate nature of African life.

People were originally destined for immortality, that is not to die. The chameleon was sent from the Creator in heaven to the people on earth. The message to the people on earth was that they shall not die. The chameleon delayed along the way. The lizard outran the chameleon with a counter message and



told the people that they shall die. That is how death originated.

#### 1.7.4.2. Rituals

These are forms or rites that have to do with a ceremony. Any ritual involves action and words.

A ritual is performed in order to restore or maintain a relationship between persons or between persons and spiritual powers e.g. appeasing angry ancestors; initiating a baby into the community (imbeleko ritual); farewell speech for a woman who leaves her parents for marriage; a send-off of the dying, praying that they should be accepted by the living dead or departed spirits; purifying individuals or groups after breaking a taboo.

#### 1.7.4.3. Prayers, taboos and sacrifices

Prayers, taboos and sacrifices are essential aspects of the African's religious life and are typical of all known religious groups. Africans pray, offer sacrifices and have some prohibitions or taboos. Prayers take different forms and include the spoken word, repeated oral prayer; smoke from burnt medicine for healing; dancing and singing (Thorpe 1992: 112). Smoke from burnt medicine for healing becomes a prayer to the ancestors as well as an effective means of driving away evil powers.

Like rituals, prayers maintain good relationships between humans and the supernatural powers or power like the ancestors.

Sacrifices, where the blood of an animal is shed, are for appeasing or invoking blessings from the ancestors.

Taboos prohibit people from performing certain functions e.g. a menstruating wife should not cook for her husband; a woman who is still mourning the death of her husband should not move about after sunset.

#### 1.7.4.4. A holistic approach to life

One of the outstanding characteristics of all primal religions is that they make no distinction between the sacred and the profane. All life is sacred. It is the gift of the Supreme Being. African Religion is no exception to this unity of life. All aspects of life form a unity – “Visible and invisible, physical and spiritual” and still maintain a spiritual dimension (Thorpe 1992: 114).

#### 1.7.4.5. Animism and awe

Animism has got to do with human nature as well as the natural phenomena like rivers, trees and mountains being imbued with the superior power (soul or spirit). The different clans or tribal groups in Africa have different versions of animism. It is there as in all other primal religions of the world. Berglund (1976 : 102), writing on the Zulus says the spirits live in the sacred places of the household as well as along the rivers, forests and mountains.

Awe (holy fear) is also an essential part of the African Traditional Religion. The awareness of the presence of the

holy and pervading Creator of heaven and earth result in this awe or *mysterium tremendum* (holy fear).

#### 1.7.4.6. The use of magical powers

The use of magical powers is another important ingredient in African Traditional Religion. For instance, the mirror magic is practised in Africa, that is, using the mirror to reflect the image of a wrong doer and stabbing it causes sharp pains or death to the victim.

What Thorpe calls “contagious magic” is also practised. This magic means that the things that have been part of the body can be used to harm that body, e.g. sputum, hair, finger nails etc. Whenever discarded these items have to be destroyed in order not to be used by the witches to harm people.

#### 1.7.4.7. The importance of sacred places

The different tribal groups venerate different objects such as mountains, trees, rivers, stones and animals. The Zulus for instance, have the upper part of the thatched house (*umsamo*), the cattle enclosure, the hearth as holy places where the ancestors live.

A certain type of tree known as *umphafa* or *umlahlankosi* (*zizyphus mucronata*) is used to bring back the spirit of the departed person to look after the living members of the family. The branches and leaves of this tree are also used to attract ancestral spirits from an old kraal to the new one.

With these features: use of myths, rituals, prayers and sacrifices, a holistic approach to life, animism and awe, use of magical powers and the important role of sacred places, it becomes quite clear that African Religion deserves respect like any other world religion.

It is important to state here and now that the common features between African Religion and other world religions qualifies African Religions to have a world status or to be counted as one of the religions of the world with its own unique status.

**1.8. The centrality of marriage and death and how the rituals connected with both relate to the central theme “continuity of life”**

Marriage and death promote the continuity of life in African Religion. That is why the two rites have been selected.

The rituals around marriage clearly enhance the continuity of life through procreation. Childlessness and barenness are regarded as a curse from the ancestors and child bearing or procreation are regarded as a blessing from the ancestors.

The children in a marriage ensure the continuity of the parents’ life through ritual remembrance (regular slaughtering usually accompanied by the brewing of African beer – umqombothi. So the more children one has, the more people there are to remember one and the more chances are there to prosper in the world of the living dead.

Physical death as a means of an end to life is unknown in African Religion. When a person has died, the Zulu would say useye koyise-mkhulu (he/she has gone to be with the forefathers). When a Zulu says the praise – songs of the living dead - he would end by saying asifi siyalala (- we do not die but sleep).

This comes out clearly in burial rituals and farewell speeches of the dying Africans. This is also true in send-off rituals during marriage ceremonies.

The following are the typical funeral prayers from Africa:

From the Zulus:                   “Farewell, our father. Protect us your children from suffering, starvation, disease, death of stock, drought and from barrenness.”

From Ghana:                    “You are leaving us today; we have performed your funeral. Do not let any of us fall ill. Let us get money to pay the expenses of your funeral. Let the women bear children. Life to all of us. Life to the chief.” (Taylor 1963: 109)

From the Tswanas:            “Remember us where you go! – ask them to send us rain, food and grain.” (Setiloane 1986: 7)

The continuity of life is highlighted in the above statements during the funeral or mortuary rites. Life with the ancestors as well as the blessing with children promote this continuity.

## 1.9. A brief outline of the religion of the Zulus

### 1.9.1. Belief in the Supreme Being

The Zulus believe in Mvelinqangi (first appearer or exister). Mvelinqangi is the source of all that exists. Mvelinqangi is sometimes referred to as uHlanga (Reed), uMdali (Creator), uMenzi (Maker), uMdali and u-Menzi are the praise-names.

Another name for the Supreme Being is iNkosi yeZulu (the Lord-of-the-sky).

Other praise names are uSomandla (the father of all power) and uMnini mandla (owner of power).

How the Supreme Being created the human beings, as well as heaven and earth, is not important to the Zulus. Speculation about creation is not part of their belief system.

### 1.9.2. A holistic approach to life

All life is imbued with a sense of the holy or the sacred. Life is one whole reality, it is not compartmentalized. The dichotomy between the sacred and the secular or profane is unknown because life, the whole of life, is sacred.

### 1.9.3. The significance of the ancestors as mediators

There is a strong bond of relationship between the living and the living dead (ancestors). The ancestors either bless or curse the living. If the living live in peace and harmony this is always a blessing from the ancestors e.g. good harvest, fertility in cattle, sheep and goats. Where the ancestors are not happy, there will be drought, disease, and no procreation.

The living have to remember the ancestors and appease them through sacrificial ritual if angry. The people of Zululand and other African tribal groups venerate or respect rather than worship, the ancestors. The Supreme Power (Mvelinqangi) is worshipped. The Supreme Power (Mvelinqangi – First Appearer) is worshipped but He is addressed

through the living dead (Ancestors or Shades). He is addressed through the living dead, ancestors or shades.

The reason for not addressing the Supreme Power directly is attributed to the African world-view. A senior person is not approached directly by the subjects, the subjects approach the chief through the headsmen (izinduna); the son approaches the father through the mother, aunts or uncles. A direct approach is discouraged. It is a sign of disrespect.

For this reason the ancestors play a leading part in the religious life of the Zulus and other tribal groups.

#### 1.10. Methodology or theoretical approach

The phenomenological approach is appropriate for this study. This approach concerns itself with the things themselves, intentionality, epoche and essences.

Literally the term “phenomenology” refers to “that which appears”. This method has been selected for it is the most helpful in human sciences. Its chief exponent was the well-known philosopher Edmund Husserl.

The four characteristics which are mentioned above have been found to be suitable for any research in the Science of Religion. (Kruger J S 1982)

##### 1.10.1. The things themselves

The modern scientists are concerned that science has lost contact with the world that is experienced daily by men and women. Science can therefore no longer address life and blood issues of the day. It is abstract and irrelevant.

Phenomenology therefore seeks to go back to the basics in order to rediscover the contact with “the raw material of life itself” (Kruger 1982: 17). The scientist has therefore to describe accurately what one sees.

Generalizations will therefore not help in a study like this. One has to investigate the basics like, what do the Zulus and other ethnic groups do in marriage or in death? What words and rituals are used?

Rituals like the slaughter of the farewell beast (inkomo yokumphelekezela), the farewell speech of the head of the family – accompanied by the slaughter of a goat, the burial with some possession or seeds; ukubuyisa ritual (bringing back the spirit of the dead person to the family household to protect and care for the living members); the sacred places (or centres), e.g. back of the kraal, the back of the hut (umsamo), the threshold (umnyango) of the hut, the forests as well as the remembrance rituals, are the components of this study.

This aspect of phenomenology – the things themselves – will therefore be beneficial in this study.

#### 1.10.2.Intentionality

Phenomenology seeks to discover and describe how people themselves experience and understand their world. So the emphasis is on the relationship between people and their world (Kruger 1982: 18).

The phenomenologist of religion therefore focuses not on God in Himself, but on God or Mvelinqangi (First Appearer) as the Zulus experience Him in their rituals.



So in applying this method in this research, one has to try and look at the religions, beliefs and practices of marriage and death through the eyes of the Zulus, then their intentions will be better understood.

#### 1.10.3.Epoche

The main aim of phenomenology is to penetrate and reach the core of things. It is therefore imperative for the researcher to suspend all previous assumptions. The phenomenologists call this practice epoche.

There must be a measure of openness to learning in the study of a particular religion. A temporary suspension of one's religious beliefs and convictions can therefore be helpful. There can of course be no complete emptiness or clean slate, it is only a temporary suspension in order to learn. A Christian, for example, can hold back his or her beliefs and convictions in order to learn from the religious practices and convictions of the African people.

#### 1.10.4.Essences

A phenomenologist examines the essences of a phenomenon that is studied. The essential aspects of, for instance, prayer as a human act is investigated.

The task of this study is to look at the essences of the rites of passage that promote the continuity of life: marriage and death.

This approach is going to be used in conjunction with the hermeneutical approach, which seeks to interpret texts and actions. In this study actions or practices are the main focus, for African Religion is not a religion of the book. The beliefs of Africans are expressed in action.

## 1.11. Data collection procedure and techniques

To effect the above stated methods the following aspects of the method are going to be used:

1.11.1 Interviews: This includes the following categories of people with a broad knowledge of the beliefs and practices of African Religion.

### 1.11.1.1. Ministers of religion

They have a good knowledge of what it is to be both a Christian and African with the background of African beliefs and practices. Most Ministers of Religion were brought up by parents who practice both religions.

The Ministers of Religion are also directly involved as they minister to the people who practise both religions.

### 1.11.1.2. The elderly people

These are the religious leaders of the African Religion. They venerate the ancestors, sacrifice to them and also appease them in times of hardships.

The elderly people are also the teachers of the clan. They regard it their duty to convey African cultures and beliefs to the

younger generations. So they are priests and teachers of African Religion.

#### 1.11.1.3. Sangomas

The Sangomas are spirit driven and communicate with the ancestors through dreams and visions. The Sangomas are therefore directly involved in traditional religions.

#### 1.11.1.4. Specialists in zulu culture and literature

These are people like authors in African Literature, lecturers and others. These people should be interviewed because they have a broader scientific view. They have done research in Zulu Culture, for instance. They know the views of different writers in culture and religion (of the Zulus).

Open-ended questions were used in these interviews. Open-ended questions are recommended in a qualitative approach type of acquiring information. These questions are more narrative orientated than in a statistical approach and they are also recommended because they allow a natural or a relaxed setting or environment.

In addition, the open-ended questions do not confine the interviewee. They enable him/her to give as much information as possible.

### 1.11.2. Personal observation or

This is important in this type of research. One has to get the essence of what happens. To see what is said and done is essential. This means attending a traditional African wedding as well as a traditional African funeral.

### 1.13. Definition of Concepts

African

Renaissance: the revisiting or revival of norms and values (accepted ways of behaviour in the African continent)

Intrinsic values: values that develop from within as a natural quality.

Polygamy: one man, many wives (poly – many; gamos – marriage))

Death: the ending of earthly life. It is a departure to be with the ancestors in the African context.

Marriage: not only a contract between two people. It involves a relationship between the two families of the two people who marry (both the living and the dead).

Continuity

of life: this concept refers to human life which does not end at death. It continues to the hereafter.

African Religion: Religion refers to the awareness of the Wholly Other by human beings. This awareness results in reverence and praise. African religion refers to this awareness within the African context.

**Myth:** a myth is an ordinary story with a sacred message e.g. a message from the Creator or Ancestors.

**Ancestor:** an elder from whom a tribe or clan descends. A parent or grandparent can also be an ancestor.

**Widow**

**inheritance:** the brother or any member of the extended family takes the wife of the deceased brother and cares for her. This involves the bearing of children for the brother.

**Levirate marriage:** the brother takes the place of the deceased brother and bears children for him.

**Surrogate**

**marriage:** if a wife is sterile or dies young, the sister may come in to bear children on her behalf.

**Homosexuality:** sexually attracted to persons of ones own sex.

**Taboo:** that which is forbidden by custom or religion of the people.

**Fornication:** sexual intercourse between two unmarried people.

**Adultery:** sexual intercourse between a married person and the one to whom he/she is not married.

**Incest:** sexual intercourse between blood relatives e.g. between brother and sister.

Clan anthem: a musical piece sung on special occasions e.g. at the burial of a family head, headman, chief or king. It usually expresses sadness and loss.

An Anthem sung in a marriage differs in wording. It expresses joy.

The practice however varies from tribe to tribe.

Procreation: this turn refers to child-bearing, an essential aspect of African marriage.

Life: The turn “life” refers to a “state of existence as a human being”. (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English : A.S.Hornby)

There are other forms of life, like plant, life and animal life. Our immediate concern is human life which is higher than other forms of life.

1.13. Literature Study: The following is a survey of the existing and related literature on African Religion or the subject under investigation. The literature is going to be classified into the categories : African Religion in the eyes of African writers; African Religion in the eyes of the Western writers and African Religion according to Zulu tradition.

1.13.1.Berglund a. *Zulu thought patterns and symbolism* (1976 London : Hurst)

Berglund deals with a broad area of research interviewing community leaders, Ndunas (headmen) and chiefs, sangomas (diviners),

witchdoctors and religious leaders and other people in almost the whole of Zululand.

He deals with religious beliefs and practices as well as the role played by the ancestors in the religious orientation of the Zulus. He investigated issues like untimely death, ukungena (widow inheriting), marriage, death and burial customs, rituals like ukubuyisa (bringing back the spirit of the deceased to look after the members of an earthly family).

Berglund also deals with sacred places like umsamo (back of the hut), iziko (hearth), ikhothamo (doorway arch) and back of the cattle enclosure.

1.13.2. Bujo B. *An African Theology : In Its Social Context*\_ 1992 St Paul Publications – Nairobi - Kenya

Bujo uses the concepts of African Religion like unity of life, ancestor cult, African morality, marriage, death etc, within the context of African Theology that is, the understanding of God within the context of Africa.

He seeks to provide an understanding of these concepts within the African context.

Introducing the book Bujo says, “African Theology in its Social Context is more an invitation to African Theology in order to suggest a few basic ideas that might later provide matter for deeper reflection”. (1992: 10).

1.13.3. Kirwen M. *The Missionary and the Diviner : Contending Theologies of Christian and African Religions*. 1987 New York : Orbis

This is an interesting debate between Kirwen a Roman Catholic Missionary, and an African diviner in North Africa.

Their debate centres around issues like marriage, death, widows and widow inheritance. It is a debate between Western Christianity and African Religion. The two sometimes differ and sometimes agree on some points.

1.13.4. Magesa L. *African Religion : The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*. 1997 Orbis Books – Mary Knoll, New York

John Mary Waliggo summarises the contents of this book with words, “The promotion of life is the criterion of African morality” (Magesa 1997: 8). He points out to the enemies of life e.g. colonialism and selfish African leaders. What is pro-life e.g. marriage and procreation, should be promoted.

The forces like the Western Culture, have influenced but not eroded the religious ethos of the African people.

1.13.5. Mbiti J S. *African Religions and Philosophy 1989*. East African Educational Publishes Ltd Westlands – Nairobi.

Mbiti asserts that Africans are by nature very religious people. He prefers to use the term “African Religions” because of the diverse religious beliefs and practices.

He highlights the fact that all spheres of life are sacred. Mbiti tackles a wide range of topics, like: the concept of time, God, nature, creation, spiritual beings, rulers (Kings), stages of development, marriage and death, Christianity and Islam in Africa.

Mbiti ( 1969 : 5) sums up the aim of these concepts by saying, “My approach here is chiefly descriptive and interpretive, bringing together in



a comparative way those elements which are representative of traditional religions from all over Africa.”

- 1.132.6. Mbiti J.S. *Introduction to African Religion*. 1975/1992. East African Educational Publishers Ltd. Kampala

This book covers a wide range of topics: What African is and is not, where this religion is found e.g. in art, symbols, rituals, shrines etc., belief in God, spirits, man, stages of development, marriage, death, religious objects and places, magical powers, morals, religious leaders, African Religion and other religions and the value of religion.

- 1.13.7.Msimang C.T. *Kusadliwa Ngoludala*. 1975/1995. Shutter & Shooter. Pietermaritzburg

Professor Msimang, an expert in Zulu culture and religion, has interviewed the Zulu elders, Sangomas and observed many practices (rituals) in KwaZulu/Natal, when preparing to write this book.

It examines the Zulu rituals about puberty, marriage, death and also the role played by the Ancestors in Zulu life, beliefs and practices before the advent of Christianity as well as today.

- 1.13.8.Parrinder e.g. *African Traditional Religion*. 1992. Sheldon Press : London

Parrinder points out that African Religion belongs to the world family of religions. Africans believe in God though they do not worship God directly.

Parrinder refers to witchcraft as the enemy of life. Ancestors play an important role. They are not worshipped. They are honoured, respected or venerated.

Parrinder (1992 : 10) says “To Africans, the spiritual world is so real and near, its forces intertwining and inspiring the visible world that whether pagan or Christian, man has to reckon with things invisible to mortal sight”.

1.13.9. Setiloane G.M. *African Theology : An Introduction*. 1986. Skottaville Publishers – Braamfontein

This is a small book, but full of valuable information e.g. how people originated, citing some myths. He states that African people never attempted to state how human beings were created.

Setiloane goes on to state the African understanding of community, referring to the extended family, the living and the living-dead (ancestors), and also the relationship of clans through intermarriage.

The writer discusses the dignity of human life, the role of the ancestors, making it quite clear that Africans have never given the Badimo (ancestors) the same status as Modimo (the Supreme Reality).

Botho, ubuntu (humanness) is realized in community. There is no place for individualism in African Religion. One finds ones' true personhood in interaction with other people.

Finally the writer examines the relationship between Black Theology and African Theology; African Theology and Black Consciousness; African Theology and Liberation Theology.

He points out that Black Theology and African Theology belong together. They are soul-mates which seek to remind Blacks of their roots.

African Theology and Black Consciousness make the youth aware that they can only gain their identity through re-discovering ubuntu/botho.

The writer is not happy about the relationship between Black Theology and Liberation Theology. He feels that “liberation” is narrowed down and limited to socio-political issues. He is convinced that the main issue of liberation is the regaining of the “soul of Africa” which has been dampened down by Western Culture.

1.13.10. Taylor J.Y. *Christian Presence Amid African Religion*. 2001. Acton Publishers – Kenya

This book was first published in 1963 by the SCM Press: London with the title *The Primal Vision*.

It is written by an English Christian and theologian who was a missionary in Uganda. So he writes from his experiences of the encounter with African Religion. For instance, referring to the relevance and integrity of African Religion, he says “The bible, like the beliefs of Africans about the dead, also says the deceased are not dead but living or resting”. (2001: 111).

1.13.11. Tempels P. *Bantu Philosophy*. 1969. Paris : Presence Afraine

This book refers to life as a “vital force”, a force or strength. This force is an ongoing virtue that continues beyond death. Starvation, illness, droughts and other misfortunes diminish the vital force. These problems are brought about by witchcraft or angry ancestors.

Life here is understood in a holistic sense – physical and spiritual life. Harmony and health increase the vital force.

6.13.12.Thorpe S.A. *African Traditional Religions*. 1991. UNISA: Pretoria

This book attempts to point out that people in Africa have something to be cherished in their traditional African Religion. Non-Africans can also be enriched.

The writer also tries to show that there are common features which African Religion shares with other religions. This proves that African Religion has a status of its own as a world religion.

6.13.13.Thorpe S.A. *Primal Religions Worldwide*. 1992. UNISA : Pretoria

Thorpe gives a comprehensive review of the world's traditional religions. It is quite clear that while the basic beliefs are similar, they are expressed differently due to the different contexts out of which they arise. No religious views are expressed independently of context. The context influences people and their views about the Supreme Power.

6.13.14.Zeusse E.M. *Ritual Cosmos : The Sanctification of Life in African Religions*. 1979. Athens – Ohio University

All life is sacred according to the African world view. Daily life is lived in the awareness of the presence of the Creator. In other words, life is lived in awe or *mysterium tremendum* (Holy fear).

The implication is that this sacred human life cannot be ended by death for it is a gift of God.

#### 1.14. Division of chapters

Chapter One : This is an introduction, covering the following topics:

The parameters of the dissertation; relevance of the topic; the reason for a particular interest in the topic; personal interest in the continuity of life; the reason for concentrating on the Zulus; the four main components of the theme; African Religion as a religious tradition; the centrality (significance) of marriage and death in Zulu culture; an outline of Zulu religion and lastly an outline of the method to be used in collecting data.

Chapter Two : Understanding the concept “life” amongst the African people especially the Zulus.

Chapter Three : Marriage in general in African Religion. Continuity of life through marriage, amongst the Zulus, addressing things such as the corporate understanding of human life, marriage and rituals associated with marriage, marriage and the importance of procreation, remembrance and the continuity of the name.

Chapter Four : Continuity of life through death in African religion in general. Among the Zulus, cause of death, early death and death at maturity, caring for the dying, accompanying beast, a farewell message from the dying, rituals at burial and thereafter.

Chapter Five : Synopsis of Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

Points of contact between Christianity and African Religion.

Conclusion.

## CHAPTER TWO

The understanding of the concept “life” among the African people especially the Zulus.

### Introduction

This study is about the continuity of life. It is therefore pertinent that the chapter immediately after the introductory chapter should be on the understanding of “life”.

This is an attempt to spell out what life is about in the understanding of the African tribes with special emphasis on the Zulu people.

This chapter addresses the following: who the Zulu people are; their understanding of the Supreme Power, the source of life; the manifestations of the deity among the Zulus; some creation myths, relating to the origin of life; the continued existence in and through the ancestors. Under the latter sub-topic the following needs to be highlighted: remembrance and the concept, umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu (a person is a person through other persons). Lastly, a consideration of life as a “vital force” or “power” among the Zulu people; and the enemies and restoration of life.

#### 2.1. The Zulus as a people

The Zulus are part of the group known as AbaNguni (Ngunis). They are predominantly found in the area known as Kwa-Zulu – Natal (one of the Provinces in South Africa).

They are, however, presently scattered all over as a result of job seeking. It is fair to state that not much has been written about the history of their origin.

Pieces of information have been obtained from interviewees (20 interviews conducted). The majority of these people were not sure of the facts of how the Zulus originated.

From the scanty written information, the Zulu historians have traced the appearance of the Zulus from the time towards the end of the seventeenth century or early in the eighteenth century.

These historians state that a small clan arrived in Northern Natal; where from, it is not quite clear. This clan had a chief with the name “Zulu”. He was the son of “Malandela”. “Zulu” later became the name of these people – AMAZULU (“people of the heavens”).

What came out clearly in the interviews was that the majority of the interviewees associated the origin of these people as a powerful nation with Senzangakhona, the father of King Shaka, a relentless warrior who built these people into a strong, fearful nation. (Thorpe 1991:32)

## 2.2. The Zulu’s understanding of the supreme power : Source of life

It is interesting to note that the Zulus believed in a Supreme Power long before the advent of the missionary societies. They called the Supreme Power u-Mvelinqangi (the one who appeared first).

All the people in the urban areas with their roots in the Zulu culture confirmed the belief that the Zulus believed in UMVELINQANGI (the first appearer), the Lord of the Sky (INKOSI YEZULU), since they became a nation.

The Supreme Power, Mvelinqangi, is the creator of life in general, particularly human life which is the focus of this study.



Many theories have been put forward about the African God. For instance, it is generally believed that the God of the African is uninvolved or disinterested in the affairs of men and women (humanity). The God of the African is said to be distant or withdrawn (*Deus otiosus*). Those who hold this view go on to argue that that is why the veneration of the ancestors is greatly valued among the African tribes.

But the truth of the matter is that the God of the African is passionately involved in the human affairs.

Manci (1995 : 2), writing from a Zulu background states that *Deus otiosus* does not imply a physical distance or rather distance in a physical sense. It is an intellectual distance. The problem is that humans cannot comprehend God (*Mvelinqangi*). So to humans, God seems to be distant and not directly involved in their daily lives. He can therefore be only approached through intermediaries. The question of intermediaries will be addressed in a section dealing with continuity of life through the ancestors - below.

Berglund (1976 : 36) makes a pertinent point relating to *Mvelinqangi* as the source of life. He refers to two praise-names: *u-Somandla* (Father of all power or source of all power); *u-Mninimandla* (the one who owns power). So the Lord-of-the-sky (*Inkosi Yezulu*) is not only the source of life. He is also the source of wisdom and knowledge. As the source of power and owner of power, the Supreme Power (*Mvelinqangi*) endows some people with knowledge and wisdom and denies others. No one knows why people are not endowed with these godly qualities in the same measure. So the Zulus speak of *ukuphiwa* (to be given or gifted) or *ukuncishwa* (to be denied). An attempt was made to find out from the interviewees why there is this discrepancy. All of them could not tell the reason. They were unanimous in stating that it is God's secret.

The Zulus do not have a clear description of how God (*Mvelinqangi*) created human life, as one would for instance read in Jewish/Christian Biblical

accounts. There are however, some creation myths which hint to the Zulu understanding of the origin of human life.

#### 2.2.1. Some creation myths relating to the origin of life

“Myths” in this study refers to a traditional story about a particular belief. In this context the particular belief is the origin of humans.

2.2.2.1. Mvelinqangi is believed to reside in the sky. Hence the name Lord of the Sky (Inkosi Yezulu). It is alleged that Mvelinqangi was relaxing when it was reported to Him that one of the young men had been mischievous. He had decided to ride on Mvelinqangi’s white horse.

The young man was expelled from heaven. He was brought down to earth through a hole in the sky. A cord was tied around his waist and brought down. He arrived on earth and a reed was used to cut the cord.

Later Mvelinqangi saw the young man lonely and suffering on earth. He sent a beautiful lady through the same process. That is how human beings came to be on earth as the two multiplied.

This myth indicates that humans originated from the Lord of the Sky. He is the source of life. Perhaps that is why the Zulu people are referred to as AMAZULU (People of the Sky). It is because the sky is their place of origin. (Berglund 1976:34)

2.2.2.2. Another myth associates the origin of human life with a bed of reeds. Male Zulus will therefore greet one another with the words: “Wena wohlanga” (You of the reed)

Perhaps this also explains the corporate nature of life as understood and experienced by the Zulus (and other African tribes). Reed does not grow in isolation. The reeds are always found in clusters along the riverbanks or swamps.

An outstanding feature of both myths is community. The young man was lonely and so Mvelinqangi gave the young lady to him.

The origin of human beings in a bed of reeds also implies community.

No wonder then that for the Zulu, life is lived or experienced and celebrated in community.

This is, however, not unique to the Zulus.

The corporate aspect is found amongst many African clans and tribes. A person realises who he or she is in a community.

An individual belongs to a family unit, extended family or clan. All are embraced in the individual (the living and the dead).

This is why the Zulus use the plural when they greet one another – “Sanibona” (Good morning/afternoon/night “Ninjani” (How are you).

The maxim “I belong therefore I am” is taken seriously and is expressed in all aspects of life. A person participates in the life of the people of the past (the living dead), the present (the living) and the future (those yet to be born).

Hence the African Maxim: umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu (a person is a person because of other persons), which is elaborated below in this chapter.

There is also another aspect, which shows that Mvelinqangi is both transcendent, and immanent. As transcendent, Mvelinqangi is wholly other. He is the stronger and inaccessible, that is, on a superficial level. On the other hand the Supreme Power, Mvelinqangi, is transcendently immanent. He is ever present in a special way as stated above. Masumbuku Mununguri (1998 : 31) states this immanence categorically when he says, “certainly! God is present in all the outcomes, the blessings, the names that one gives to children, the proverbs, the tales, the myths through which there is emphasized both presence of God and his “remote greatness”.

This presence is evident in certain manifestations of the deity and is common in the lives of the Zulus as discussed under 2.3. below.

### 2.3. The manifestations of the deity among the Zulus

There are many manifestations of the divine presence. This is a common feature in religions. The Supreme Power manifests His presence and activities through things and through people in their daily life.

#### 2.3.1. Nomkhubulwana

This is the Zulu female that is believed to influence fertility. Nomkhubulwana is regarded as the Princess of Heaven (INKOSAZANA YEZULU).

She is not only associated with fertility. She is also responsible for a good harvest as well as early or spring rains.

When the clouds appeared on the hills in spring, this phenomenon was interpreted as the sign of the presence of Nomkhubulwana.

For the Zulu, the mountain was associated with the presence of Mvelinqangi.

So when the young women saw the clouds, they brewed beer to celebrate the festival which was known as Nomdede.

The interviewees confirmed the belief in Nomkhubulwana as Mvelinqangi's representative (the daughter of Mvelinqangi).

The people who were interviewed confirmed that Nomkhubulwana was regarded as a theophany (presence and appearance of God) among the people. This shows Mvelinqangi's interest in the daily lives of the people. Theophanies or manifestations do not in any way imply polytheism (belief in many gods). The interviewees agreed that Nomkhubulwana was not a god like the Canaanite gods of fertility.

Nomkhubulwana was merely a manifestation of the Supreme Power, actively present among the people. Any Zulu would therefore be at home with Masumbuko Mununguri's (1998:27) statement "God is definitely part of their daily concerns because they are convinced that he can answer their calls for help, solve their problems and turn events in their favour".

So Nomkhubulwana was both a manifestation of God's power to make rain and also God (Mvelinqangi) as a source of fertility. Nomkhubulwana had a field in every community. All the local community members would come together for weeding that field as their corporate service to the "Prince of Heaven".

### 2.3.2. Izinyanga Zezulu/Abelusi Bezulu (Heaven Herds)

These people play an important role in the lives of the Zulu households/kraals. They are experts in the controlling of thunder and lightning. They are believed to have direct contact with the power of the Lord of the Sky. They protect the lives of the people. Every head of a kraal sees to it that one of them is invited to come and strengthen the kraal (household).

Special sticks are prepared ceremoniously. These are regarded as sacred and are kept safely at the back of the hut (Msamo). These sticks are known as the sticks of the sky/thunder or lightening (Izinduku Zezulu). The sticks are taken out when the dark clouds appear in the sky as warning sign of thunder and lightning.

All the people who were interviewed agreed that Izinyanga Zezulu (heaven herds) still play an important role in the lives of the Zulus. They also stated that they have never heard of a female heaven-herd. Heaven herds are not young, they are usually people in their mid-years or elderly males.

They are able to control the forces of nature because Mvelinqangi uses them as instruments or representatives to effect his presence and activity.

These are the two, out of many, examples to show that Mvelinqangi is the source of life and also protects, provides for

the people through people and things. Life for the African is sacred. It is also lived or experienced in community; and community involves the living and the dead.

#### 2.4. The continued existence of the people in and through the ancestors

The continuity of life among the Zulus is spelt out clearly in their strong belief in the ancestral or spirit world.

Life that is lived in the flesh continues through remembrance, which is done through ritual by survivors. There is therefore a close relationship between the living and the dead (living dead).

That life is a journey is as old as the Zulus themselves. Old age is therefore respected and revered as sacred and a blessing. It is a common speech for the Zulus to refer to the elderly grandfather or the great grandfather as an ancestor (idlozi).

Death at an old age was therefore regarded as a crown of the earthly life and is still regarded as such. It is simply a form of passing on to the other form of existence in the spirit world. Excessive mourning is therefore discouraged. The old person has passed on to be an ancestor.

##### 2.4.1. How a person becomes an ancestor (idlozi)

###### 2.4.1.1. Ukubuyisa Ritual (bringing back ritual)

“Ukubuyisa” refers to the bringing back of the spirit of the deceased to be the protector of the descendants in the household.

The ritual is performed by the descendants of the deceased a year or two after the death of a parent.

It can be the head of the kraal (male) or even the mother or the descendants (female). The practice however varies from region to region.

People were interviewed again in connection with “ukubuyisa”. The majority of the interviewees stated that it is only an influential leader of the tribe or family head who is brought back to be an ancestor and therefore protect, bless or punish the descendants.

Some people perform the same ritual for the mother of the descendants. At this juncture it is pertinent to address the question, who qualifies to be an ancestor?

#### 2.4.1.2. The procedure of ukubuyisa ritual

A beast is slaughtered. The deceased is introduced to the ancestors before the slaughter. This is usually done by an elder of the family. The writer has witnessed this on more than ten occasions both in Zululand and in the East Rand. (Gauteng)

The ritual begins at the grave-side. The eldest son usually performs the ritual. An invitation is directed to the spirit of the dead person. He or she is invited to come home and look after the descendants. At the entrance of the kraal, the spirit is welcomed to the household.



The ancestors are invoked at the back of the cattle fold (sacred place or centre). That is how the deceased becomes the protector and defender of his/her descendants. It is in this ritual that praises (izibongo) are given. The ancestral spirit makes himself/herself known. The children have to remember the deceased from time to time especially through slaughter followed by a ritual or ceremonial meal.

#### 2.4.1.3. Who qualifies for the status of ancestor?

This question was addressed to the interviewees. Some were not quite sure. Previously, they simply took it for granted that all the dead were ancestors.

The others, however, disagreed. They clearly stated that not all the dead could be an ancestor. For instance, they found it difficult to associate sorcerers, witches and other enemies of life with ancestry.

The people who were interviewed maintained that the ancestors (transmitters of life) must be people who had had a good record of leadership in the community during their life time. They must also have had a good record of running their household affairs; and also lived exemplary lives to the tribe as a whole.

The head of all ancestors was the first ancestor who then transmitted life from Mvelinqangi to all descendants.

The ancestors were and still are transmitters of life. This is one of the reasons why childlessness is still not

acceptable. It is regarded as a failure to transmit life and therefore a curse and not a blessing to the tribe.

Lumbala Kabasele says, “The greatest curse for a Muntu would be to die without a child. To live is to give life, the more one-gives life, the more one increases his capacity of being. To love is to give ... it is a matter of a life that is biological and spiritual and even temporal, for among the Bantu, these are intimately bound together, indeed, when one encourages communion in a social group, when one sows peace and love there, one is an ally of life, one is a giver of life”.

These words were written by an African theologian and pastor with the experience of life and beliefs in the northern part of Africa. Any Zulu in Southern Africa will see the self in these words.

For any Zulu to be respected and be recognised as a leader in the tribe or community he must have transmitted life to the offspring and have a proven record of managing his wives and offspring. So for the Zulu life is lived in and for God through the ancestors.

#### 2.4.1.4. Remembrance (umsebenzi wabaphansi)

This is an important ritual in Zulu culture and beliefs. The people who were interviewed confirmed that it is a popular practice in both rural and urban communities. Even Christians practice it. For fear of victimisation by the church elders or to be scorned by other Christians, they (Christians) will tell people that there is itiyane or itiyana (some tea party).

When one gets there, one will find that they have slaughtered a beast and it is not itiyana (small tea party).

The ukubuyisa (bringing back) and occasional remembrance seals the Zulu belief in the continuity of life after death as well as the fellowship or communion between the living and the dead.

It is quite clear that for the Zulu life is a unity.

There is no dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual. This holistic world-view has resulted in a corporate or group form of existence. There is constant interaction between the living and the living dead.

#### 2.4.1.5. The ancestors play an intermediary role

Why do the ancestors play such an important role in the life of the Zulu? Why is there need for intermediaries? Can't the Zulus approach Mvelinqangi directly?

The beliefs of a people and their cultural practices usually intermingle. It is common knowledge among the Zulus that a junior person is not supposed to approach the seniors directly. For instance, the chief (inkosi) is approached through the herdsman or steward (izinduna noma inceku). This way of life cannot be exchanged. It is central to the Zulus. Even within the context of the household, a young man, for instance, will not approach the father directly, especially when serious matters are concerned. The mother mediates, on behalf of the son, to the father.

So what sounds incomprehensible for other nations is quite normal and acceptable for the Zulu. Mvelinqangi has to be approached through those who are already in the spirit world. Parrinder (1992 : 65) refers to the “enhanced power” which is given to the ancestors. They possess this status – “enhanced power”.

The ancestors play a vital role in the life of the Zulus. They bridge the chasm between Mvelinqangi and the living. They are consulted regularly through slaughtering and ritual communication, which accompanies it.

The role played by ancestral spirits is limitless. The Christians and the non-Christians, the literate and the illiterate, the urban and the rural Zulu value it.

Human life is incomplete without interaction with the living dead. When mishaps take place a person will be asked when last he/she sacrificed to the living dead.

The ancestors are actively involved in the lives of the living. They are particularly involved in the affairs of their families e.g. health, fertility. In this involvement there is always tension between fear and affection. They can both harm and bless. “The ancestors are ever at hand to harm or to help”, says Parrinder (1992:39).

For instance when the crops increase, women are fertile, livestock fertile and increase; these are experienced as the blessings of the ancestors. On the other hand infertility, drought and disease are seen as reflections of

the anger of the ancestors. The mediums (izangoma) are approached to find out why they (ancestors) are angry and what needs to be done.

The last thing, which needs to be addressed, for it is controversial, is the question of whether Zulus worship or venerate the ancestors. This also applies to other African tribal groups.

#### 2.4.1.6. Do the Zulus worship or venerate ancestors?

The Zulus and other African tribes are not known for the practice of idolatry even in the distant past. They believed in the one Creator God even before the advent of the Western Missionaries.

They however, believed in intermediaries as means of approaching the transcendent God who was only experienced as immanent through intermediaries. The Zulus do not worship the ancestors. Worship is reserved for the absolute power (Mvelinqangi). That is why the Zulus sometimes scold (thethisa) the ancestors. They scold them because they once lived here on earth themselves.

They can never scold God. The ancestors are closer to them, part of them and therefore different from the Supreme Being.

Concerning worship and veneration, it should be categorically stated that according to the Zulus only Mvelinqangi needs to be worshipped. The ancestors are honoured or venerated. A clear distinction should be

made between latria (worship) and dulia (reverence and homage). Latria belongs only to God and dulia applies to the activity of the Zulu people as they communicate with the Supreme Power through the living dead.

It has been stated above that for the Zulu (and other African tribes) life is experienced and cherished corporately and communally. No member of the tribe or nation is an island. He/she finds fulfilment and development through interaction with other people.

It is therefore appropriate that this chapter on the understanding and experiencing of life should touch on an important Nguni adage “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”.

#### 2.5. Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu (a person is a person through other people)

This adage sums up the African world-view. A person’s relationship with other people is central to the Zulu perspective on life. As Taylor puts it, there is a shift from the Western world-view “I think therefore I am” to “I participate therefore I am”.

Setiloane (1986:14) expands this concept of “participation” as the core of being when he says the essence of being is participation. Human beings are always interlocked with one another. The human being is not only “vital force”, but also more: vital force in participation. He was writing about the Tswana understanding of life. Every Zulu person can, however, identify oneself with what he says.

So life is experienced, celebrated and shared with the group. Solitude and individuality are regarded as anomalies. This understanding of life

in African thought is essential in this study. It forms the basis of the understanding of the continuity of life through marriage and death.

Shutte (1993:51) aptly puts it when he says “the notion that personhood consists in incorporation in the community so that in some sense its gift is so strong in African thought that there is disagreement as to whether unborn children as unnamed, or dead people who have been forgotten by their descendants, the nameless dead exist as persons at all”.

That is why procreation is crucial in marriage. One has descendants to remember him/her, and so personhood continues. That is what continuity of life is about in this study.

Life has been referred to as “vital force” in participation above. This concept needs to be explored within the context of the Zulu understanding of life.

## 2.6. Life as a vital force/power among the Zulus

The phrase “vital force” was coined by Tempels (1969:45), referring to life as a vital force among the tribes of Africa.

The life (force of power) of persons is what makes a person, a person in interaction with other persons. The concept “life” is very broad. It embraces both material and spiritual dimensions of personhood.

Writing on personhood Setiloane (1986 : 13) says, “the human person is like a live electric wire which is ever exuding force or energy in all directions”.

This life or vital force goes on. It has to “remain perpetually in one’s posterity” (Tempels 1969:45). The ancestors are invoked to promote

and protect life. The diviners (izangoma) are consulted when the ancestors threaten to harm, weaken or end life. From the (diviners) the Zulu will “learn the words of life” (Tempels 1969:45) and how it can be protected and sustained.

One can therefore see why life is not understood as temporary (beginning at birth and ending at death), but understood as an ongoing force that continues in one’s progeny or descendants.

It is important also at this point to state that life as a vital force is not just used in a general sense, but as Tempels (1969:45) aptly puts it, “it is used in the sense of the integrity of our whole being” – (isithunzi sobuntu – human dignity).

The source of this force is the Supreme Being (u-Mvelinqangi). The ancestors or the living dead increase and perpetuate their vital force in their descendants. Starvation, illness, droughts and many misfortunes result in the diminution of the vital force in human beings. These have a dehumanising effect on people. So the purpose behind rituals (religious action) is the desire to acquire life in its full measure, to acquire “strength or vital force” and “to live strongly” (Tempels 1969:44). Ritual is therefore a form of prayer that life or force should continue in the person’s descendants. The ancestors are invoked for this assurance.

To have the vital force is the “sumum bonum”.

All that is contrary to it is diminution. Tempels (1969 : 46) rightly says “the supreme happiness, the only kind of blessing, is to the Bantu, to possess the great vital force: the worst misfortune is, he thinks, the diminution of this power”. A Zulu would therefore say “siyafa” or “safa indlala” (we are dying of hunger). Such a statement does not refer to the



literal and actual act of dying. It refers to the weakening or diminution of vital force, that supreme reality whose source is uMvelinqangi.

That is why according to the Zulus, a person would not starve. The haves share with the have-nots. The Zulu protects and nourishes the vital force in the self and in other people.

There are no natural evils. Illness and droughts are understood as the result of the dissatisfaction of the ancestors.

In dealing with the corporate understanding of life above, reference was made to the use of the plural in greeting, “sanibona”, “ninjani” (good morning/afternoon. How are you? (Plural)). The same applies to the use of the concept vital force or life. “Life” here does not only refer to physical life. It is used comprehensively to refer to both physical and spiritual well being (Tempels 1969:45). Harmony and health are inseparable. This underscores the importance of this vital force.

## 2.7. The agents of destruction and restoration of life in Zulu religion

All that is contrary to the promotion of life destroys it.

The purpose of being human is to promote and sustain life. Many forces have been identified as threats to life.

### 2.7.1. Enemies of life

#### 2.7.1.1. Concepts

##### 2.7.1.1.1. Wrong doing or badness

The African person lays emphasis on bad or wrong action.

#### 2.7.1.1.2. Sin or evil

This term describes a person's personality. In other words sin or evil is embedded in human nature. Hence "so and so is evil or sinful". This means that a person is against life and hampers any attempt to promote life.

#### 2.7.1.1.3. Evil eye

There are people who are said to have an "evil eye". They curse. They destroy with a mere look at a person or property. Sometimes they become animals e.g. a hyena. Such people destroy the life-force or the vital power in people. As Magesa (1998:153) puts it "they harm people and things by simply gazing at them and their motivation is uncontrollable or envy at their success".

### 2.7.2. The mechanism of the life force

The life-force or vital power is diffused or spread out in all parts of the human body.

There are, however, particular organs, tissue and waste fluids in the body in which the life force is more concentrated than others e.g. the

hair, saliva, blood, head, heart, urine, stomach and eyes, as well as faecal matter.

These organs can also be used for evil purposes. A good example is the hair. It can be used to harm the owner mentally. That is why the hair is protected and burnt after a hair cut.

The hair is cut on the day of the funeral or a day thereafter. This is a common practice in Africa. It is a practice that signifies the end of the earthly life and the new hair that grows thereafter signifies the new life with the clan of the living dead. The interpretation differs from tribe to tribe. In some places it simply implies suspension of normal social life by the mourners. It is a sign of mourning.

## 2.8. Morality or Ethics

### 2.8.1. Wrong-doing

Every African community has rules of behaviour that should guide members of that community. So all people who are part of that particular community should try and conform to those rules. Then there will be order and continuation of life. If the rules of conduct are broken, life is harmed and that is unacceptable in African religion (like in all world religions).

The rules of behaviour are interconnected in African Religion, to such an extent that to refuse to give due respect to the elders, for example, may ultimately be as serious a transgression as the deliberate refusal to marry and have children; the refusal to take care of a brother's widow or a sister's widower and procreate in their names, or the refusal or negligence to offer sacrifices and frequent libations to the ancestors. Disrespect for elders implies disrespect for the ancestors as well, for the elders are their visible "representatives" on earth. (Magesa 1998:154)

### 2.8.2. Affliction

Affliction results from doing something that is contrary to the rules of behaviour. It comes in the form of disease, drought, failure of crops, infertility of woman and stock etc. Failure to remember the ancestors also results in affliction.

The nature spirits and malevolent spirits (resulting from improper burials or unperformed rituals) are harmful.

The religious experts help to diagnose the kind of spirit responsible for the promotion or enhancing of life. The enemies of life act contrary to that ideal.

### 2.8.3. Witchcraft

In many parts of Africa, witches, sorcerers, medicine men and herbalists are regarded as people who have mystical power which can be used either for good purposes (benevolent) or for evil purposes (malevolent).

It is pertinent at this juncture to make a distinction between a sorcerer and a witch. The two possess the same mystical power but differ in some ways. For instance, a sorcerer kills intentionally, but can stop being a sorcerer and live a good life. On the other hand, a witch does evil things or harms life unintentionally and impulsively (Magesa 1998:166).

Witchcraft is therefore a mysterious power that is in the person's system, influencing every area of a person's life.

To counteract the enemies of life African people have got the means or resources for safeguarding or restoring harmed life.

## 2.9. The restoration of life

Just as there are many forces that diminish or seek to destroy life, African people are well equipped to restore life.

The “religious experts” or “moral theologians” are the hope of the Africans. They communicate with the living dead and come up with the cause for suffering as well as measures to be taken in order to restore order in life. These people are the moral conscience of African Society (Magesa 1998:175). They offer sacrifices and make offerings and prayer or communicate with the living dead.

### 2.9.1. Prayer

A daily thought about the Supreme Power or the ancestors, even if not called upon formally is part of an African life. Prayer is a means of restoring wholeness and balance in life. (Magesa 1998:177). The main content of an African prayer is the removal of all that threatens life and the restoration of all that promotes life.

Prayer is usually addressed to God through the ancestors. The dependence of the people on the living dead (ancestors) or the Supreme Power is expressed in prayer. Africans make petitions (requests) particularly petitions for protection from the forces that threaten life as well as the removal of all suffering or affliction.

### 2.9.2. Sacrifices and offerings

Sacrifices and offerings can either be an animal or food products. A sacrifice or an offering is put aside in order to influence supernatural powers.

Sacrifice involves destroying an item that is sacrificed. For instance a sheep, goat or beast has got to be slaughtered in order to appease the ancestors or to restore relationships.

Offering involves dedicating an item. The item is dedicated to the creator through the ancestors as a means of securing blessing or protection. Magesa (1998:182) refers to separation by destruction and separation by dedication.

These religious acts are meant to mend or recreate a healthy relationship between God, man and creation in general. In other words, sacrifices and offerings restore wholeness between the living dead (Ancestors) and the living and also between the living and God.

Magesa (1998:183).explains the value of sacrifices and offerings in these words: “The offerer identifies himself or herself with the sacrificial item by touching it or making a similar gesture before the victim is destroyed or dedicated. In other words the offerer becomes the sacrificial victim”.

Sacrifices are directed to God (Supreme Being) through the ancestors. There is however a wide variety of spirits apart from the Ancestral spirits e.g. spirits of affliction and death; spirits of the power of witchcraft; spirits who bring the good to the people; nature spirits; and vocation spirits (Magesa 1998:184). These and many other spirits have the power to bring suffering, disease or even death. The different spirits are then identified and appeased with an appropriate ritual.

### 2.9.3. Medicine

Medicine is used to protect or cure people. It can also be used to harm people. The herbalists usually use medicine in order to protect or restore life.

It is also important to note that the knowledge of medicine is a gift from the spirits. It is therefore imperative that the expert should make sacrifices and offerings to such spirits on a regular basis. For the Zulus and other tribal groups in Africa, the practitioner will slaughter a goat annually to sprinkle the medicines with the goat's bile to strengthen the medicines. Sometimes one of the sons is given izikhwama zemithi (medicine bags with medicines) by the father or uncle before or after death in order to carry on with the profession.

There is a wide variety of medicines to address the different conditions people find themselves in. For instance "there are medicines for good fortune, love, success, security of persons or property ... there are also medicines against sorcery and witchcraft .... All medicines contain (or are) a power that ought to be used for the benefit of humanity ..." (Magesa 1998:189)

Hence, apart from leaves, barks and roots, amulets and charms are a common feature in African Religion.

#### 2.9.4. Problem diagnosis experts : Diviners, mediums and seers

These are people with the gift of finding out the secrets and making the truth or the revelation known to the people. They work closely with the inyangas or witchdoctors.

##### 2.9.4.1. Diviners

A diviner tells the people what has gone wrong in their lives. The truth or revelation is, for instance, the reason why there is such an illness or evil in the community or in the family.

The diviner goes on to tell the people what should be done to stop the evil. As most diviners are also medicine

people, the diviner will heal the situation or refer the people to a great witchdoctor.

#### 2.9.4.2. Mediums

These are the experts who communicate with the spirit world or the ancestors. There may be an evil like an epidemic, infertility, drought etc. The spirits will inform a medium why the situation is such and also suggest action to be taken to heal the situation e.g. a sacrifice or libation.

A medium undergoes training and works closely with a particular witchdoctor.

#### 2.9.4.3. Seers

These are people with natural powers to predict things e.g. a drought or an epidemic. They are not trained. They have foresight and insight into things or situations. They may also see things in dreams or visions.

But all these people: diviners, mediums and seers contribute to the restoration of life which is threatened or has been diminished by the enemies of life.

Tempels (1969:52) says, "it is the condition into which those who have passed over fall if they have no means of the renewal through those living on earth. They can no longer exercise their vital influence, either for the strengthening of life or the detriment of life by its diminution or destruction". This is an important understanding of life for the Zulu people: that life



continues in and through the progeny, when the dead is remembered or venerated and invoked in times of crisis like famine, epidemics, hailstorms and other destructive forces; that childlessness is a curse to the clan and a sign of disfavour of the marriage by the ancestors. It is in the light of this understanding of life that one can speak of continuity through marriage and death.

## CHAPTER THREE

### 3. African marriage in general

Marriage is an important institution in African religion for it is a means of procreation. If there are no children in a marriage there is great concern. It may mean that the ancestors are not happy about the marriage.

In African Religion marriage is not so much a matter between two individuals. It brings together the families as well as the clans of the two individuals who get married. The two families and clans have so much in common that there can be no faction fights between them. Marriage binds them together for *baganiselene* (intermarried), as the Zulus would put it.

In marriage the bride literally becomes the daughter of the bridegroom's family and the bridegroom becomes the son of the bride's family.

The bridegroom's people refer to the bride as "our wife" ("umfazi wethu"). That is why it is not easy for the bride to leave her new adopted family even if the husband dies. This implies that marriage is not only an agreement between two individuals. It involves the whole family structure – brothers, sisters, the in-laws, aunts and uncles on both sides, the groom's and the bride's.

Marriage is closely related to the transmission of life. Fertility is therefore an essential element in marriage. It is the only way to assure community survival. Sterility and therefore childlessness can only be attributed either to the displeasure of the ancestors about the marriage or witchcraft.

So pre-marital life is important. The families concerned make sure that nothing is going to interfere with the transmission of life. That is why some parts of the slaughtered beast for the wedding ceremony are closely guarded by a trusted

member of the family, lest they end up in the hands of witches who will use them to make sure that no children are born of a marriage.

Another important feature of African Religion is that it is the moral responsibility for every woman to focus her life on marriage at a very early age. Marrying and transmitting life is the ideal for African marriage. It was so in the past and is still the case in modern times. (Magesa 1998: 115).

Marriage does not only bring together the two people entering into it. The ancestors (the living dead) of the two families are also involved and therefore have to be invoked by the two families. Just as marriage makes the two families and clans of the living into one, so are the living dead (ancestors) of the two families. The bride's ancestors are petitioned to bless the marriage of their daughter. The bridegrooms ancestors are also petitioned to accept the bride as one of their daughters. Ritual therefore plays an important role in a marriage ceremony. It is offered to the living dead (ancestors) who are "guardians of the vital power of their descendants"

To be abundant, life depends on the ancestors who guard it on behalf of God, wherein lies its origin and for whom the ancestors are intermediaries. African marriage is ultimately anchored in God, the main sustainer of life and the principal preserver and transmitter of the vital force. (Magesa 1998:16)

Two points are highlighted in the above quotation. Firstly, God/Supreme Power/Mvelinqangi/Modimo is the source, keeper or preserver of life. Secondly, He gives it to the ancestors who act as guardians who pass it on to the living. So at marriage the woman attains a new status in life: to be the bearer or keeper of life, as well as its transmitter.

The different stages in African Marriage

Courtship This involves the sister/s of the woman or any other older woman in the community (iqhikiza/amaqhikiza in Zulu).

Doke, Malcom, Sikakana and Vilakazi, in their Zulu/English dictionary define iqhikiza as a “full-grown girl; girl with fully developed breasts”

Iqhikiza (singular) or amaqhikiza (plural) act as advisors to the girl who is being courted. Questions like, what is the character of the young man? What is the social standing of the parents of the young man? Can they afford to pay ilobola (bride wealth), preferably cattle, given by the young man’s people to the woman’s people?

Secondly, if the young woman has accepted the young man, the relationship becomes close.

Love-Play (ukusoma in Zulu) is a common practice. It is a form of sexual intercourse without penetration. While the two get to know each other closer, self-control is the norm. The virginity of a woman is a sacred thing. It is also an exercise in self-control which promotes the moral fibre of the community. That is why the testing of virginity is still widely practised in Africa.

It is only with a few exceptions in Africa where full sexual intercourse is permissible such as the Nuer and Azande tribes of North Africa (Magesa 1998: 120).

Thirdly, there is abduction (ukuthwala in Zulu). This is a common practice which is done for different reasons: in case the woman shows some signs of disinterest in the youngman;

or if there is another youngman who shows interest in her. Whatever the reason, the message is clear; “I have the cattle for lobola (brides wealth) and I am ready to marry you”.

When abduction takes place, there is always some resistance even if the action is prearranged. Most African tribes can identify with what Magesa says is the reason for resistance:

“Resistance is a symbol of the girls’ honour and a sign of her reluctance to incorporate her children into another clan” (Magesa 1998: 120).

The abduction is usually followed by people from the groom’s people going to report to the bride’s place that their daughter is with them. The bride goes back home. The lobolo proceedings usually follow at this juncture.

After payment of lobolo/brides wealth, a wedding date is set. The wedding ceremony lasts for two days. The first day is a send off ceremony by the bride’s people. A beast is slaughtered. The ancestors are informed about the daughter who is leaving to be a wife of another clan. The ancestors are invoked to bless the daughter and make her bear children for the clan.

The birth of the child, especially a baby boy, is the final stage. It completes the marriage process. The husband and “the wife belong completely to one another and the bond between the two families and their clans is sealed. The wife gains a new status, a certain elderhood among her husband’s people” (Magesa 1998: 121). The marriage is for life and even beyond

death. That is why surrogate and levirate arrangements are made in cases of early deaths.

So marriage in Africa is not only a short period of courtship, the signing of a marriage contract and a wedding celebration, but it is “a step-by-step progressive development undertaken in a community frame work a living process which unfolds stage by stage, each following on the preceding one, right up to the arrival of the bride at the home of the bridegroom”. (Magesa 1998: 118).

All the tribal groups in African can identify themselves in this step by step development of marriage process which Bishop Kaseba describes as “a gradual growing together of partners and families” (Quoted by L Magesa in African Religion : The moral Traditions of Abundant Life – page 119).

The culmination process of growing together is the procreation of children who are the means of “the transmission and preservation of the force of life”; assuring the presence of the living dead (ancestors) through naming, that is, naming the child after an ancestor.

## Marriage as an agent for Continuity of Life

### 3.1. Forms of marriage

#### 3.1.1. Polygamous

Polygamy is important in African culture. It is part of African life for the following reasons:

- For economic reasons. Labour in the fields can be strenuous for one person. That is why sometimes the wife would ask for a helper (ask the husband to marry another wife).
- It is a mark of status and potential for leadership. The polygamist has to display ability to organize and maintain peace and harmony in his household, treating the wives equally while the first wife holds a senior position.
- The relationship with the wives has to assure fidelity, stability and permanence.
- The continuity of life is assured through the remembrance by the many children of the different wives.

### 3.1.2. Widow inheritance

The wife belongs to the family and to the clan in African marriage. So when the husband dies, the younger brother or one of the members of the family looks after the widow. This involves bearing children for the deceased brother or relative. The children belong to the late brother. The living brother or relative acts as a caretaker.

### 3.1.3. Levirate marriage

The brother takes the wife of the late brother as a wife. The children belong to the brother and are entitled to benefit from his estate. Both widow inheritance and levirate marriage have one goal; the need and desire to survive through the bearing of children.

#### 3.1.4. Surrogate marriage

If the wife dies young, her sister may come in to bear children on behalf of the late sister or if the wife is sterile, the husband can take the sister-in-law to come and be the sisters' co-wife in order to bear children for the clan.

#### 3.1.5. Ghost marriage

There are cases where a person dies without children. The elders of the clan decide that they should get a wife for him to "marry" and beget children for him. This is a rare practice amongst the Zulus, Sotho groups and Xhosas. It is practised in some parts of Africa.

#### 3.1.6. Woman marriage

In some cases there is no man available to inherit the widow of a deceased person. The widow may then "marry" another woman. Whatever children she gets from any male will be regarded as fathered by her. This is also a rare form of marriage.

### 3.3. Marriage related matters

#### 3.3.1. The importance of sexuality and sexual relations in marriage

Sexuality is God-given. It is sacred. Its dignity should be maintained at all times. Sexuality is the means to procreation and the preservation of life which is central in African Religion.



Sexual relations are therefore respected and should not be abused. First and foremost sexual intercourse is for procreation to serve the interests of the family as well as the clan. Magesa (1998 : 135) aptly puts it when he says “it (sexuality) is the most obvious and pragmatic way of transmitting and preserving the force of life; it is because of sexuality that humanity perpetuates itself and the ancestors are assured of remembrance and honour”. It should therefore be handled with care if it is sacred.

### 3.3.2. Homosexuality

It is regarded as an abnormality. It interferes with the transmission and preservation of life.

### 3.3.3. Taboos

Menstruating time, suckling time, sexual intercourse is discouraged during these times. It can lead to sickness or death.

#### 3.3.3.1. Fornication and adultery

Sexual intercourse between two unmarried persons (fornication) and adultery which is sexual intercourse between two married people or one married and another one unmarried are discouraged or prohibited.

#### 3.3.3.2. Incest

Sexual intercourse between father and daughter; brother and sister are regarded as a disgrace. It disorganizes the transmission and preservation of life. Incest angers the ancestors who have to be remembered through naming.

## Twins

### Bad Omen

Zulus

Vha-Venda

Tsonga

Afungwe (Malawi)

Akamba (Kenya)

Edo, Igbo (Nigeria)

### Good Omen

Yoruba (Nigeria)

Ganda, Banyaro and Lango  
(Uganda)

Kpelle (Liberia)

Dogon (Mali)

Twins disorganize the smooth order in life. They believe that twin-bearing is for animals and not humans.

The above people regard the birth of twins as a blessing from the creator.

### 3.4. The continuity of life as evident in the rites related to marriage

One cannot consider the rites of marriage and death without an awareness of the sacred or religious places within a Zulu kraal.

#### 3.4.1. The sacred places

A “sacred” place is the meeting place of the human and the divine. It is a holy place where the spirits of the dead are believed to reside.

##### 3.4.1.1. Umsamo (The back part of the hut)

This place is regarded with respect and reverence. It belongs to the living dead. The guardian spirit of the

family lives there. The rituals of the kraal are therefore performed from there. The vessels and clothing of ritual significance are stored there. The ritual spears as well as isiphuku (skin blanket) are also kept there in order to be blessed and used by the shades (izithunzi/amathongo/amadlozi).

The carcass of the slaughtered beast is kept there overnight for the consumption of the shades before it is cooked and eaten the following day.

The well-brewed African beer (umqombothi) is also kept there overnight. It is drunk the following day by the elderly people of the clan or family.

The shades or ancestors are believed to mysteriously eat and drink overnight (Berglund 1976: 102).

#### 3.4.1.2. The hearth/fireplace (Iziko)

The hearth is also a sacred place. The cooking pots are never cleaned properly. Some bits and pieces of food are left and the pots are left near the hearth overnight. The shades/ancestors or spirits of the dead are believed to “lick” or eat the food at night. (Berglund 1976: 103).

The food is left near the hearth because it is believed that the living dead warm themselves and then eat the food. Should women be careless and scrape the pots clean, there will be punishment by drought resulting in a poor crop harvest.

Closely related to the hearth (iziko) is the hearthstone or hearth-watcher. From this stove, the shades watch the hearth. So the hearthstone is not an ordinary stone. A religious significance is attached to it and it is called “umlindiziko” (hearth-watcher) in Zulu.

#### 3.4.1.3. Ikhothamo (doorway arch)

The doorway arch is also sacred. The shades live there. When the corpse is taken out of the hut, thatching is removed from the doorway and buried with the corpse. There are two reasons as to why this is done:

- The person who looked after the shades has left. The shades are taken away so that they should not be abused by the witches (abathakathi).
- The ritual signifies that the shades accompany their child to a new place. The shades will however still remain in the hut to protect those who remain behind.

The maize cobs, pumpkinseeds, eggshells and other valuables are stuck onto the doorway arch in order to be seen and blessed by the shades/ancestors. This stems from the Zulu belief that crops, stock and other essentials abound if the ancestors are happy with the family or clan.

#### 3.4.1.4. The cattle enclosure (Isibaya)

The upper end of the enclosure is very important. It is believed to be the place of the ancestors. The ritual celebrations and ritual slaughter take place at this point

of the enclosure. It is a sacred place. From here the living communicate with the living dead. The cattle enclosure serves the same purpose as the hut “umsamo” (the back part of the hut).

### 3.5. Marriage or Marriage rite in Zululand

Marriage is an important stage of transition in Zulu culture. Writing within this context, Mancini (1995 : 51) describes marriage as an “institution which ensures the prolongation, nurturing and preservation of life”.

It is for this reason that marriage is honoured. For the Zulu, the contract should be without spot or blemish. The family background is therefore scrutinized. There should be no blood relationship; no former public scandals associated with any of the two families e.g. witchcraft or sorcery. This highlights the importance of marriage as a “sacred fountain of life”.

Another pertinent point to be made is that marriage is not a matter between the two involved people – the bride and the bridegroom. The whole family and sometimes tribes are directly involved in intertribal marriages. Marriage is a community or intertribal matter (ukuganiselana).

The family of the groom and that of the bride become related. The Zulus would speak of “ukwakha ubuhlobo” (establishing a relationship) between the two families during the negotiation period. The same applies to the tribes involved if the marriage is intertribal. There can be no longer tribal wars or faction fights between the two tribes. This seems to be the trend in the rest of Africa. Idowu, (1974 : 49) writing from the context of Northern Africa says, the “two families are linked

together in a kind of brotherly relationships when a girl and a boy from these two families get married. Because of the system of exogamy and polygamy, large numbers of clans and lineages are in this way united for mutual assistance, defence and trade”.

The two families or two tribes become one. This is not simply a cultural contract. It is a religious one. This religious contract is sealed by slaughtering a beast on both sides. The groom is sprinkled with gall by his in-laws. The bride is also sprinkled by her in-laws in the same way or manner.. This ritual symbolises a deeper and inner spiritual union that brings the two families together.

With this general understanding of marriage within the Zulu context, one can then go on to investigate other aspects to highlight its importance to the living and the dead.

#### 3.5.1. Lobolo (dowry/bride prize) and its significance

This is the beginning of negotiation. A person is valuable. A person is of such high value that she cannot be bought. So lobolo has nothing to do with buying and selling as if the daughter of the family was a marketable commodity.

Lobolo is a replacement of loss to the family or clan, loss of the person herself and her contribution to the welfare of the family. It is also a way of expressing gratitude to the parents for bearing and bringing up a wife for the bridegroom and his family and clan. It is a sign of sealing a relationship between the two families or families and clans.

It is therefore clear that lobolo has nothing to do with purchasing. It is a noble act. The people of royal descent can ask for up to twenty herds of cattle. All Zulu commoners usually ask for eleven.

The Zulu marriages are usually polygamous – marriage of one man with many women.

The father pays for the son's first lobolo. The Zulus would say "umakhela umuzi" (building a family for the son). (Msimang 1995: 265 1975/1995)

The involvement of the father has an important implication for the continuation of his life in the son. It is interesting to note that this aspect is not confined to the Zulu people. It is true of other African tribes. Professor Mbiti (1969 : 138) records the case study of the Batoro people. The words of the father negotiating on behalf of the son are acceptable and familiar in most African groups. The father of the boy says:

*"I have come to be born in this home, to be a son, to be a servant if you like, to take the cattle to the river to drink, to make the cattle shed, to buy you clothes, to help alleviate your needs. I am prepared to do all these things and many more, if you give me a wife for my son".*

So the father gives of himself and his services to the girl's family for the sake of the son. This is self-emptying (Kenosis) at its best. The father sacrifices himself and humbles himself for it is obligatory that the son should have a wife. The father acts as a bridge or link in securing a marriage contract for the son. Mbiti (1969 : 139) aptly puts it when he says the father is "ready to cease to be through his son". It is a solemn religious act.

Closely related to lobolo (dowry) is the area of virginity.

### 3.5.2. The significance of virginity

One can wonder why young women have to be examined to check whether they have been involved in sexual intercourse or not. The Zulus do this annually. Why take all the trouble to go through this exercise? This question prompted the researcher to interview some elderly people in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng Provinces.

The interviewees stated that virginity is so important that in some areas the parents of the bride, particularly the mother, gets a special gift for the good upbringing of their daughter.

Virginity means that the spring of life (blood) has been preserved. It is highly regarded by most African tribes beyond the Zulu territories. For instance Mbiti (1969 : 141) points out that it is only within the context of marriage that the sacred blood (breaking of the hymen) should unlock “the door for members of the family in the loins to come forward and join both the living and the dead”. So virginity symbolises the purity of the body and the moral life as a whole. The bride who is a virgin is the pride of the parents, relatives and of the bridegroom.

It is appropriate at this point to state that this research is not going to deal with the details of the Zulu wedding ceremony. It is only those aspects, which indicate the continuity of life through marriage that is going to be highlighted.

### 3.6. Matters which indicate the continuity of life through marriage

The farewell dance; prayer at the wedding ceremony; the clan anthem; procreation and barrenness. Other matters to be briefly highlighted are:



the corporate nature of marriage as well as the importance of the family to society as a whole.

#### 3.6.1. The farewell dance

This dance takes place before the bride leaves her home for the new marital home.

The dance takes place in the cattle fold, which is the family's sacred place, particularly the top part.

The father takes the daughter by the wrist, leads her to the gate, the father addresses the ancestors and ask them to guard and guide their (ancestor's) child and bless her with children. This is a solemn moment. The singing is soft and that particular moment is charged with awe for the pillars of the clan are addressed.

There is a lot of crying from the parents as the daughter leaves the known for the unknown.

Another important aspect of marriage for the purpose of this research is the role played by prayer.

#### 3.6.2. The role of prayer at a wedding ceremony

The moment of prayer is a solemn moment. The writer, as a Zulu, witnessed this aspect in Zulu weddings along the North Coast of Durban in Nongoma, Nquthu and Mahlabathini, as well as the weddings of christianised Zulus in KwaZulu-Natal and in the urban areas. This moment is characterised by silence and reverence.

The ancestors are invoked at the bride's home as well as the bridegroom's home.

On the wedding day the bride is presented to the living dead of the bridegroom's family. They are petitioned to receive her, bless her and strengthen her marriage.

Those who invoke the ancestors are usually two elderly respected males. Two elderly women from both sides ululate (kikizela) as the males address the ancestors.

They slowly and reverently move East and West communicating with the living dead. The traditional weapons are lowered during this solemn moment.

The ancestors are requested to accept and bless the marriage with pregnancy (Msimang 1995: 284-285 1975/1995)

Closely related to the element of prayer is singing. The two have an important part to play in both cultural and religious life of the Zulus. A religious song known as the clan's national anthem (ihubo) is sung.

### 3.6.3. The clan anthem (ihubo)

This song is sung at special occasions like marriage. It is sung without dancing. If there were some movement, it would be slow and solemn or very sacred in character. The researcher has witnessed this rite and interviewed people on it.. Bryant (1949: 32), writing on the Zulu people before the advent of the missionaries, also states that it is sung when the woman leaves the kraal of birth and when she reaches the bridegroom's kraal with

the bridal party. On entering the kraal of the bridegroom, there is great joy which is expressed by the joyful cry (ukulilizela). The clan's national anthem is sung again on the following day (wedding day). The shields are lifted as a way of saluting the living dead.

Prayer and the anthem highlight the significance of uniting the two families of the marrying people. They also show the role played by the living dead in the welfare of the two people, particularly child – bearing, for children are believed to be the gift from Mvelinqangi through the living dead (ancestors).

All the people interviewed confirmed that the ancestors have to be asked to bless the marriage. Other African tribes (apart from the Zulus) also make petitions to the ancestors to bless the marriage, for instance, Opong (1997 : 61) , writing on the Sotho marriages, states that if the ancestors (Badimo) are not happy about the marriage, they will not bless the marriage with children. There will therefore be no children in the marriage. If there are no children then it means there will be no one to remember the parents and therefore no continuity of life.

#### 3.64. Procreation and barrenness

Marriage and procreation (child – bearing) are inseparable. Marriage without children is not complete. It is usually interpreted to mean that the ancestors are not in favour of the marriage.

Marriage is directly connected with the continuity of life as one lives in his children and wife after death. So marriage and children assures one the regaining of lost immortality (Mbiti

1969: 133). That is why a single life is unacceptable. It curtails the continuation of life.

The living dead re-live or are “re-incarnated” in their children. This is evident in the personality traits or physical appearance of the deceased’s descendents. So marriage and the begetting of children is a sacred duty. In a sense, it means the re-creation and existence of husband and wife in their children.

The importance of procreation also lies in the fact that one has to have the offspring to remember him/her. The living dead live in the minds of the people left behind (the family) and sometimes appear to them in dreams. The people are able to recognise the living dead in their dreams.

The death of a childless person is regarded as a tragedy. It is the end of life. This seems to be a widespread belief in Africa. Bujo (1992 : 115, 116), writing from a different context in Africa, states this fact, which is acceptable to any Zulu person:

*“Thus a man who dies without progeny falls in a way, into oblivion. In some traditions a piece of coal is put into his mouth to indicate that the fire of life has died out.”.*

It means extinction because there are not children in whom life might continue. It does not only affect the individual concerned. The whole community is affected. A marriage with children means community survival as well. The marriage institution is regarded as a means of continuing community or human life. Mancini (1995: 55) describes marriage as the custodian of human life.

The decision not to marry and have children is seen as abnormal and means immediate rejection by both the extended families, that are parents, aunts, uncles and other relatives; and the community at large. It is a disregard for life. It is not acceptable to the ancestors. It also means that the person will not be acceptable to the living dead when he or she dies.

This conviction is based on the understanding that marriage promotes life, which is communally celebrated as “a communal value” for the living and the dead (Manci 1995:55).

The Zulu people have much in common with other tribal groups. Any Zulu person would be on a familiar ground in reading what Schapera says about the Tswana people. He points out that childlessness is not acceptable either by the family or the community.

The child is important both for the continuation of the life of the deceased in his/her children, and also for the continuation of the life of the community (or its development).

Schapera (1940 : 214) points out that the birth of a child even changes the name and the status of parents. For instance, in Zulu, the father becomes “uyise kaBongani” (father of Bongani). The parent becomes known by the child’s name.

Childlessness is totally unacceptable. The barren wife is given away. If the man is barren some arrangement is made to get a child for the couple. With the Zulus, the elderly women would arrange for the man’s brother to fertilise his wife to bear children for him.

If the woman is barren, the husband will marry the wife's relative or sister to get children (surrogate and levirate arrangements).

The problem here is what if this private relationship continues after bearing the children for the brother? The interviewees admitted that this sometimes creates problems if the relationship continues. The people interviewed agreed that this needs very strict self-discipline.

At this juncture one should mention another aspect of marriage, which shows the continuity of life not only within the family unit. The involved families or tribes are also enriched by inter-marriage.

#### 3.6.5. Corporate nature of marriage

Marriage creates peace between families and participation between tribes and clans. It creates friendship between the tribes who would be at loggerheads if the marriage had not taken place.

Ilogu (1974:29), writing from a context outside the Zulu people says

*Two families are linked together in a kind of brotherly relationship, when a boy or girl from these two families gets married. Because of the system of exogamy and polygamy, large numbers of clans and lineages are in this way united for mutual assistance, defence and trade.*

This underscores the importance of marriage and intermarriage amongst the traditional African people in general. Even during the time of Shaka, the builder of the Zulu nation, the clans which

had intermarried with the Zulus, were not attacked. Friendship had been established. The Zulus would rather come to the assistance of such a clan if they were attacked by enemies.

Intermarriages between families, tribes or clans, have a deep implication. They imply the sharing of life in a deeper level, sharing life with other people. According to the Zulu belief, a person's life is extended through the offspring. Intermarriage therefore implies the sharing or giving of life to each other. As Mancini puts it (1995 : 55)

*“The bride's people give their life through their daughter as the groom's people give theirs through their son”.*

This does not only affect the living. The living dead of both families, tribes or clans are directly involved.

To recap, it has become clear so far in this chapter that the different sacred places serve as an important point for the communication between the living and the living dead; that marriage means the continuity of life as one lives in his or her children after death: that a single life or life without children is therefore unacceptable for it curtails the continuation of life, and so marriage is a sacred duty as it means the recreation of husband and wife in their children (Mbiti 1969: 133). Mbiti (1969 : 134) also refers to marriage and the begetting of children as an attempt to regain immortality through being remembered by the offspring.

The Zulus, as part of a wider African family value the importance of this human institution called “marriage” or “family”. A good marriage or family results in a good and stable society. It strengthens the oneness of being for its very nature of being part

of the large and collective existence. This has been stressed above on the reference that the marriage in a traditional African society involves families, tribes and clans. This aspect is summed up in the words of Hillman (quoted by Mungazi (1966 : 38)):

*“Marriage in Africa is not merely a personal matter between two individuals. It is always a mutually rewarding socio-economic affair with important implications for the whole community (of the living and the living dead – addition mine)”.*

This research also attempts to look at a transition phase known as “death” (ukufa). Here again, the related rites give a clear indication of the continuation of life. In other words, the death of a person is understood differently from the death of an animal.



## CHAPTER FOUR

The continuity of life as evident in the rites related to death

### 4. Death

The Collins English Dictionary defines death as

*“the permanent end of all functions of life in an organism or some of its cellular components”*

The Longman Concise English Dictionary defines death as

*“a permanent cessation of all vital functions; the end of life”*

The Oxford Student’s Dictionary defines death as *“end of life”*

The Black’s Law Dictionary (4<sup>th</sup> Edition, 1951) defines death as:

*“The cessation of life ... a total stoppage of circulation of blood and functions ... such as respiration, pulsation”*

The above definitions seem to be influenced by philosophical considerations according to which “death” simply means an end. In other words these definitions do not take into account the religious understanding of life, human life in particular; that within the physical and material human body is embedded the soul or spirit. This is the essence of being human. The Zulu would therefore say “akasekho” (he/she is gone) when referring to death. The permanent and imperishable soul has left the perishable, physical body.

One can therefore say that on a religious level death means the separation between the physical body and the soul, the inner spiritual being. This reinforces the traditional African belief that a human being is a unit constituting the mind, body and spirit. There is no dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual.

The Zulu belief in the meaning of death is not different from the beliefs of other religious adherents like the Jews, the Christians, and the other traditional African clans.

Like the people of other religions, the Zulus understand death as the separation of the soul or inner being and the physical material body. Their understanding of death undoubtedly attests to life after death. This belief in life after death is validated in the language and ceremonies that are associated with death as will be noted below.

#### 4.1. Causes of death

##### 4.1.1. Witchcraft

This is medicinal practice for the purpose of killing (ukuloya). The very herbs for healing, are used by evil people for killing. A witchdoctor who mixes herbs for healing knows also how to use the herbs for bewitching.

- Witches

A witch is a female who practices black magic or sorcery. Sorcery is associated with the practice which is motivated by evil power or evil spirits. There seems to be more witches than wizards in the Zulu Communities.

- Wizards

A wizard is a male who practices black magic or sorcery. As mentioned above, there are less wizards and more witches in any given community. The interviewees (the majority) thought that the reason is that women handle food and it is easier for them to poison people. Some felt that they usually bear grudges against male chauvinists who use and abandon them.

#### 4.1.2. Magic

Magic is the manifestation of some mystical power. It is mystical because it cannot be explained how it affects people's lives.

There are two aspects of this mystical power – the good and the bad aspects. The desired mystical power is used by the diviners, rainmakers, etc. It is used to protect people from evil power. The evil power or mystical power is manipulated for evil purposes. It is used maliciously therefore becoming “Black Magic”, “evil magic” or “sorcery”. Sorcery is associated with evil concoctions.

#### 4.1.3. Poisoning

Poisoning is usually practised by people with evil hearts, people who nurse grudges and a desire to harm other people.

Poisoning in the Zulu situation is not different from the Western situation. Some concoction is used to make poison. The most

common one in some parts of Kwa-Zulu Natal is the liver of a crocodile. It is a deadly poison.

#### 4.1.4. Curses

The word is powerful. If a parent curses another person, especially the daughter or son, this has an evil effect on the one who has been cursed. Even death can result.

#### 4.1.5. Ancestral Spirits (Amathong/Amadlozi/Abaphansi)

There is no strong belief among the Zulus that the ancestors cause death. There are usually signs, which are interpreted by the diviners if the living dead are not happy.

Sometimes the living dead send messages of satisfaction through dreams. The Zulus and other ethnic groups are good in interpreting dreams. For instance, the dead person may appear to a member of the family in a dream saying “ngilambile” (“I am hungry”) or “ngomile” (“I am thirsty”). Then the Zulus know that they have to slaughter (sacrificial slaughter). The ancestor may appear angry for an improper action. An immolation sacrifice has to be made. Death can only result if the messages from the dead are ignored.

### 4.2. Zulu mythology

The most popular myth concerning the cause of death is the delay of the chameleon. The chameleon was told by the Creator to go and tell the people on earth that they would not die. The chameleon delayed on the way. The lizard was very fast with a contrary message: people on earth shall die. That is how there came to be death here on earth.

### 4.3. Types of death

There are untimely and timely death. One is regarded as a blessing. The other is a tragedy or irreparable.

#### 4.3.1. Untimely death

This death is totally unacceptable. It is a tragedy and loss to the family and the community. It is referred to as “ukufa” or “ukubhubha” – to be extinct or cease to exist. This type of death is associated with witchcraft or sorcery. Sometimes it is attributed to the anger of the ancestors.

#### 4.3.2. Timely death

This is the death, which happens at a ripe age. At this time one has children and grand children. The continuation of life is implied in the terms, which are used regarding this type of death:

Ukugoduka	-	to leave
Ukudlula	-	to pass on
Ukuthula	-	to be silent
Ukuhamba	-	to depart
Ukuqhubeka	-	to continue with the journey
Useye koyise mkhulu	-	has gone to be with the ancestors

It is clear from the above that timely death is understood by the Zulu as “a natural continuation of existence” (Berglund, 1976:

79). It is natural death. That is why the Zulus would say, someone “usishiyile” (has gone or left us).

The people who were interviewed agreed that such a person is not mourned.

#### 4.4. The rites and passage associated with timely death

##### 4.4.1. Farewell speech

When the elderly person is ill and there is no hope of recovery, the members of the family come together to be with him/her for the last time before the last journey.

The ill person leaves messages to the family. The words of a dying person are taken seriously. The livestock and other possessions are usually allocated to the offspring at this point.

The final words are usually: “ukufa sekungehlulile” (“Death has overpowered me”); “Awu! Sengiyanihiya, sengiya kobabamkhulu”, he says. (“Oh! I am leaving you now, going away to be with my great grandfathers”). (Msimang 1995: 140).

These words of farewell are familiar to the researcher, with a Zulu background. The interviewee also agreed that such speeches have been experienced in the different contexts. Such words are sacred. Prof. Msimang, with a Nkandla background (Zululand), also points out that death is thought of in terms of the ‘way’ (“indlela”) or ‘journey’ (“uhambo”).

Death is also thought of in terms of 'sleep' ("ukulala"). After saying praises for the living dead, a Zulu would end by saying "asifi siyalala" ('We do not die, but we sleep').

After the speech and the allocation of stock and other possessions, the dying person asks for meat. A beast is slaughtered. After eating its liver, the ill person passes on.

His last words are treasured. They have to be respected. The failure to do so will result in misfortunes.

So, according to the Zulu religion, there is no thought of death as the end of life. This is highlighted by the custom of burying people with possessions for use in the world of spirits or shades (izithunzi) (Msimang 1995: 143 1975/1995).

#### 4.43.2. Burial rite and possessions

Bryant (1949 : 143) gives a vivid description of the burial he witnessed.

*"One of the actual burial party, already descended into the grave, relevantly took the stones and therewith propped up the squatting corpse, let it topple over, by slipping them beneath the thighs and buttocks or as otherwise needed. Beneath his knees was deposited the dead man's head-ring (isicoco); into his folded hand was thrust one grain of every kind of cereal and a pumpkin pip. Within his reach was placed his snuff box with fresh ground snuff and round beside his body were piled his various mats, blankets, body-ware and eating vessels".*

A number of things can be learned from the above quotation. Only three comments need to be made here:

- The squatting position of the corpse symbolises the journey that the buried person embarks on at death. It is a journey to the spirit world or the world of the shades (izithunzi).
- The grains of different types of cereals in the hand are significant. The ancestors are believed to bless the living with rich harvest. So, those grains are for the welfare of the living dead as they are believed to use them in the world of the shades, as well as for the good of the living as they get these as a blessing from the living dead.
- The other things like blankets and the eating vessels are an indication that there is a strong belief that life goes on. It does not end at the physical death of the individual.

The interviewees agreed that what is described above is a well-known practice. The details do however, differ from area to area and according to the wish of the deceased. The two common positions are: laying position and squatting position.

Prof. Msimang (1995 : 143 1975/1995), writing from his experiences in Zululand, also states the two burial positions. On the burial with possessions he says:

*“Umnumzane usezobonwa okokugcina bese engena umfowabo nembewu yayo yonke into elinywayo, yezindlu ngezindlu zomuzi lowo. Uzofike ayifumbathise umufi acele kuye ukudla. Umkhuba wemvelo lowo.*



*'The head of the family is shown to the people for the last time. His brother comes in with the grain of the different crops kept by the different wives (in case of polygamous marriages). These are thrust into his hand and ask for a rich harvest)'*.

This is a cultural or religious practice.

The burial with possessions seems to be a general practice among the people of Africa. For instance Opong (1997 : 75), writing from a Sotho background, refers to it.

For the Zulu the most important possessions are the personal assegais. It will be a grave mistake to leave these behind. Calamity will befall the family until the anger of the spirits is appeased. The only possession, which is left behind intentionally, is the deceased's private beer-pot. It would be used for sacrificial purposes (the remembrance ceremonies).

There is no other way of clearly showing the continuity of life than the burial with possessions as well as the bringing back ceremony (ukubuyisa).

#### 4.4.3. The bringing back home ceremony (ukubuyisa)

Many Zulu families still perform this rite. It is a religious act that is practised by both Christians and the adherents of the traditional African religions.

All the interviewees testified to their experience of this ritual practice. The following procedure was confirmed:

- An ox is slaughtered for the head of the family.
- A cow or goat is usually slaughtered in the case of a woman.

- A mixture of medicine known in Zulu as ubulawu for good luck is used as a symbol of purifying the slaughtered animal.
- The gathering of the family members to grace the ritual occasions.

The interviewees also agreed that this rite is only for the members of the family unit or close blood relatives. The friends of the family and other people in the community can join the family for the feasting on the slaughtered animal.

The senior member or priest of the family is usually in charge of performing the rite. When the time for performing the actual rite comes, he addresses the living dead in the following words, holding the goat by the horns, he stands in front of the family which is seated and says:

*“N this is your food (animal) or something to eat. It is slaughtered for you. We plead with you. Come back and look after your children. This is the day for celebration. It is for your honour”.*

The researcher and interviewees have heard these and similar words not only in Kwa-Zulu Natal, but in Gauteng and other urban areas.

After uttering these words, the beast is slaughtered. This is a religious act. That is why the medicine for the ritual cleansing is applied to the living. It has a symbolic effect: It cleanses the mourning people who are believed to be in darkness or have what is called isinyama (a dark shade) at the death of the member of the family.

The “bringing back home” is greatly valued as a religious ritual. It serves

*“To invite the dead to come and make their presence in the midst of the family” (Nxumalo 1981: 71).*

The living dead is invited to be within the homestead for a very important purpose. His/her presence assures the members of the family that they are always safe. As Msimang (1975/1995 : 148)points out,

*“... akabuyele ekhaya ukuze ababheke””... brought back home in order to guard and protect the family from ailments and possible misfortunes.*

In discussing “death” and its related rites, it becomes clear that there is continuity of life in Zulu religious understanding of life. This has come out clearly in discussing “timely death”; “farewell speech”; “burial with possessions” and “the bringing back home” rite. What follows is a summary of funeral and after funeral procedures and their relevant symbolisms:

<b><u>FUNERAL RELATED PROCEDURES</u></b>	<b><u>THEIR SYMBOLISMS</u></b>
The striking of the grave with a spear by the son/ thrusting of the ground with a spear on the head end from the time the diggers begin. It remains there until the corpse is lowered down.	The spear is an important religious symbol. It is the weapon of defence or protection. It assures one of safety from danger on the way to the new country of the living dead. The thrust spear symbolises that the living dead is going to be remembered.
Personal possessions buried with the dead body.	The weapons are for protection on the way. The grains of corn are for substinance in the next world.

<p>Beast slaughtered before a person dies to “accompany him/her (yokumphelezela)”</p>	<p>Symbolises the food for the journey as well as the fact that the person (especially the head of the family) will need livestock in the next world.</p>
<p>Cleansing Ceremony (ihlambo). The Beast is slaughtered. The bones are not thrown away c/f note underneath.</p>	<p>This rite ends the mourning period. It is a purification ritual cleansing the mourners of contact with the corpse.</p>
<p>Bringing up Ceremony (ukukhuphula). The bones of the slaughtered beast not thrown away. C/f note underneath.</p>	<p>The Zulus believe that when a person dies, the spirit goes down under the earth and remains in the water there. The ceremony signifies that death is not final (according to the Zulus). Death is unable to destroy the rhythm of life. What it does is to disrupt the smooth running of life. Since the departed is not really dead, he/she is regarded as the <u>living-dead</u>. Death the destroyer is unable to destroy the rhythm of life.</p> <p>It symbolises the Zulu belief in life after death, and that something of the dead person lives on after death which can be contacted.</p>
<p>Bringing Back Ceremony (Ukubuyisa)</p> <p>After the ukubuyisa ceremony, the members of the family can contact him/her during bad as well as good or normal times.</p> <p>Now and again, the person is invited to participate in affairs of the family.</p>	<p>The Beast is slaughtered. The bones are also not thrown away. An explanatory note follows underneath. What is done with the bones? What does it mean?</p> <p>It symbolises reunion of the living family members with the deceased.</p>
<p>The beast of the ancestors (usually a black ox)</p>	<p>The presence of this beast in any homestead has a far-reaching significance. It symbolises the continuing presence of the living dead in the family and in the community at large.</p>

The informants or interviewees had knowledge of the above procedures. They pointed out that the meat of the beast slaughtered for the cleansing (ihlambo), “bringing up” (ukukhuphula) and the

“bringing back home” ceremonies was not to be taken away from the relevant family.

The reason for this is that the bones are not to be thrown away. They have to be burnt. Some medicine is made out of the ashes of the burnt bones. The medicine is used for sprinkling (ukuchela) within the homestead. By this rite, the departed is inexplicably united with the living members of the family as well as the community.

These insights on death, burial and post-burial rites have something in common. This common aspect is even stronger within the Nguni groups (Zulus, Xhosas and Swazis). For instance, what Soga (1931: 318) wrote in his *The Ama-Xhosa : Life and customs* shows very close similarities with the Zulu beliefs and practices in the following areas:

Regarding the death he says

*“Death to the Xhosas does not indeed mean extinction. The soul lives on, continuity of the family is preserved, the spirits of the departed have direct communication with the living: the living minister to the wants of those who “have gone before” and the latter punish the shortcomings of their friends in the flesh, by sending sickness or death upon them. These in their turn, offer sacrifice to appease the offended spirits”.*

Soga (1931 : 20) also put on record what people usually say when they address the dead people, usually at funerals:

*“Remember us for good from the place to which you have gone” (“uze usikhumbule ap’uya kona”).*

The dead body is placed in the grave “with the face towards the home”. This is significant. It is based on the belief that the deceased watches the welfare of the living in the family, chasing away the powers of evil.

#### 4.5. An analysis of Zulu poems on death (Msimang 1986)

The following is an analysis of five Zulu poems on death. The continuity of life after death is crystal clear.

##### 4.5.1. Emangcwabeni

At The Graves

Ibhalwe Ngu: J C Dlamini

Written by: J C Dlamini

Kodwa ngaphesheya kwengcwaba	But on the other side of the grave
Ningabaphelekezela ngemithandazo	You can accompany them by prayer

There are two points to be made about the above lines from the named poem: There is reference to the other side of the grave which implies after life. Secondly, there is reference to accompanying (phelekezela). This implies a journey. In Zulu culture and religion death is regarded as a journey to the ancestors. So the living cry and pray as they accompany the deceased up to the grave side (funeral rites).

##### 4.5.2. Nada, Ngidedele Ngife

Nada, Release Me To Die

Ibhalwe ngu: J C Dlamini

Written by: J C Dlamini

“Uma ukufa kungumnyango”	If death is <b>door</b>
“Uma ukufa kungukuphunyuka”	If death is an <b>escape</b>

“Uma ukufa kuyintathakusa”	If death is <b>dawn</b> ...
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There are three key words in the above lines from the poem: door (umnyango); escape (ukuphunyuka) and dawn (intathakusa).

All three imply “continuity of life” e.g. a door from one place to the other ; escape from one place or situation into another and dawn has to do with new life. The darkness will soon disappear and light appear.

#### 4.5.3. Angikwesabi Kufa

I Do Not Fear You, Death

Ibhalwe Ngu: O E H Nxumalo

Written by: O E H Nxumalo

1. Ngikwesabeleni kufa, ngoba	Why should I fear you death, because
2. Uma ngingawukhehl’ umqhele	If I do not put on the crown
3. WaseZulwini, ngingedlulanga kuwe	Of heaven, without passing through you
4. Kanginqikazi namanj’ungafika	I do not doubt even now you may come,
5. Kodw’uzungakhohlwa nanini:	But never forget:
6. Ekugcineni nawe kufa uyofa	You also will die in the end

The writer sees death as a bridge to better life (green pastures). This is a desire to be with the forefathers, hence the reference to “amathongo’akithi” (line 4). The writer desires two things: to be with amathong’akithi (ancestors); and to enter heaven, hence a reference to “umqhele weZulu” lines 2 and 3 – crown of heaven.

In the above stanza we come across a good example of the combination of Christianity and African Traditional Religion.

This is a common practice which is widespread in Africa. Most people hold onto both religions dearly.

The fear of death is ruled out because of the hope of reunion with the ancestors (African Traditional Religion) and also a hope of the heavenly bliss (Christianity).

4.54. Kufa... Kufa... Kufa                      Death... Death ... Death  
 Ibhalwe Ngu: LBZ Buthelezi                  Written by: LBZ Buthelezi

1. Okwangeneno                      makube okwangeneno	What belongs to this life must be of this life
2. Okwangale    kube    okwangale .....	What belongs to the other side must be of the other side .....
3. Ngale                      mangithokozelwe ngenamelwe, .....	On the other side let there be rejoicing (or a warm welcome). .....
4. Ngithole indawo ethokomele,	And get a warm (comfortable) place
5. Lapho    umphefumulo    wami uyolala .....	Where my soul will sleep (in peace) .....

Ngale (on the other side) (lines 2 and 3) definitely refers to life after death where the poet hopes and prays for a warm welcome and a comfortable place for rest or sleep. The Zulus would say asifi siyalala (we do not die but sleep) as mentioned above.

4.55. Kufa    Death  
 Ibhalwe Ngu: O E H Nxumalo                  Written by: O E H Nxumalo

Yebo, ngiyaye ngizwe	Yes, I usually hear
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Nobuxokoxoko bamandla, ngizwe	The voices of the crowds, I hear
Namazwi obabamkhulu engibezwa	The voices of my great fathers whom I hear
Ngendaba, ngizwe behuba	About, I hear them singing
Nezingom'uthuthumel'umzimba	The traditional songs and my body, trembles
Wami, ngifikelwe ukubingaza	I become anxious and desire (to join them)
Unqobeni – ke kufa ndini?	Where is your victory then death?

For the writer of this poem death is not the end. He imagines the life of the ancestors, and in that imagination, he even hears the voices of the forefathers which he did not even know. He concludes that death is not a victory for there is life after death.

The aim of going through these five poems is to examine the idea of the “continuity of life” that predominates in Zulu literature including poetry.

One can argue that the poets who wrote on the theme of death could have been Christians and therefore influenced by Christian beliefs in life after death.

The truth of the matter is that even if they were influenced by their Christian beliefs, those convictions were acceptable to the culture and beliefs of the Zulus e.g. the belief that life continues after death, hence the belief in ancestors (the living dead) who influence their daily lives.

The above analysis examines the Zulu culture and religion. It is however important to note that any African in the continent of Africa can identify with or be on familiar ground when reading

these Zulu poems. A good example is the following poem written by Dirago Diop, a poet of MALI (Sudan)

4.5.6. Those who are dead are never gone:

they are there in the thickening shadow

The dead are not under the earth:

they are in the tree that rustles,

they are in the wood that groans,

they are in the water that runs,

they are in the hut, they are in the crowd,

the dead are not dead.

Those who are dead are never gone,

they are in the breast of the woman,

they are in the child who is wailing

and in the firebrand that flames.

The dead are not under the earth:

they are in the fire that is dying,

they are in the grasses that weep,

they are in the whimpering rocks,

they are in the forest, they are in the house,

the dead are not dead.

(Quoted by J V Taylor (1963 : 107) in *Christian Presence Amid African Religion*).

The above references do not only underscore similarities, but also the fact that the continuity of life is real in African religion as this chapter attempted to highlight.

#### 4.6. The connection between marriage and death

The death ceremonies show the religious value of marriage as well as procreation in the African way of life. For example, the son plays a leading role in the father's funeral especially if he is the first-born. The son keeps the father's economy and also cares for the ox, which mystically links the human world with that of the living dead (Mbiti 1969: 152).

That is why childlessness is unacceptable in African Religion, for it means that a person will not be remembered and will not be invited back to be with the family. When death comes, it is the end of that person's life.

One may therefore conclude by stating that the connection between marriage and death is that the two are the means through which the continuity of life is promoted and strengthened in African Religion.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## Conclusion

The previous chapters have investigated the continuity of life under three key areas: life, marriage and death.

### 5.1. Life

The Creator or Supreme Power is the source of life. This statement represents the convictions, not only of the Zulu people, but also many tribal groups in Africa (African Religion). It is also the conviction of people of other religions: Islam, Judaism and Christianity

It is true of course, that all life originates from the Supreme Power: human life, animal life and plant life. But like other religions of the world, the Zulus and other African tribes believe that there is something special about human life. It is different from animal and plant life. That is why the taking of human life was taboo among the people of Africa from time immemorial, except in times of war.

Life is lived in community. This is the African understanding of life. There is strong emphasis on community and belonging. The corporate nature of the understanding of life does not entertain individualism. Life cannot be lived in isolation. A person finds his/her identity in interaction with other people, hence the Zulu adage or maxim – *umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye abantu* – a person is a person through other persons.

So the family unit, the extended family, friends and relatives as well as the clan play a crucial role in shaping and influencing the life of an individual.

Life continues even after death through the ancestors who are regarded as the heroes of the tribe or clan. They are venerated because of the exemplary life they lived here on earth. That is why they are ritually remembered and ritually brought back to look after the members of the family who are still here on earth. The ancestors do not take the place of the Supreme Being or Mvelinqangi (the first Appearer). Mvelinqangi is

approached through them. This is a sign of respect according to the African world view (weltanschauung). A senior person is approached through those who are close to him or her.

The ancestors either bless or curse. They bless if they are ritually remembered and curse if they are forgotten or if there is some evil or the breaking of a taboo.

Life, according to the African understanding and experience, is far from being smooth-sailing. There are enemies which are a threat to life. These enemies either diminish or annihilate life. The most common of these enemies of life are:

***Wrong-Doing:*** If people conform to the norms and values of a particular community or clan, there will be order and continuity of life.

On the other hand, if the norms and values are not adhered to, life will be threatened or diminished. Wrongdoing is unacceptable and angers the ancestors. The same applies to the failure to do what is right e.g. offering libations to the ancestors.

***Affliction:*** Affliction usually comes in the form of disease, drought, barrenness and the failure of crops. These diminish life and are the result of failure to promote life.

***Witchcraft:*** This is a strange mysterious power that controls and manipulates a person, affecting all the faculties of that person. Witches and sorcerers are associated with this evil skill or craft.

The survival mechanisms preserve and promote life in African Religion. These are prayer, sacrifices and offerings, as well as medicines (herbs). They are used to restore and promote life.

The religious experts like diviners, mediums and seers are approached for diagnosis of a problem. The prescriptions for the restoration of life

are given. When followed, restoration results in a state of peace and harmony between the living and the living dead (ancestors) and also between the living themselves.

#### 5.1.1. Sacredness of life:

This was highlighted as a very important mark of any religion. If life originates from God/Mvelinqangi/Qamata or Molimo, it has the stamp of Godliness in it. It should therefore be respected by all the people of faith. This is in line with the Biblical ideal as well as the African way of life. Hence the call for ubuntu (humanness).

The second area that promotes and preserves the continuity of life is marriage.

#### 5.1.2. Eternal life and African Religion:

African Religion does not believe in eternal life with God in heaven. There is however, a strong belief in life after death with the ancestors. Hence, the words like “usikhonzele ko-gogo nakomkhulu” (‘we send greetings to our grandparents’). Such words are based on the belief that they, are alive. They can even receive messages.

### 5.2. Marriage

African marriage is a process. It consists of the following stages: courtship, love-play, abduction, lobolo (brideswealth), wedding and the birth of the first child, preferably a baby boy.

So marriage in African culture is a progressive development of the two people involved. It is a process of growing together which culminates in procreation after the wedding celebrations.

Marriage is a contract or an agreement between the two parties – bride and groom, and also between the two families – of the bride and that of the groom. It is an agreement of relationships. The two become one big family symbolised by the exchange of gifts.

These relationships go beyond the living and also involves the ancestors. This is important because the ancestors are the ones who have to bless marriage with children.

The living dead are addressed from a sacred place both at the bride's place (during the farewell dance) and at the groom's place.

The sacred places like the back of the hut, the hearth or fire place, doorway arch, and the cattle enclosure (upper part of it) are believed to be places where the spirits of the living dead (ancestors) reside.

Women are regarded as the bearers and transmitters of life. This is realised through fertility and childbearing. Sterility or childlessness is regarded as a curse. It is unacceptable. Diagnosis needs to be made. Why is there no childbearing? Are the ancestors unhappy about the marriage? The religious experts have to be consulted. That is why the parts of the slaughtered animal have to be guarded lest they be used by evil people to stop the transmission of life by making the bride childless or sterile.

That is also why virginity is regarded as a noble state. It symbolises the purity of the body and preserves the blood (spring of life) which is essential for procreation at a later stage in life.

Childbearing has been stressed above. Its significance is based on the assurance it gives to the parents that they will have the offspring to remember them. In fact the living dead (ancestors) will ask for some of the grandchildren to be named after them.

Impotence, homosexuality, taboos (like the time of menstruation) and suckling (during which sexual intercourse is forbidden) fornication and incest, hinder, threaten or diminish the transmission of life. These hinder the transmission of life because they are not the accepted or normal ways of the sexual activity that can result in the procreation of children that will be a blessing from the ancestors. In fact in conditions like impotence there may be no children at all.

The following forms of marriage are important: polygamy, widow inheritance, levirate, marriage, surrogate marriage, ghost marriage and woman marriage. These are commonly known practices in the different parts of Africa.

So procreation, remembrance and naming assure the parents a continued existence through their offspring.

#### 5.2.1. Childless marriages:

If the wife cannot conceive, the husband is free to marry another woman to bear children for the family. This is according to the Zulu culture, which is similar to those practised in many parts of Africa.

In some cases the suggestion comes from the wife. She can even go to the extent of choosing a woman for her husband. Family peace and stability is usually not disturbed.

The present situation of one man one-wife results in untold pain and suffering. In fact it results in emotional trauma if the husband has to separate from his wife just because she cannot bear children for him.

There was a strong feeling among the interviewees that bigamy (one man two wives) and polygamy (one man many wives) should be revisited by the church.

#### 5.2.2. The care of the living by the ancestors:

Concern was raised about the rituals of bringing up (ukukhuphula) and bringing back (ukubuyisa) the spirit of the deceased to look after the living members of the family. Is life with Christ and in Christ not enough to guard the believers from the attacks of the evil powers?

A Minister of Religion made a valid point. He pointed out that the Africans believe in the ancestors who are already in the spiritual realm in the same way that both the Jews and Christians believe in the mediation of angels without doubting the all-sufficient power of God.

The continuity of life is also evident in rites and rituals that are related to death.



### 5.3. Death

For the African people, a human being as a unit consists of mind, body and spirit. African Religion knows no dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual. Human nature is a unit consisting of the two. This is true of other world religions: Judaism, Islam, Christianity and the other religions.

Death is caused by witches, wizards, black magic, poisoning, curse and sometimes ancestral spirits. Another cause of death is mythological in nature. The chameleon with the message that people should not die was overtaken by the lizard with the message people on earth should die.

#### 5.3.1. Types of death:

There are two types of death namely timely and untimely death.

Untimely death, which is the result of witchcraft and sorcery or the anger of the ancestors.

Timely death, or death at a ripe age. This death is regarded as a blessing. It is referred to as passing on. The farewell speech underscores this passing on (as stated above). In this instance death is not understood as the end of life.

Closely related to the timely death is the burial with possessions and the seeds of the different crops in the hands for use in the land of the shades, as well as the blessing of the living with a rich harvest. The same applies to the bringing back ceremony. The spirit of the dead is ritually brought back in order to look after the living members of the family.

The analysis of five Zulu poems further underscores the idea of the continuity of life. The hope of life after death is expressed and its certainty highlighted. Death can never be the end of human life that originates from God and that is of God (Mvelinqangi, Qamata or Molimo).

The same is highlighted in the poem from Mali (Sudan), which shows that what is believed by the Zulus is typical of many African tribes. “The dead are not dead”, as Dirago Diop puts it in this poem.

The life that proceeds from the Supreme Power goes on through procreation, naming, remembrance as well as through the rites of bringing up and bringing back.

Having examined the above – life, marriage and death – one becomes even more confident to assert that African Religion has a world status like all world religions which equally accept the belief in life after death.

All the interviewees were of the opinion that there is no reason why African Religion should not be included amongst the great religions of the world. Like these religions, African religion also stresses the belief in the Supreme Power, Creator of heaven and earth and in life after death.

Human life is therefore sacred and valuable for it has its special origin in the Supreme Power. This is an important understanding of humanity in African Religion. For instance there is no “stranger” in Zulu Culture, and in fact, in the whole African Continent. A “stranger” gets special care : the best meal is prepared for him/her. A person is seen not as a stranger but as a fellow human being who needs respect and care.

A person belongs to a wider circle of familial relationships that shapes his/her personality. So a person finds his/her personhood or real self through interaction with other people.

Another important understanding of human life is that it is valuable here on earth as well as in the hereafter or on the other side of physical death. Human beings therefore strive for a common goal, that is, the attainment of a full humanity. This is a life that is not lived selfishly but in awareness of another person. Hence the adage: Umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye abantu (a person is a person because of other persons). Any religion that disregards this fact is lacking.

All the known religions of the world should take the lead in striving to attain the goal of a full humanity African Religion in general has always sought to promote this ideal.

The life that continues from here on earth to the hereafter is concretely expressed in rituals (actions and words) that are used in marriage and death events. Marriage invites the families of the woman with that of the bride, the families of the living as well as the dead. A person dying in old age therefore passes on to be with the ancestors. The ancestors bless the marriages of the family with children who continue the lives of the parents through remembrance.

It is therefore quite clear that the understanding of life, the significance of marriage and death (rituals associated with marriage and death) enhance the belief in the continuity of life which is an important mark for any world religion.

Religion is a human belief and activity. There are therefore activities and beliefs that need to be revisited from time to time depending on the context. Firstly, childlessness has often resulted in great emotional pain and loss. The belief that there must be children, otherwise the marriage relationship is not complete needs to be revisited. In most cases women suffer if they cannot conceive. They get divorced by the husbands. This is where it becomes difficult to be both Christian and African. But women are understanding and accommodating if the husband is sterile.

In African culture sterility is not a cause for divorce. The husband, and in most cases in agreement with the wife who cannot conceive, would take a second wife.

This is a challenge to the church, and it needs to be addressed adequately.

What happens if a black African Christian is faced with such a problem? Something of his African background says he must get a second partner to bear children for him. The Christian church refuses and that person leaves the church for it fails to meet that person's cultural convictions and practices.

So the issue of procreation needs to be addressed urgently in modern times in the African continent.

Secondly, there is the practise of widow inheritance. Whatever good intentions and beliefs surround it, is it feasible in these days of HIV/Aids?

The other area is polygamous marriages. The current problem of the increasing numbers of orphans of Aids victims is alleged to be the result of illicit love affairs because there are more women than men. The man contracts the virus and comes back home to infect the wife. Perhaps the church should leave the choice to individuals. Those who feel they cannot live for life with one partner be allowed to have more than one wife.

But apart from the above-mentioned areas of concern, one can state confidently that the continuity of life as evident in the rituals connected with marriage and death is a worldwide religious phenomenon. African Religion can therefore be classified amongst the well-known world religions.

The areas of similarity with other religions have shown that African Religion can take its place with any other world religion.

# ANNEXURE I

## Interview questions

1. What is the role of the elderly people in the family when there is a traditional Zulu wedding?
2. What is the role of the elderly people in the family when there is a funeral that is conducted according to Zulu culture?
3. What is the role of socialization of children in relation to the Zulu traditional religion?
4. Why are African traditions not given international status in Africa?
5. How do you describe the concept “ubuntu”?
6. What role do you think Mvelinqangi/God plays in your life?
7. How do different believers or religious people describe God?
8. What are the roles of witchdoctors/izinyanga in a society?
9. Describe the different types of witchdoctors and their functions.
10. Why is marriage emphasized in African culture?
11. Why are the children, particularly boys, important in Zulu (African) marriage?
12. What role do the ancestors play in Zulu culture?
13. What rituals are regarded as important in a traditional African marriage or wedding and in death?
14. What myths are viewed as the cause of death in Zulu religion?

15. How does the spirit of the dead person connect to the relevant spirit or shades?
16. What is the status of women in Zulu culture/religion?
17. Describe the status of African Religion in comparison with world religions e.g. Christianity and Islam?

## ANNEXURE II

### Important role played by women

The role of women is evident in the naming of baby girls with names beginning with prefix “No-“, abbreviation of ‘mother of’. The following are only a few examples (Zulu names).

It is important to include this appendix because African Religion has been classified by some people as an inferior religion for it discriminates against women. But one has to revisit the history of the great world religions e.g. Islam, Judaism and Christianity itself to learn that African Religion is no exception.

What follows highlights the importance of women in African Religion:

- Nobantu:** (Mother of the people)  
When a young person gets married in the Zulu culture, the wife belongs the husband’s family, extended family and the whole clan. It is in this sense that the parents will say the “mother of the people” is born.
- Nozizwe:** (Mother of the nations)  
The nations rise and prosper through women. A woman conceives, carries the baby in her body and gives birth to the heroes and leaders of the nation.
- Nokuthula:** (Mother of peace)  
Peace and prosperity is the “sumum bonum” (the highest good) not only to the Zulus, but to all the tribes of Africa. This name is therefore a prayer that the baby girl and her descendants should be instruments of peace and harmony
- Nonhlanhla:** (Mother of fortune)  
A fortune is a blessing from the creator. According to Zulu Religion, it shows that the ancestors are happy.

Misfortune is a curse. It means that the ancestors are not happy and have to be appeased.

This name is therefore a prayer that the person concerned and her offspring should be a blessing to the family and the clan she will belong to.

**Nosihe:** (Mother of mercy/empathy/compassion)

All three meanings are noble qualities that are possessed by a true mother in the community. This name is therefore a prayer that the person should be a blessing to her children, husband, in-laws and to the community at large.

**Nondlela:** (Mother of the way)

The way of life, the norms and values of the community are sacred to the Zulu.

The mother of the children helps her children to embrace the community norms and values. This name is therefore a prayer that the person concerned should have wisdom to lead her children to the acceptable way of life.

**Nontobeko:** (Mother of humility)

Humility is a noble virtue to all religions of the world. This virtue is valued for the mother of humility is a blessing to her husband, in-laws and to the wider community.

**Nomusa:** (Mother of mercy/grace)

The children are regarded as a gift from the ancestors, the heroes and the saints of the clan.

The children are a sign that the ancestors are happy with the marriage.



This name is therefore a prayer that the owner of the name should be a blessing through which the nation will receive favours from the ancestors.

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