

One God, many people

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This is probably the only contribution to this *Festschrift* written by a non-Christian, albeit a theist of sorts. In view of the complex integrity that is Inus Daneel it seems fitting that such an essay should appear in his book. The eye of a fly has many facets; and Inus, keen observer that he is, would surely have noticed the omission.

His point of entry into the Shona world that he has explored so minutely was, because of his own belief, background and profession, Christian. But black Christianity is permeated with indigenous concepts – perhaps even more so within the Mission Churches than in the AICs – and these became of all-absorbing interest to him. The fundamental monotheism of the Shona cosmogony fascinated him and led him to the cave in the Matopos where the old god of Africa speaks. He was the first white person to be admitted there, and that is the story of his small classic, *The god of the Matopo Hills*. No balanced researcher and participant observer – which Inus is *par excellence* – can remain impervious to the pervasive reality of the indigenous culture in rural Zimbabwe, and to its impact on religious ideas imported from elsewhere. With typical thoroughness he included, in the first volume of his *Old and new in Southern Shona Independent Churches*, a detailed chapter on 'Traditional beliefs and ritual'. When I first read it in 1981, its sheer authenticity enlivened the dry academic analysis and convinced me of its author's close familiarity with the scene he was describing.

Ten years later, when I wanted to pursue my own study of indigenous African belief in a systematic way, Inus was my obvious choice for a mentor. He supervised my master's study (the dissertation was eventually entitled 'Soil and blood: Shona traditional religion in late 20th century Zimbabwe'). Our approaches differed, of course. To me Christianity was peripheral, of interest only inasmuch as it is one of the many 'modernising' influences on the still vibrantly alive indigenous culture. Inus fully understood this and generously gave me access to his own research contacts, introduced me into tribal communities in Masvingo Province, and shared his inside knowledge with me in discussions. As a result, my field research in Zimbabwe gave me far

deeper insight than I could otherwise have acquired in two years. For all this I am very grateful. I am also grateful for his openness to my thinking, which tends to be radical at times. Where we disagreed, he always gave me a fair, if critical, hearing and did not impose his own views – of which I in turn was sometimes critical. It was, for me, a free and fruitful learning climate.

In this essay I present what strike me as some fundamental conceptual differences between the African and the Western outlook, specifically as they affect worldview or, in the Western sense, religion. I do so from a non-Christian point of view, and obviously from the point of view of a white person who was brought up to 'think European', however much I may have immersed myself in my African lifeworld.

Understanding these differences could deepen and enrich cross-cultural communication and interaction on our subcontinent. In the present context they may also provide a fresh slant on the theology (enacted or otherwise) of AICs. The traditional theological loci – Christology, ecclesiology, pneumatology, etc – are no doubt useful analytical tools. But I have always felt that Christology in particular, as understood in traditional Christian theologies, is not directly applicable. What Inus has often described as a 'weak' Christology may simply be a very different one! Not being a theologian, I am skating on thin ice but shall return to this point nonetheless in my conclusion.

I should point out that I use the terms 'African' and 'Western/European' in a very generalised way. I am fully aware that neither of these worldviews or cultures is homogeneous, and that both are continually evolving. Both are fraught with their own inner contradictions and differences. A Spanish peasant Catholic may have more in common with Shona traditionalists than with German Protestant (or even fellow Catholic) theologians. Many of my black neighbours in Yeoville, Johannesburg, may have more in common with me than with rural black Zimbabweans – or, for that matter, with rural fellow South Africans. With these qualifications, however, the distinction still has some validity and remains useful for cross-cultural comparative purposes.

My respect for the African worldview, which is only beginning to take its place among the philosophies of the world and which is still greatly underestimated, even by some black African intellectuals, is evident in what follows. So is my intolerance of any preconceptions about the superiority of a technologically advanced but spiritually repressed, if not impoverished, Western civilisation.

Explanatory comments

The notion that Africans 'worship' their ancestors is dying a natural death (Daneel 1971:178ff). It has become academically more correct to speak of ancestor veneration, and mainline churches – notably the Roman Catholic Church, with its established hagiography of venerated saints – are increasingly accommodating it. Yet it seems to me that this essentially liberal tolerance overlooks the basic conceptual differences between the African and Western worldviews that I mentioned above.

The respect that black people have for their dead forebears, and the many rituals they observe to demonstrate it, must have struck early European missionaries and colonisers as religious worship in their own Christian sense. There is no doubt that many black Africans believe that their forebears continue to influence their lives and communicate with them in various ways. Interaction with the spirit world, to most Western Christians, is either religious (good) or demonic (bad). My study of the indigenous African worldview, both first-hand and through secondary sources, has convinced me that, although a good/bad distinction does apply, there is no stark opposition. Communication with spirits is part of everyday reality. And spirits, like people, are both good and bad; it is a matter of relationships. Wole Soyinka (1990:122) writes:

In contrast to what would be called strictly religious processes in other societies, the harmonisation of human functions, external phenomena and supernatural suppositions within individual consciousness emerges as a normal self-adjusting process in the African temper of mind. Where, for instance, the mediation of ritual is required, it is performed as a human (communal) activity, not as a space-directed act of worship. This is what leads to a preference for a 'worldview', a cosmic totalism, rather than 'religion'.

The implications of such an approach are many. One is to abrogate the modernist divide between sacred and profane, a dichotomy reflected in the thinking of scholars of religion like Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade. Dichotomies of this kind (Soyinka calls them 'Manicheisms') are fundamental to European Enlightenment thinking.¹ It has certainly informed the constitutions of democratic Western countries with their strict separation between 'church' and 'state'. Thus the Western or modernist worldview is built on an assumption of *discontinuity*. The 'African temper of mind', I

submit, assumes, indeed insists on, *continuity* as a fundamental requirement of human life and wellbeing (Appiah 1992:203).

I am not saying that discontinuity necessarily implies fragmentation and conflict, although it may produce these effects. Neither does continuity necessarily imply a lack of dynamics and innovativeness, though it may give rise to such effects. I am not arguing the merits or demerits of either position at this stage. I am merely looking for categories that will help to explain how African and Western outlooks differ.

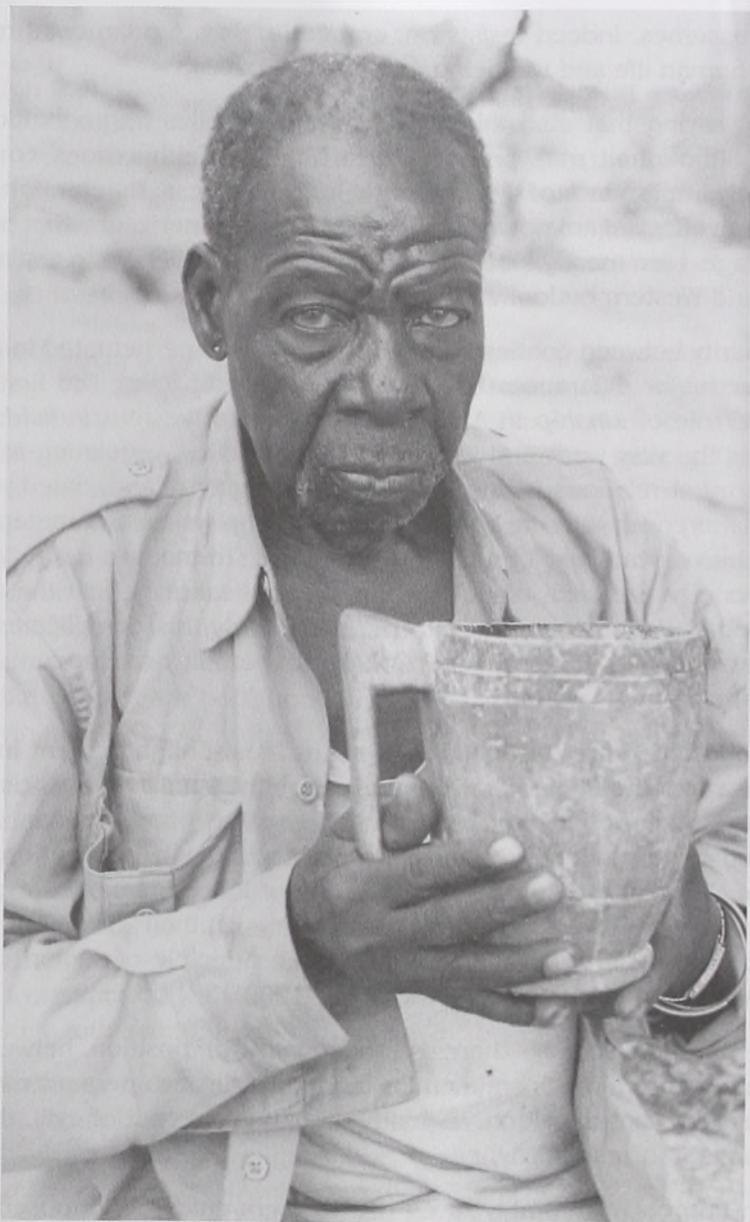
The disparity between continuity and discontinuity is perpetuated in at least two other major differences between the two worldviews. The first is the pervasive role of *kinship* in Africa, as opposed to Western *individualism*. Kinship is the very warp and weft of African societies, regulating tribal life and intertribal relations in formally intricate, highly differentiated ways. It extends, moreover, into the spirit world, knitting physical and metaphysical realities into a seamless fabric. That is the ideal. To modern urban Western people, one major ideal is individual self-actualisation, which the nuclear family and society are expected to permit. Clearly this complicates social regulation and places great strain on social stability, as modern history abundantly proves.

The second difference has to do with status. Post-Enlightenment individualism has radically affected many notions about human life and society. One of these is the notion of the essential equality of all human beings, canonised in revolutionary manifestos like the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the American Declaration of Independence. Pre-colonial African societies had a very real democracy of their own, but it was predicated on lines of kinship with its built-in principle of seniority. In the Zimbabwean context Herbert Aschwanden (1989:122) observes:

In Karanga society, there is no equality of position between two persons. Within a lineage and extended family, two persons can never hold the same position. 'Equality of status is a root of evil', they [his Shona informants] say.

Such an approach inevitably gives rise to *hierarchies*, as opposed to the Western democratic ideal of *equality*.

1 See eg Van Niekerk 1995



Spirit medium Tazivei, who was the senior tribal advisor at Chief Gutu's court. He provided guerrilla fighters with ancestral directives during the liberation struggle of Zimbabwe. In 1967 he endorsed Inus's visit to the Mwari cult shrines which resulted in the first-ever attendance of a white African in the secret oracle proceedings

If one links the last two differences with their conceptual roots, continuity and discontinuity, a certain logic starts to emerge. In my context the question is: how does this logic affect the religious thinking of the two broad groups under consideration?

Western discontinuity (and its offshoots, equality and individualism) clearly creates problems for theism. As Appiah (1992:186) points out, 'If God's answer is sought to any questions of a technical character it is to those questions that have remained recalcitrant to scientific management – questions about one's relations with others – and questions that could not even in principle be addressed by science – questions of value.' (This actually suggests one solution to the dilemma of relevance, so evident in the work of many 20th-century theologians.) African hierarchical continuity, by contrast, readily explains God as the self-evident apex of the entire cosmic structure: the first and, therefore, the greatest ancestor of all. The problem here is how this continuity can be maintained in practice as the human life world becomes ever more hybrid and diffuse.

Continuity versus discontinuity

In a non-literate society, creedal consistency is obviously not easy to monitor. Even my limited field research produced diverse explanations of the same custom or ritual, not to mention fascinatingly different God concepts. These individual, sometimes highly creative, interpretations within a commonly accepted framework show that conservatism and innovativeness are not necessarily mutually exclusive; continuity is not equivalent to stasis.

A striking example was the way in which young guerrillas from distant areas were accepted as 'sons of the soil' by local ancestors during the Zimbabwean liberation struggle, and these same ancestors abandoned their traditional aversion to European artefacts by extending their aid and protection to gun-carrying freedom fighters (Lan 1985). Expedient to the point of pragmatism as this may have been, these ancestors' mediums acted in accordance with a pattern evident throughout Zimbabwe's pre-colonial history. Invading conquerors always had to establish good relations with autochthonous occupants and their forebears:

The historical process of accretion of immigrant ruling and client groups resulted apparently in a series of layers of authority, with the

earlier layers developing ritual responsibilities for the relations between the new inhabitants and the 'earth' (which includes earlier generations of inhabitants). Later layers of immigrants wielded political power based on military or economic supremacy (Rennie 1973:73).

Thus new dynasties, however strong their temporal hegemonies, could at most maintain a deferential, ritually observed balance of power; they had to accept the fundamental superiority of spirits more directly linked with the soil (which, as Rennie points out, is also the Shona metaphor for the entire ancestral hierarchy) and, therefore, better able to bring rain.

Such flexibility is made possible by the resilient strength of the commonly accepted framework referred to above. Commenting on George Steiner's verdict that European dramatic vision has declined concomitant with the decline of such an integral worldview, Soyinka (1990:48f) writes:

The implication of this [verdict], a strange one to the African worldview, is that ... the world in which lightning was a cornice in the cosmic architecture of man collapsed at that moment when Benjamin Franklin tapped its power with a kite. The assimilative wisdom of African metaphysics recognises no difference in essence between the mere means of tapping the power of lightning – whether it is by ritual sacrifice ... or through the agency of Franklin's revolutionary gadget. What George Steiner effectively summarises is that at some stage of intellectual hypothesis, at some phase of scientific exploration ... that architectonic unity which is the basis of man's regulating consciousness ... suffers the same fate of redundancy as the assumptions and theories themselves. For cultures which pay more than lip-service to the protean complexity of the universe of which man is himself a reflection, *this European habit of world re-definition appears both wasteful and truth-defeating* (my emphasis).

Soyinka's 'architectonic unity' is much the same as my notion of continuity. The *structure* within which human beings exist and operate is fixed and enduring. Its cohesive unity cannot be tampered with without invoking grave, even cataclysmic consequences. Several of my own interviewees were insistent that these consequences were not 'punishment' but simply ways of recalling people to recognition of their abiding need for the built-in safeguards of the created order. Without these safeguards they are at the mercy of destructive forces, from natural disaster to witchcraft. (At an

existential level this is reflected among the Shona in the notion that offended ancestors will 'open the door' of their living descendants to harmful spirits, rather than inflict harm on their kin themselves.) Within that framework, however, innovations – artistic, philosophical, technological – are readily accommodated if they further human wellbeing and do not disrupt social harmony. Continuity takes precedence over knowledge about the pre-existent structure of the cosmos, which humans discover in the course of living their cosmically ordered lives. To such a worldview the iconoclastic Western deference to science would actually be hubristic, just as the African reverence for ancestors struck Western believers as idolatrous.

The ancestors vividly and palpably embody the very continuity on which African belief rests. They are the immediately accessible part of the cosmic communication system. And the communication is reciprocal; the reality of spirit possession is not questioned. When Daneel (1987:259ff) contrasts indigenised (AIC) Christian pneumatology with belief in the power of ancestral spirits, characterised as a manipulable force that can be 'given' to people, he appears to be contradicting his own earlier observation of traditional Shona practice (Daneel 1971:178):

Even in the magical manipulation of the diviner, Mwari [the supreme God] is not merely a distant observer, because He is the source of the forces at work. Should such forces become perverted in the hands of a sorcerer or witch and thereby pose a threat to the social cohesion of His people, it is on His behalf that punitive measures are undertaken.

This apparent ambivalence strikes me as a result of the author's apologist stance on behalf of AIC Christianity in the face of orthodox Christian criticism – a stance which has been vindicated by widespread acceptance of his initially revolutionary approach. (My own stance on behalf of the African worldview is analogous, and, I hope, ultimately as persuasive!)

Personally, I find the adamant rejection of ancestral spirits, notably among some Zimbabwean Zionists whom I interviewed, perplexing. In the traditional worldview ancestors are simply go-betweens, rungs in the cosmic ladder leading up to the creator God, 'the one who was there first'. To most Shona traditionalists, and many Christians, the 'white' God of the Bible and the indigenous Mwari, known by many other names as well, are one God who is merely worshipped differently in different cultures. Appiah (1992:184) quotes the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe as saying, 'I can't imagine Igbo

travelling four thousand miles to tell anybody their worship was wrong!' And an elderly, illiterate Shona chief told me he was very grateful to the churches for teaching the same morality that he and his peers sought to uphold, and doing so, moreover, every Sunday instead of only at major ceremonies two or three times a year. His one reservation about the churches was that they 'stop people from attending rituals and consider our forefathers dirty'. He could not see any need for such radical rejection. To AICs, of course, it may be partly a matter of self-definition.

Be that as it may, Zionist and other indigenised Christian churches still operate from within an integrated African cosmogony when they interpret the new faith. The modern Western approach is a very different matter. The explosion of knowledge about the physical universe that triggered what is known as the Enlightenment shook belief in a metaphysical reality, and, in some cases, it shattered such beliefs completely. Old gods became obsolescent myths, new ones were cast in the mould of the human intellect. Once emancipated from 'superstitions', human reason proceeded to annex every domain of knowledge and activity and to reshape social, political, industrial and economic realities in its own image. Metaphysics became the (more or less relevant) domain of philosophers, artists and theologians: a harmless backwater for a lunatic fringe.

More recent intellectual trends such as chaos theory and the general drift away from positivism may change the picture. Western confidence in its modernist certainties has been shaken by two world wars and the ensuing disillusionments. Binary word pairs like 'fact' and 'fiction', 'faith' and 'superstition', 'body' and 'spirit' are no longer as starkly opposed in Western minds as they were a decade or two ago. If this trend continues, new, open forums of discussion between African and Western thinkers may emerge.

Kinship and individualism

In English people say, 'Blood is thicker than water'. The expression is significant in my context; it acknowledges the reality of kinship bonds. At the same time the comparison with water has denigratory connotations. Somehow the value, actual and symbolic, of both blood and water is played down in common parlance and, to a greater or lesser extent, in everyday life. That they retain it symbolically in formal religion, as in Christian baptism and

eucharistic rituals, is symptomatic of the discontinuity that underlies the Western worldview.

African tribal life, by contrast, is permeated with metaphysical reality. Blood and water are both vital fluids, sustaining life here and now. This makes them profoundly meaningful and valuable and so, quite naturally, they are assigned metaphysical symbolic meaning in rituals which, as naturally, form part of everyday life. Aschwanden uses the example of the calabash, an ordinary household utensil, which is symbolically identified with the uterus. 'That he [his Karanga informant] is very much aware of the obscurity and contradictory nature of the symbol shows [in] his own interpretation: "They are two things, and, yet again, only one"' (Aschwanden 1982:15). In my own interviews I was told the same about other symbols, notably 'blood' and 'soil'.

Appiah (1992:184-185) points out that Christianity, when forced 'to retreat in the face of science', opted to demythologise doctrines, which were then assigned purely metaphoric or symbolic meaning. He comments, 'But even if . . . this is consistent with the main traditions of Christianity or Judaism, to treat the religious beliefs of traditional cultures as likewise symbolic is radically to misrepresent their character.' He insists that symbols arise 'out of the fundamental nature of religious beliefs, and that these fundamental beliefs are not themselves symbolic' (Appiah 1992:181). The beliefs are literal, with direct existential meaning and implications. Their ritual, ceremonial expression is symbolic.

The same sort of literal belief cum symbolic identification, to use Aschwanden's term, informs kinship ties here and now. Among the Shona the depth and reality of this belief is reflected in the powerful symbol of blood. Ancestral blood – which in extreme tribal and even national crises like drought and epidemics is said to 'boil' – is fully identified with the vital fluid circulating in the bodies of living people. Aschwanden (1982:23) writes:

The symbol of the blood – because of this conscious equation with the ancestral spirits – is the strongest of all the lineal ties. It not only lends a religious aspect to the tribe, it also puts the individual under an obligation towards his consanguines. How could he ever seriously oppose a member of his own tribe? It would mean opposing his *vadzimu* [ancestors].

This clearly has both socially cohesive and socially divisive implications. Close kinship ties within a blood line, and at least some caution when

dealing with other blood lines, are inherent in tribalism. My impression is that African nationalism extended the blood affinity across tribal divisions in the various struggles against colonialism. It certainly did so in the Zimbabwean liberation struggle.² The apparent decline of Pan-Africanism in postIndependence Africa suggests that the blood symbol reverted to its customary meaning once the crisis was over.

To the extent that African elites, who took over the governance of postcolonial countries, are disregarding the reality of blood as a life-regulating symbol and reality, one could argue that they are failing to fulfil their democratic mandate to represent the majority of their electorates. How to incorporate that reality into the different but equally complex reality of modernising societies is a very real problem – although nepotism in high places might be explicable in these terms and could be dealt with more effectively if its roots were acknowledged. At all events, *mere lip-service to tradition is begging the question.*

If my interpretation is correct, it means that the Western separation between politics and religion is artificial to the point of irrelevance in African terms. It could make the very concept of sovereign nation-states inassimilable, as some of Africa's postcolonial history seems to suggest. Since nation-states were a colonial imposition in the first place, that they have remained in place is indicative of both neo-imperialism and an uncritical acceptance by new elites of Western 'solutions'.

Daneel (1987:Chapter 3) argues on roughly parallel lines when explaining the causes of 'independentism', such as the need for 'a place to feel at home' among newly urbanised African workers. Specifically he writes:

The process of industrialization also led to secularism. One of the first effects of secularism on Christian life is that it begins to be lived at two levels: the religious level . . . and the secular level of 'normal' everyday life . . . In addition secularization is an escalating process: the religious level of life decreases and the other increases. In more and more areas, God becomes dispensable. Black Christians sense this subtle threat subconsciously: they sense that Western Christians, on account of their dualistic world-view, have segregated the sacred from the profane. There is only one solution, and that is to reunite the two in a new

2 See eg Daneel 1995; Lan 1985.

synthesis. This the Independent Churches, particularly those of the Spirit-type, offer to do (Daneel 1987:80).

Daneel is writing as a Christian missiologist, but one can readily extend his argument to include other forms of spirituality. The segregation of spirit from matter, body from mind, is not just a problem in Africa. It culminates, for instance, in a self-contradictory segregation of economic expediency from ecological sustainability, which is threatening the human race, flora and fauna, and the planet as a whole. Specialists in many fields all over the world are increasingly recognising this. Intellect has manifestly failed to accomplish its high mission. Yet the discontinuities of the Enlightenment continue to regulate human life on earth.

In such a context the integral worldview of Africa's peasant past cannot be dismissed as naive or primitive. It should be recognised – above all, by black African leaders – as one of humanity's rich resources in the creation of a more sustainable, more satisfying and more wholesome life style for all creatures on earth.

If God created us, we are all kin. If not, we need a new and better theory.

Equality versus hierarchy

For a white African woman, the area of male and female equality is problematic. Both in Zimbabwe and in urban South Africa I am meeting more and more black sisters who agree. In a patriarchal society women are regarded and treated as 'minors from the cradle to the grave and therefore under the guardianship of men' (MCDWA 1985:16). Traditionally Shona widows were (and in Zimbabwean customary law still are) 'inherited' by a male relative of her late husband, presumably on the principle that his family paid the bride price for her. The children of divorced couples automatically went to the father. Birth control consisted in female abstinence from sexual relations during prolonged periods of breast feeding, while the husband satisfied his sexual appetite with other wives or even concubines. Such a system – and it has its parallels in contemporary Islamic and other societies, including Western ones – can only remain stable if women are physically, psychologically and economically dependent on male protection. In Zimbabwe, as elsewhere in the world, this situation is increasingly changing.

Since Zimbabwe gained its independence, equal education for both genders has escalated dramatically. In addition there are post-Independence statutes like the Sex Disqualification Act entitling women to hold public office; equal pay regulations; the Electoral Act, which gives all citizens the franchise; new legislation on the division of household property and custody in divorce cases; and, by far the most controversial, the act in terms of which young people over the age of eighteen are legally majors, in cases involving customary law as well. One implication is that couples over the age of eighteen can now marry or enter into relationships without parental consent. This caused a furore and is still widely condemned. In a survey I conducted among high school pupils in Masvingo, 47 out of 59 respondents thought the Act was a bad thing, three thought it was both good and bad, and only nine approved of it. If schoolboys and -girls, the intended beneficiaries of this new freedom, feel this way, the reaction among older people, let alone conservative chiefs, can well be imagined.

Yet the chiefs are not uncritical of customary law. One staunchly traditional Duma chief pointed out to me that customary inheritance law, specifically the inheritance of wives, is unfair because, in the case of widows who exercise their traditional right to decline to be inherited, the joint household estate, which, he pointed out, both spouses had worked for, can be retained by the husband's family, thus leaving the woman destitute. When I asked him if a government amendment of this customary law tenet would not amount to introducing European law into the traditional system he said: 'It is not European law, it is a way of putting things right. Our culture is not fair about inheritance.'

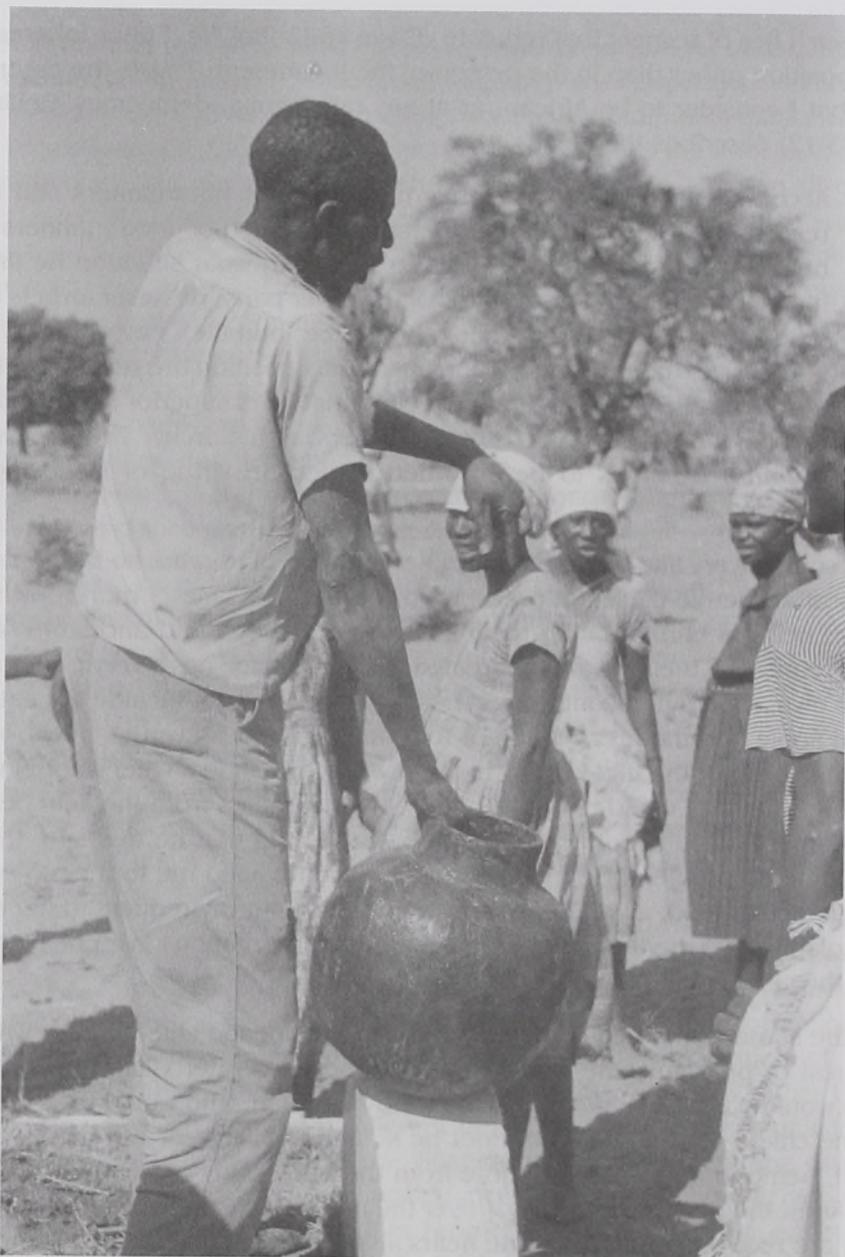
Hierarchy versus equality has other radical implications. The assumption that no two human beings are equal cuts across gender divisions. Although in some relationships male superiority may override other forms of seniority, female relatives play important roles. The authoritative position of the paternal aunt in her brother's household is a case in point. She, rather than her brother's wife (who is of a different blood line), is the communication channel between the females in the village and the male hierarchy. She is also sex instructor (for girls), marriage counsellor, general arbiter in disputes between genders, co-executor of her brother's estate and, often, ancestral medium (Gelfand 1973:36ff). As such she commands great respect, both in this life and the next.

It is such ties of respect that regulate village and tribal life. Status inheres in the position rather than in the person of the incumbent. This is the essence of what I consider to be African, or at any rate Shona, democracy. Gelfand (1973:12) describes the ideal:

According to many, a man may be judged by his manners and the respect he accords to another person. Possessed of good manners he behaves in the same way to all no matter in what situation he finds himself or what the social status of the other party, He never forgets the other person ... Every man should be humble, never proud or aggressive, though station, age and family position are respected; but no-one is allowed to create the feeling that he is superior for any other reason than that of his slot in the social hierarchy. Every person (*munhu*) deserves to be accorded respect in virtue of his being a human being.

This sounds very like the essentially liberal notion of *ubuntu*, so fashionable in local academic circles at present. To me the message is more down to earth: being a human being means having ancestors; and ancestors have their reprisals if their kin are maltreated. (This message has a very clear logic of its own, rooted in a continuous theology that does not include the eating of an apple and the great divide of the 'Fall'.) It applies even to chiefs, who are at the top of the this-worldly hierarchy. Once I asked a chief whom I was visiting whether I could not have one of the millet ears from the field below his homestead to beautify my flat in town. He said that he was sure there would be no problem. He then personally accompanied me to the owner of the particular field, a young peasant woman. He put my request to her and she gladly gave me the millet ear, as well as some mangos from her grove. But the chief could not consent on her behalf.

Yet the same woman could never approach the lineage chief directly with a request or problem. She would have to proceed via her village headman, who would pass the matter on to the ward headman, who would then take it to the chief – that is, if it could not be settled at village or ward level. The chief, being in many cases remote from the hurly-burly of village life, does not know the details. He presides over the proceedings in his court, whether they are requests or disputes. He hears all parties out, and it can take hours or days; he listens to his counsellors' interpretation of the facts in terms of tribal custom and precedent. His verdict, although final, is not a judgment in the Western sense but simply a reflection in the current context of the time-



Ritual officiant stands on grave while addressing deceased during a *kugadzira* home-bringing ceremony. This is the key ritual in Shona ancestral veneration, which elevates the deceased to the full status of ancestorhood

honoured rules of the soil which are known to all. Without the power of the soil the chief is no different from anybody else. 'Chiefs have flesh', one of my informants told me. 'This flesh is not the chief. The spirit of the *svikiro* [ancestral medium], that is the chief.' As far as I could determine, chiefs are very much aware of this.

The implications of such a worldview are intriguing. It makes nonsense of Western notions of democracy. One person, one vote presupposes the equivalence of all people and their votes, as well as their human judgment. African – at any rate Shona – custom insists on the *equal worth* of all persons, but flatly denies their *socio-political equality* and emphatically subordinates their judgment to that of the ancestors. (Ironically, I observed a similar hierarchy among democratically elected Zanu-PF politicians in Harare. Respect for seniority apparently overruled personal judgment of character or astuteness in a way that I found quite bewildering. Analysts of African politics should perhaps bear this ambivalence in mind.)

In the traditional order the principle of seniority resulted in a system of go-betweens. A young man will not pursue the woman of his choice personally. All formal overtures and marriage negotiations are conducted by an intermediary, just as the paternal aunt, and the village and ward headmen are the stepping stones to the head of a household or a tribe. The line extends beyond this life; the ancestors, hierarchically of course, are go-betweens between their descendants and God. One chief told me, matter-of-factly, 'Jesus is just the ancestor of the whites'. Functionally, at any rate, his interpretation strikes me as appropriate.

Conclusion

That brings me to the point raised at the beginning of this chapter. I repeat I am not a Christian theologian. The same point may have been made, more adequately, by African or other theologians already. But I have observed Christianity in interaction with African belief in various countries – Lesotho, South Africa, Zimbabwe – and in different contexts. One instance strikes me as particularly relevant here.

When I was doing my honours degree in Religious Studies I had to submit a mini-dissertation. I was permitted to do a somewhat unusual one, in that it entailed a trial run in field research: a study of Jackson Hlungwane, a

Shangane prophet and healer, who is now an internationally famous sculptor. In the mid-1980s, although already poised for his new and wider mission, he was still deeply involved with a small church he had founded in his home village. Indeed, some of his finest carvings, now in the University of Witwatersrand's art gallery, were altar pieces in that open air place of worship on a hilltop in Gazankulu, Northern Province. He claims that one night, driven literally to the brink of suicide by an ulcerous leg that refused to heal, he had a vision of God's feet striding across the northern horizon to the south. On that night Jesus personally bestowed his healing powers on him and commissioned him to spread the good news of 'New Country, New People'. This has become his clarion call.

In the various myths he recounted to me, Jesus featured as God's youngest son, the champion of a human race oppressed by his older brother, Satan. Jesus came to earth at his own request to do battle against the forces of evil on behalf of suffering humans and, according to Jackson, he vanquished those forces at the time of Jackson's life-changing vision. His carvings include one of Jesus playing football, and many of Gabriel as a warrior fighting on Christ's side in the cosmic battle against sin. When I asked him what Jesus was doing on the cross (he had carved some crucifixions), he said, almost dismissively, 'He was just fighting for people'. His soteriology hinges on people embracing the vision of a world freed from sin: 'New Country, New People'.

Jackson is virtually illiterate. His gospel, heterodox in the extreme, is also highly idiosyncratic. Even so, his acceptance of Jesus is total and the role he assigns him is not incongruent with more orthodox soteriologies. Yet at no point in any of our lengthy interviews did he attribute a specifically salvific function to the cross. The idea that God had either planned or willed a sacrificial death was never mentioned once. Gabriel is the warrior, Jesus the gentle knight; 'too much brother', was how Jackson described him to me. The closest to a directly salvific event he ever mentioned, apart from the titanic struggle against Satan, was in a myth he told me one afternoon, of how Jesus took a wife and they had a child called (predictably) New Country, New People. My interpreter on that occasion was a Swiss Calvinist missionary who had known Jackson for many years and clearly respected him. Yet he was visibly shocked by this myth and told me he had difficulty even translating it. For my part, I found it profoundly moving that Jesus should save humans, not through his gruesome death on the cross, but by begetting a child to accomplish his liberating mission once and for all.

I am not suggesting that Christians, black or white, should accept Jackson's gospel. His is the visionary mind of a superbly creative artist and, like William Blake's, it is not always easy to grasp. But it would be interesting to look for equally novel 'dogmas', even if less startling, in AIC sermons, rather than interpreting them as more or less 'proper' in terms of Western theologies. When Inus examines Shona AIC approaches to the ministry (Daneel 1987:143–150), for example, he does so from the angle of the royal, priestly and prophetic offices. However thoroughly he contextualises these categories – and he does – they are not necessarily congruent with Shona religious thinking, although they no doubt overlap. The preachers' own conceptions – *in their own right* and *in their own terms* – could be vital keys to the cosmology of African believers. It may turn out that Christ the Healer takes precedence over Christ the Crucified. New and different theological insight could be rejected as heretical, as in the case of the Swiss missionary. On the other hand it could enrich, broaden and deepen Christianity world-wide, embattled as it is in an age of rationalism and burdened by its long and chequered history.

Among the questions that theologians and scholars of African religion could look at are the following:

- Is it *possible* to have total equality among people and grant precedence only to God? If not, why not? If so, how? (Blanket answers like 'Western democracy' should be carefully scrutinised; they tend to have hidden agendas and strategies.)
- What is the difference, if any, between the spirits of the ancestors and the Holy Spirit of Christianity? (Many of my Shona peasant interviewees referred to the 'holy *spirits* [plural] of the church', and saw them as different in a purely cultural (not a functional) sense.)
- What is the difference, if any, between the animal sacrifices of African and other (including Judaic) traditions and the suffering or death of figures like Prometheus and Jesus? In other words, what is the difference between propitiation and expiation, and what does it imply for human living and belief?

Expiations, atoning deaths, are remote from Western reality. It may be helpful to consider, by way of alternative or complement, a duly revered and propitiated spirit, fully in touch with here-and-now human realities, guarding our door (be that spirit Christ's or my grandfather's), provided we recognise

our right place in the cosmic hierarchy. We cannot fool or bribe the gods. The chronic Western disease of blame and rationalisation – which keeps jails full, psychiatrists rich and churches in business – may yet prove to be the bitterest fruit of the Enlightenment.

I am sure there are as many questions of this kind as there are thinking people. But usually they are not even asked. We stay in different compounds, apartheid style. We tolerate but do not understand. It is, I think, a betrayal of what we are. God does not belong to us. We belong to God, and we are many and diverse.

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On the interplay between political and therapeutic *ngoma*: a case from Malawi

Matthew Schoffeleers

Introduction

A few years ago John M Janzen published his *Ngoma: discourses of healing in Central and Southern Africa* (Janzen 1992) in which he highlights the striking similarity between healing rituals over large parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the term *ngoma* referring to the drumming, dancing and handclapping which often accompany such healing sessions. There are numerous types of *ngoma* pertaining to a variety of professions and functions, but in this chapter we shall limit ourselves, following Janzen, to politics and healing.

Although Janzen acknowledges the political alongside the therapeutic *ngoma*, he has paid relatively little attention to the former. One of the consequences of this omission is that he deprived himself of the chance to elucidate their interrelationships. The one observation he makes in that connection concerns a negative correlation, that in centralised state systems the therapeutic *ngoma* tends to become marginalised to the extent that the state itself takes responsibility for public health (Janzen 1992:74–79). Apparently the political elite view therapeutic *ngoma* as a potentially hostile factor.

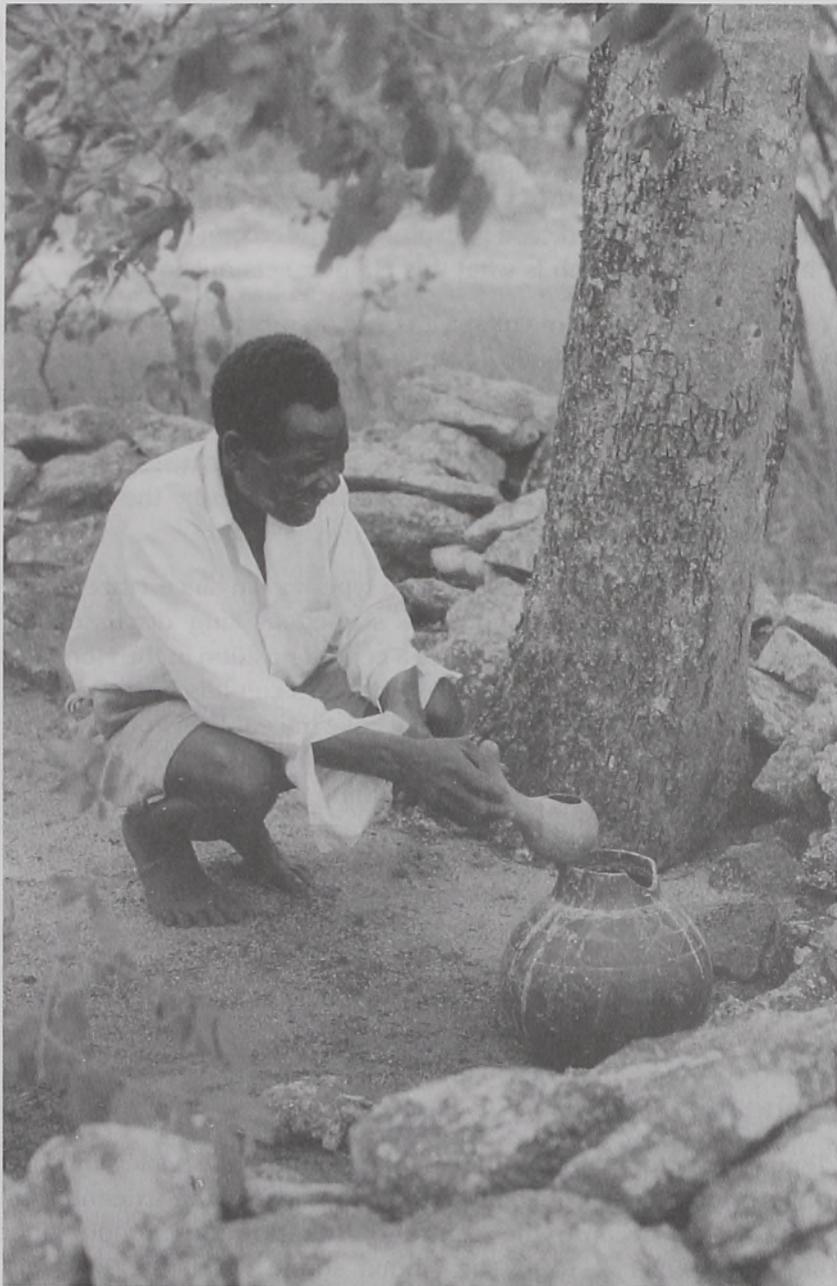
Marginalising therapeutic *ngoma* may curb the emergence of charismatic healers critical of the political establishment. Yet critical charismatic healers, however relevant, are exceptional.

A more important factor in integrating the therapeutic and political *ngoma* is the earth cult, which functions as a healing cult for the community as a whole. There are many such cults in sub-Saharan Africa (Schoffeleers 1979). They have variously been called earth cults, rain cults, and rain and fertility cults. From the political viewpoint they are to be characterised as territorial cults, since they are centrally concerned with the political life of a specific land area, and since their constituency is a group identified by its common occupation of and rights in that land area.

Victor Turner has made an important contribution to our understanding of earth cults in sub-Saharan Africa by contrasting them with ancestral and political cults. He summarises the crucial difference between them as follows:

Ancestral and political cults and their local embodiments tend to represent crucial power divisions and classificatory distinctions within and among politically discrete groups, while earth and fertility cults represent ritual bonds between those groups and even, as in the case of the Tallensi, tendencies toward still wider bonding. The first type stresses exclusiveness, the second inclusiveness. The first emphasizes sectional interests and conflict over them; the second disinterestedness and shared values . . . In cults of the second type, the accent is laid on common ideals and values, and, where there has been misfortune, on the guilt and responsibility of all rather than the culpability of individuals and factions (Turner 1974:185).

Earth cults operate on the basis of a philosophy which holds that serious abuses in the life of a community invariably lead to natural disasters which in their turn endanger the life of that community. Or from a different angle, control of the climatic cycle depends on the correct management and control of society (Homans 1965:28; Wilson 1970:38). This interpenetration of the two orders has for one of its consequences that earth cults, apart from their therapeutic, fertility-promoting function, have an important political dimension as well, since they often actively intervene in the political process. One can go further and state that earth cults are by nature political since they are the religious representation of what are basically territorial and political groups, and because the boundaries between religious and secular politics are notoriously difficult to demarcate. There always exist areas of overlap that constitute a structural basis of conflict. Weber refers to them as 'cults of political associations' (Weber 1971:16). But his characterisation would be misleading if it were taken to mean that they are no more than a religious extension of the political establishment. They constitute a different source of authority that on occasion may be identifiable with secular political institutions but which remains in principle different from them. It is this relationship between cults and secular authority that provides the closest analogy to the church-state relationship in literate cultures. It is, however, strictly an analogy, because there exist significant differences between these two situations. Earth cults, unlike churches, recognise no distinctions that set the community of believers apart from the rest of society, nor do they



Mukwerere rain ritual. A plea for rain is made to the senior guardian ancestors of the land. The beer libation symbolises the close ties between the living and the living dead

possess an explicit creed on which this could be argued. The analogy derives its validity rather from the fact that in earth cult organisations ritual and secular authority are thought of as distinguishable and separable. It has become clear from a number of case studies (Schoffeleers 1979) that this concept of dual authority and the variety of modes by which it is realised constitute a major locus of conceptual and organisational change. Earth cults thus offer a privileged case to explore the interconnections between the two kinds of *ngoma*, which is what this chapter sets out to do.

The classification of earth cults with the therapeutic *ngoma* implies a distinction between therapeutic *ngomas* that are concerned with the healing of individuals and those concerned with the healing of a community as a whole. By revealing the social wrongs thought to have caused a drought or other calamity, earth cults thus address the structural causes of illness, and their inclusive character allows for direct participation by the public in the quest for those causes.

Earth cults often feature a ritualist of the type known since Frazer's days as 'divine king' or 'scapegoat king'. The scapegoat king discussed in this chapter is Chief Tengani, who occupies a central position in the Mbona cult of Malawi, also cited by Janzen (1992:76). Mbona's cult has been documented from the middle of the 19th century but whose traceable history goes back to the second half of the sixteenth century (Schoffeleers 1992). Its ritual cycle consists of annual rain prayers, the rebuilding of the main shrine every five years on average, and the installation of a new 'spirit wife' once in every generation. Tengani is the main actor in the rebuilding of the shrine. On that occasion he is symbolically treated as a slave, and there is a firm belief that any Tengani taking part in the ritual of rebuilding will die soon after. Tengani thus conforms to Frazer's concept of divine kingship around which an important discussion has developed in Africanist anthropology.

The Tenganis

The Tengani chiefdom forms part of the Lower Shire Valley in southern Malawi. Its origins in all probability predate the close of the sixteenth century, when the valley became the centre of the powerful Lundu kingdom (Schoffeleers 1992:117-139). The Mbona shrine which the Tenganis are supposed to help rebuild every five years or so is situated some 16 km south of their court. The shrine, made of highly perishable materials, is never to be

repaired, but always fully rebuilt. This happens when the valley is hit by a drought or other natural calamity. Droughts are viewed as the deity's reaction to serious instances of social disorder. They thus generate a protracted discussion amongst the population about their possible cause or causes. When this has been going on for some time and tensions have risen sufficiently high, the deity's medium becomes possessed and the political hierarchy is summoned to his hut to be told why Mbona feels offended.

Possession may be provoked by three interrelated types of events, namely environmental calamities, offences against the social order, and offences against the cult. In fact, it may be difficult in any particular case to determine which of the three is to be regarded as the activating factor, since from the perspective of the actors' nature, society and cult form an indivisible triad. Environmental and climatic disturbances are routinely explained in terms of social disturbances and vice versa, while both again are connected with the cult as the censor of public mores and as the possessor of the means of expiation. Whatever the immediate cause of possession, it invariably involves a pronouncement on the social and moral condition of the community. Moreover, the message transmitted by the spirit medium is always centrally concerned with the policies of the chiefs and with the relationships between the chiefs and the population. Characteristically, the chiefs have to bear the brunt of the medium's criticism, because they are accused either of siding with the central government against the population, or of failing to put an end to social abuses within their territories. While this may be said of any chief, Tengani, as the most senior chief, is especially vulnerable.

As to his role in the rebuilding ceremony, four items are invariably mentioned: first, that on that occasion he has to wear a slave's outfit; second, that the roof of the shrine is to be built upon his head; third, that afterwards he is to commit incest with one of his 'sisters', and, fourth, that he will die 'within a year or so'. It is said that for the last reason some of the incumbents in the past took to flight rather than participate. From the mid-1930s onward the Tengani incumbents have refused to take part in the ritual, as it had been declared irreconcilable with the Christian faith. But in the olden days, it is maintained, as soon as Tengani's consent had been obtained, people began to collect grass, reed, poles and everything else needed for the ceremony. The following is a somewhat idealised account by the officials Chapirira and Kumbiwanyati:

On the appointed day everybody comes, including of course Tengani. As soon as he arrives, work on the hut commences, starting with the circular roof, which is always made on the ground. As soon as the measurements have been taken, he positions himself in the middle and the entire roof is then built upon his head. In the meantime, others are busy putting up the circular walls on which the roof is to rest. One really has to work fast if the job is to be finished before sunset, but this is not too difficult with so many people around. Spurred on by the sound of the great drum, *Kamango*, they busily move to and fro . . . While we are building the hut, it is impossible to distinguish chief from commoner, for on that occasion we are all equals. All of us, including our little children, are Mbona's slaves. When the hut is finished and the place has been swept, we elders begin rolling about in the dust, first Ngabu [the chief custodian], then Tengani, and finally the others. Meanwhile the great drum is beaten and all of us pray, 'We have now built a hut for you. Have mercy on us and do not carry out your threats, for it can no longer be said that we disobeyed you! Do not reject us, your slaves, for we have given you the honour you deserve!' (Schoffeleers 1992:66).

Immediately after the ceremony, Tengani would set out on his return journey, spending the night on the way with one of his real or classificatory sisters. The following day he would be back in his village, waiting for his death to occur. As stated, the rebuilding of the shrine is an emergency measure, which becomes operative only when the rains are failing. Well before it, at the end of the dry season, Tengani would have performed the rain rituals at his own court, starting at the graveyard of his predecessors. What this amounts to is that Tengani forms part of two different rain cults: that of his own dynasty, and Mbona's. The first is exclusive, as the ritual legitimates his position at the top of the political ladder. The second is inclusive and egalitarian, emphasising the equality of all. But the very fact that Mbona's shrine has to be rebuilt means that Tengani's dynastic rain rituals have failed this time around, and that his rule has therefore come under severe criticism. It is at this point that he enters irreversibly the tragic phase of divine kingship.

Divine kingship

Frazer, the initiator of the discussion (1963:189 ff), begins his study of divine kingship with an evocation of Diana's priest at Nemi, whose task it was to defend a tree. Only a runaway slave was allowed to break off, if he could, one of its boughs. Success in the attempt entitled him to fight the priest in single combat, and if he killed him he reigned in his stead until he was himself slain by someone stronger. To Frazer, the death of the divine king of Nemi, as well as divine kings elsewhere, and their succession by a younger and more vigorous person, was thought to be symbolic of the renewal of nature (Frazer 1963:13). Frazer also discusses the related phenomenon of public scapegoats, including scapegoats in classical antiquity (Frazer 1963:736–768). It appears for instance that the Athenians regularly maintained a number of 'degraded and useless beings' at the public expense; and when any calamity, such as plague, drought or famine, befell the city, they sacrificed these outcasts as scapegoats. Divine kings and scapegoats thus functioned in similar contexts, the fertility of man, beast and land, but their conceptual affinity remains unclear in *The golden bough*.

Frazer has exercised considerable influence on students of comparative religion. Even the earlier social anthropologists lauded him as one of the founders of their discipline and one of their foremost representatives, but those of later generations were less enthusiastic. Few anthropologists saw in his ideas on divine kingship anything more than an ill-conceived theory of cultural evolution. A breakthrough occurred with Gluckman's Frazer lecture of 1953, 'Rituals of rebellion in South-East Africa' (Gluckman 1954), republished in *Order and rebellion in tribal Africa* (Gluckman 1963:110–136). Although Gluckman regards Frazer's treatment of divine kingship as suffering from oversimplification, he nevertheless acknowledges the important fact that Frazer at the very outset had recognised the political dimension of the institution by raising the problem of the priest-king involved in a 'ritual of rebellion'. More specifically,

He (Frazer) stressed that these agricultural ceremonies were *connected with the political process*, and that the dying god was often identified with secular kings. He drew attention also to the rebellious ceremonial, for he described the widespread installation of 'temporary kings' who were sacrificed or mocked and discharged after a few days of ostensible rule (Gluckman 1963:126; italics added).

However, so Gluckman continues, the modern anthropologist, basing his analysis on detailed observation in the field, is concerned in greater detail with the ceremonial roles of persons, categories of persons, and social groups, in relation to one another. Frazer could not have pursued these problems, for he lacked the relevant evidence (Gluckman 1963:111–112). To make his point, Gluckman describes ceremonies among the South-Eastern Bantu of Zululand, Swaziland and Mozambique, at the break of the rains, sowing, firstfruits, and harvest.

[W]hatever the ostensible purpose of these ceremonies, a most striking feature of their organisation is the way in which they openly express social tensions: women have to assert licence and dominance as against their formal subordination to men, princes behave to the king as if they covet the throne, and subjects openly state their resentment of authority (Gluckman 1963:112).

Hence his suggestion to define them as rituals of rebellion. Such rituals proceed within an established and sacred traditional system, in which there is dispute about particular distributions of power. This allows for instituted protest, and in complex ways renews the unity of the system.

In the *Incwala*, the first-fruits ceremony of the Swazi (described by Hilda Kuper (1944) and others) he perceives the acting out of the powerful tensions that make up national life. This ceremony should not be seen as a simple mass assertion of unity, but a stressing of conflict, a statement of rebellion and rivalry against the king, with periodic affirmations of unity with the king, and the drawing of power from the king. The political structure, as the source of prosperity and strength which safeguards the nation internally and externally, is made sacred in the person of the king. He is associated with his ancestors, for the political structure endures through the generations, though kings and people are born and die (Gluckman 1963:125–126).

Again we see that the dramatic, symbolic acting out of social relations in their ambivalence is believed to achieve unity and prosperity. This acting out of conflict achieves a blessing – social unity. 'Clearly we are dealing with the general problem of *catharsis* ... the purging of emotion through pity, fear and inspiration' (Gluckman 1963:126). The rebellious ritual occurs within an established and unchallenged social order. It is not meant to alter the existing social and political order, for in traditional African political life men were rebels and never revolutionaries. In a 'repetitive social system'

particular conflicts are settled, not by alterations in the order of offices, but by changes in the persons occupying those offices (Gluckman 1963:127–128). People may hate the kingship in resenting its authority, but they do not aim to subvert it. For it is the kingship and not the king who is divine. The rebellion is waged to defend the kingship against the king: 'If this emphasis on potential rebellion in practice made the nation feel united, is it not possible that civil rebellion itself was a source of strength to these systems?' (Gluckman 1963:130).

There have been critical reactions to Gluckman's interpretation of *Incwala* (Beidelman 1966; Norbeck 1967). Turner, while agreeing with Gluckman's interpretation of the structural aspects of the *Incwala* that are clearly present in its rites of separation and aggregation, draws attention also to the interstructural parts (Turner 1967:108–110). By this he refers more specifically to the liminal phase of the ritual, a day and a night of seclusion, when the king is divested of all the outward attributes, the 'accidents' of his kingship, and is reduced to its substance, the 'earth' and 'darkness' from which the normal, structured order of the Swazi kingdom will be regenerated 'in lightness' (Turner 1967:109–110). Turner's comment, though not explicitly critical of Gluckman, is nevertheless relevant to the discussion in hand because he veers away from the structural-functionalist framework, so characteristic of Gluckman, to offer an alternative theory of ritual, which he later elaborated in *The ritual process* (Turner 1969). However, saying that a certain ritual allows for a variety of interpretations is not enough. It would be more satisfactory if that variety of interpretations could be shown to be logically interconnected.

The French literary critic René Girard claims to have made a step in that direction by means of a reinterpretation of Frazer's scapegoat concept (Girard 1977). Girard starts with the observation that our desires are to a large degree mimetic, even if we are not aware of it. What proves attractive to others may thereby become attractive to us. Although he would probably not go so far as to maintain that virtually all our desires are mimetic, the tenor of his theory is that our desires are mimetic to a much larger degree that we would care to admit. Where many people seek the same thing, scarcity may be one of the consequences, followed by open conflict and the outbreak of violence. Violence in its turn may escalate to the extent that it threatens the continued existence or viability of a community. In such a crisis people tend more and more to resemble each other. They make use of the same tactics and the same arguments, and in the end they may even forget what started



Mukwerere rain ritual. Women dance at grave-site in honour of the guardian ancestors of the land. During the dance snuff is poured on the gravestones for the ancestors

the conflict. Increasingly, those involved may mentally become one another's doubles or twins (Schoffeleers 1991). The process of undifferentiation that causes that multitude of doubles to come into existence evokes the idea of a contagious disease, which is what the birth of twins in some societies is believed to bring about. If that process is not halted one way or another it will involve ever larger segments of society.

One way to solve such a crisis is to identify a scapegoat, who will then be lynched or expelled. However, once the killing or the expulsion is over, and peace is restored to everybody's relief, people begin to realise that their scapegoat was not only the cause of their discord but also of the unanimity and peace that followed. In his person, fascination combines with adherence. The scapegoat thereby acquires the traits of a sacred being (Otto 1917) whose salutary potential may be activated again by repeating the original event in ritualised form, first and foremost in the form of sacrifice. Persons destined to serve as scapegoats at some later stage were sometimes required to commit certain moral transgressions that prepared them for their future role. They might be forced to eat certain forbidden foods, or commit certain acts of violence.

Turning to Africa, Girard considers a group of sacred monarchies, situated between Egypt and Swaziland, in which the king is required to commit an act of incest, either real or symbolic, on certain solemn occasions – notably, at his enthronement or in the course of the periodic rites of renewal (Girard 1977:104). In societies where the incestuous act is no longer actually consummated – if, indeed, it ever was – a symbolism of incest persists. As Luc de Heusch has pointed out, the important role played by the queen mother can only be understood in that context (de Heusch 1958). In Girard's view, committing incest prepares the king for his role as scapegoat and thereby as a sacrificial victim. He must be looked upon as a future sacrificial object (Girard 1977:11–12).

Girard's ideas have been fruitfully used in a recent study of scapegoat kings in south-eastern Sudan (Simonse 1992). To be able to see the connection between the sacrificial dimension of kingship and the generation of consensus, Simonse develops two models or 'scenarios' which generate contrasting forms of social organisation, the *enemy scenario* in which the antagonists are groups of more or less equal strength, and the *scapegoat scenario* in which there is serious disproportion between the party of the victim and that of the victimisers. In the enemy model, the typical situation

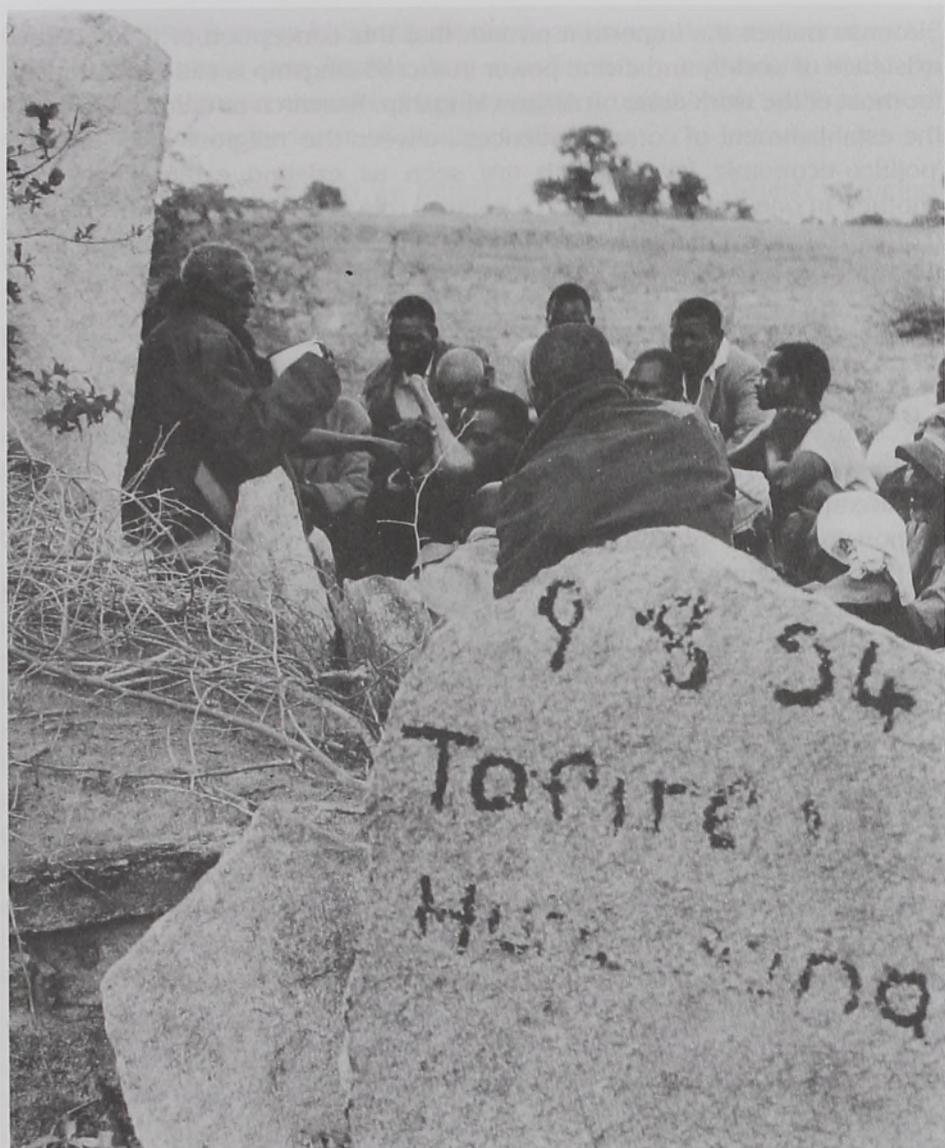
has two more or less equivalent antagonistic groups. In the scapegoat situation the typical situation is 'all against one' (Simonse 1992:24). In this article we are particularly concerned with the scapegoat model, which is considered the main organising principle in centrally organised societies.

Kingship and the cult of divinity are the two principal historical forms of organised centralism. They are two solutions to a single problem. Throughout history divinity cults have unified large numbers of people, just as the subjection to a king or emperor has. In kingship the events preceding the elimination of the victim are emphasised. In the worship of divinity more weight is given to the aftermath of the elimination, the accomplished transcendence.

Compared to the cult of divinity, which celebrates the absence of the violence expelled with the victim, the person of the King lends himself more readily to a direct enactment of the original scenario – which puts a live victim on the stage. The King is present, the divinity – apotheosis of something *absent* (the victim, the expelled violence) – must be *represented*. The power of the sacred is more immediately tangible in the 'divinity' of the King than in the 'personality' of the god. For this reason Girard qualifies kingship as an institution particularly revealing of the scapegoat mechanism (Simonse 1992:29).

In Girard's view, modern concepts narrow the conception of the divine down to the supernatural and the non-empirical. To us, the god-like qualities attributed to kings appear as something separate, as something added on at a later stage, in an attempt to increase their importance or legitimate their power:

Everyone repeats that the king is a kind of 'living god' but no one says that the divinity is a kind of dead king, which would be just as accurate. In the end there is a persistent preference for viewing the sacrifice and the sacredness of the king as a secondary and supplementary idea, for we must beware of rocking our little conceptual boat. Yet what guides our interpretation is only a conceptual system dominated by the idea of divinity, a *theology*. Skepticism about religion does not abolish this theological perspective. We are forced to reinterpret all religious schemata in terms of divinity because we are unaware of the surrogate victim [ie the scapegoat; MS] (Simonse 1992:30, citing Girard 1977).



Elders of an extended family commune with their lineage ancestors during beer-libation at grave-site

Simonsen makes the important remark that this conception of the separate existence of worldly and divine power in sacred kingship is still characteristic for most of the work done on African kingship. Research remains focused on the establishment of correspondences between the 'religious level' and the 'politico-economic level', which are seen as existing externally to one another. In one tradition the king's political role is privileged over his divinity (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard 1940). In the other, the neo-Frazerian tradition, the opposite stance is taken, privileging the king's divinity over his political role (de Heusch 1958; Adler 1982; Muller 1980).

Conclusion

We began this chapter by taking up Janzen's remark that in centralised states the therapeutic *ngomas* tend to be marginalised as the state itself assumes responsibility for public health. Apparently, the political elite view the therapeutic *ngoma* as a potentially hostile factor. It was suggested that earth cults, of wide occurrence in sub-Saharan Africa, may be part of the explanation. Earth cults function as healing cults for the community as a whole, and in that capacity they constitute an interface between the private healing cults and the political system. This means among other things that they operate as a forum where traditional rulers can be publicly and legitimately censured on issues pertaining to the wellbeing of the population in the broadest possible sense. This censorial function they are able to perform on the basis of two fundamental properties.

One of these is that the entire population is included in their membership. The other is their worldview that posits that the successful management of nature depends on the correct management and control of society. In other words, natural disasters are interpreted as a consequence of some serious malfunctioning of society. This in its turn leads to a generalised search for possible causes in the way the community is managed. The conclusion is invariably that those in power are to be held responsible or co-responsible because they were either actively involved themselves, or because they condoned wrongs committed by others. If everything goes well, the end of the affair is that the political elite promises to take corrective action, which promise is sealed by a ritual of penance and reconciliation.

The political elite are therefore viewed as influencing the health situation in two ways: directly, by the way they control people's access to the essential

means of existence; and indirectly via the functioning of the seasonal cycle. State politics, rain and health thus constitute an indivisible triad. By providing a legitimate channel of protest against undesirable state policies, earth cults are a major locus of rituals of rebellion.

In the chapter's second part we introduced the Tenganis dynasty as being involved in rain rituals of its own as well as those of the Mbona cult. Whenever the dynastic rituals were successful, the ruling chief would be left in peace, but should the rain fail, he would be suspected or accused of political malfunctioning and summoned to take part in the rebuilding of the shrine. This, it is believed, would unfailingly produce rain, but the chief had to pay for this with his life. Upon his death he would join his predecessors and transform into a major rain-spirit himself. The Tenganis thus embody a real paradox. They are at one and the same time the most autocratic and the most dependent of the traditional chiefs, as well as the most respected and the most deposed.

Having defined Tenganis as belonging to the category of divine kings we next reviewed the discussion initiated by Frazer. The latter was seen to hover between two scenarios for the death of the divine king. One centres on the king's failing health, establishing a direct link between the king's health and the country's health. The other scenario centres on the king as a scapegoat being held responsible for the society's woes and being killed or driven out in return. This allowed for a political interpretation of the king's death. Gluckman has developed that line in a systematic fashion by this theory of ritual rebellion. The sentiments of hatred expressed in certain *Incwala* songs and ritual activities were considered genuine and directed against the king, but they were to be interpreted as part of a cathartic mechanism and expressed no revolutionary intent.

The crucial element added by Girard is that the *Incwala* and similar rituals are not sufficiently explained as a rite of rebellion against the king, a way of venting communal anger. It is also to be seen as a way of establishing, renewing or consolidating social consensus by the whole of the community turning against the king. This in its turn reinforces the king's sacrality as he is at one and the same time the paragon of evil and a source of blessing. Royal incest, which is such a conspicuous feature in sub-Saharan Africa, thereby receives an altogether different meaning. It is not just something 'good to think' as the structuralists would have it (Lévi-Strauss 1962), but also the summation and confirmation of the evil perpetrated by the scapegoat.

The rebuilding of the shrine might be interpreted in Durkheimian fashion as a celebration of unity finally restored. But in the light of Girard's scapegoat theory we are able to see that it is by no means the end, for Tengani has still to seal his fate by committing incest on his way home. It is only his death that is supposed to establish a more lasting unity. The rebuilding is rather to be seen as the liminal phase of a protracted ritual process, which culminates in Tengani's funeral and deification. One tell-tale sign of liminality is the fact that the participants, including Tengani, are in a state of near-nakedness, symbolizing their common humanity.

The Tengani story shows us that someone who is, politically speaking, a failure, may transform, through that failure and the death sentence following it, into a rain-dispensing deity. This suggests an altogether different aspect of the relationship between political and therapeutic *ngoma*. What politically speaking is to be described as life-taking is cosmologically speaking to be described as life-giving. Political *ngoma* thus provides and grooms the scapegoats that therapeutic *ngoma* needs to replenish its stock of divinities.

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