

## Using the Old Testament to Interpret Africa: The Malagasy Religious Context

Magdel Le Roux (Unisa)

### **ABSTRACT**

*The article discusses some of the methodological problems raised by Georges Razafindrakoto's thesis 'Old Testament texts in Malagasy contexts'. Razafindrakoto's use of qualitative research methods as part of an Old Testament thesis is given particular attention, and a survey of his three case studies is provided, from Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and traditionalist contexts. In conclusion it is argued that Christianization processes in general – throughout history, and not only in Madagascar – interact positively with pre-Christian religion.*

### **A INTRODUCTION**

The Malagasy people consist of a variety of ethnic groups whose ancestors came from Asia and Africa. Despite their exposure to Christianity, Malagasy traditional religion is of primary importance to the Malagasy people: it dominates their thinking, shapes their culture and their way of living, and even influences their political organization. The majority of the people are traditionalists who believe in a Supreme Being called Zanahary (the Creator) and have profound veneration for their ancestors (Hübsch 1993:506). In order to appease the ancestors and make them co-operative in their mediation between them and Zanahary, the Malagasy traditionalists approach them respectfully by means of rituals, sacrifices and offerings.

It has been almost two hundred years since the people of Madagascar were introduced to the Bible. In that period of time the Bible has contributed considerably to the establishment and growth of Christianity. In a recent field study Georges Razafindrakoto (2000-2006, interrupted) observed that most of the Malagasy people have a predilection for the Old Testament (as does the rest of Africa) because of the many concurrences between their culture and the cultures reflected in the Old Testament. In particular, Old Testament texts are being used both inside and outside the mainstream church structures for various purposes, especially to interpret different Malagasy religio-cultural contexts.

During the field study Razafindrakoto employed mainly qualitative research methods which include participant observation and in-depth interviewing. As a Malagasy native and Lutheran pastor he spent many years in the field conducting interviews and making observations. The main questions he raised during his interviews were: How do the different categories of people (inside and outside the church structures) use the Old Testament texts in their specific contexts? Why do they make use of the Old Testament in this specific way? And what are the implications for the use of Old Testament texts and rituals to interpret an African context? Positive and negative criticism regarding the way the Malagasy Roman Catholic Church (MRCC) and the Malagasy Lutheran Church (MLC) contextualize specific Malagasy rituals and practices emerged during this study. This has important consequences for the Africanization of Biblical Studies.

The MRCC describes the ‘ongoing dialogue between faith and culture’ as a process of ‘inculturation’ (Shorter 1988, cited in Razafindrakoto 2006:9). This is a process that started in about 700 AD (cf. C.4 below). The MLC clearly states that it differs from the concept of ‘inculturation’, since for it this term places an emphasis on the ancestral or inherited cultures that generally serve as resources for theological thinking. It is careful not to inculturate because it is afraid of falling into syncretism. The MLC prefers to use the term ‘contextualization’ for more or less the same process: ‘It is a way of affirming that God has turned towards the world’ (Bosch 1991:430). Mashao states that ‘it remains a key concept in the process of Africanizing Christianity’ (2003, in Razafindrakoto 2006:10, 11). Razafindrakoto (2006:11) uses the term ‘accommodation’ in the context of the traditio-practitioners. For the purpose of this article I will, in general, make use of the term ‘contextualization’ to refer to these different practices.

Christian theologians from Africa have made important contributions to the practice of theology by investigating and beginning from their own political and cultural/religious contexts. European theologians have sometimes reacted negatively to African ‘contextual theology’, because they have claimed this approach sacrifices the distinctive character of the Christian message to what is distinctive in Asian or African culture. Although this might be contextualized African theology, can it still be called Christian? Their attitude is: What can the church still learn from a ‘pre-Christian’ or ‘non-Christian’ culture? Speaking of European theologians, the question that comes to mind is: how did the process of contextualization take place in Europe? What did they sacrifice of the distinctive character of the Christian message to what is distinctive in European culture, if any? (Wessels 1994:14).

In what follows I will focus mainly on two aspects concerning the investigation of Razafindrakoto. First, I will reflect on the phenomenon of using qualitative research methods in Old Testament scholarship and then,

more specifically, refer to the process of contextualization in the different Malagasy religious contexts, the ancient Israelite context and early Christianity.

## **B FIELD RESEARCH IN OLD TESTAMENT SCHOLARSHIP**

It is not a given that Old Testament Studies would include qualitative research methods. On the contrary, it is quite unique to be able to do some kind of fieldwork as far as this discipline is concerned and it obviously promises to bring new insights or perspectives into Old Testament scholarship. To my knowledge Razafindrakoto's study is one of a very few Old Testament studies where fieldwork was employed during the investigation.

Qualitative research refers to research that focuses on *qualities of human behavior*, as well as the holistic nature of social behavior (Mouton & Marais 1988:1). Qualitative research can be defined as research that produces descriptive data (Taylor and Bogdan 1984:5). The researcher collects written or spoken words and observable behavior of a select group of people. Rist (cited in Taylor and Bogdan 1984:5-8) points out that qualitative methodology is more than a set of data gathering techniques and mentions the following features of qualitative methodology: 'Qualitative research is inductive. The researcher develops concepts, insights and understanding from patterns in the data'. 'The qualitative researcher looks at settings and people holistically.' 'Researchers are sensitive to their effects on the people they study.' 'Researchers try to experience reality as others experience it.' 'The researcher does not seek "truth" or "morality" but rather a detailed understanding of others' perspectives.' 'Qualitative methods are humanistic.' The researcher obtains first-hand knowledge of social life filtered through concepts, operational definitions and rating scales. 'All settings and people are worthy of study.' 'Qualitative research is a craft.' The researcher is encouraged to create his or her own methodology. The challenge is to keep these principles of qualitative research in mind and to apply them as far as possible, in order to justifiably claim that you follow a qualitative approach.

The three case studies Razafindrakoto investigates are: (i) The Malagasy Roman Catholic Church's use of specific Old Testament texts to explain or 'legitimize' the inculturation of the Malagasy traditional ritual of the 'turning of the dead' (*famadihana*), (ii) the Malagasy Lutheran Church's use of specific Old Testament texts to contextualize the making of Nenilava's (Tall Mother) robes and crowns for use in the church, and (iii) the way 'traditio-practitioners' use the Old Testament texts to validate their religious and cultural practices.

Broadly speaking, a phenomenological perspective is employed for the execution of the study which is also central to the concept of qualitative methodology. Taylor and Bogdan (1984:2; cf. Andersen & al 1995:175) describe the phenomenological approach as a way to understand social

phenomena from the actor's own perspective. In anthropological terms, such an actor-orientated approach is called an *emic* approach, *vis-à-vis* the *etic* approach which is usually conducted from the researcher's perspective. The challenge for Razafindrakoto, as a native, Malagasy Lutheran pastor, was to obtain some kind of objectivity. To a certain extent he is both actor and researcher. The *emic* approach examines how the respondents experience their world and what they perceive as essential reality (Taylor and Bogdan 1984). This is, similarly, the field of study of cognitive anthropologists. Symbolic interactionism rests on three basic premises which should be kept in mind: Meaning determines action; people learn to see the world from other people's perspective, and social actors attach meanings to situations, to other items or matters, as well as to themselves, by a process of interpretation (Taylor & Bogdan 1984:2-9). Especially at the beginning of the research process Razafindrakoto had to learn not to attach meanings to specific situations or to defend what he was observing. Rather, he needed to try to experience reality as others experience it.

Qualitative research methods, as well as anthropological relativism, demand tolerance for other religious experiences, an awareness of a new fairness and openness in the study of the Other (whether it is another culture, color, religion or gender), and ultimately a more holistic approach (cf. Hutcheon 1988:61-62). The common goal between different religious orientations is to be in harmony with what is most important, what is eternal and what is most powerful.

These remarks lead one to inquire into the particular method of inquiry in research. Qualitative research methods seek understanding through *participant observation* and *in-depth interviewing* (Taylor & Bogdan 1984:2-9). 'Participant observation' refers to inquiry which involves social interaction between the researcher and respondents within the milieu of the latter. During this time, data are supposed to be systematically and unobtrusively collected. Razafindrakoto was quite aware of the fact that as a Lutheran pastor, he could have had some effect on the people he investigated. Lay people could have felt intimidated by the fact that he is a Lutheran pastor. Church leaders sometimes felt threatened by his investigation into their practices.

A basic feature of participant observation is to hold not too tightly to any theoretical interest, but to explore phenomena as they emerge during observations (Taylor & Bogdan 1984:15, 16). If I have learned anything from the fieldwork facet during my own research, it is that the researcher needs to be extremely sensitive towards the subject matter and adjust the methodology accordingly (Le Roux 1999). Although I had some general questions and theories in mind the specifics of the methodology evolved as I proceeded. For example, during the first days in the field, I tried to remain relatively passive, but soon realized that I might not be able to return to specific settings and

people. I was, therefore, forced to apply both non-directive and directive questions during the same interview. The idea that one is supposed to conduct interviews with individuals, needs adjustment for Africa. African culture does not really allow for individual interviewing or discussion without the elders and other important people. In this regard I found that the work of Taylor & Bogdan (1984) is not entirely suited to an African context.

The first days in the field were, furthermore, characterized by feelings of doubt, uncertainty and frustration. Interviews with individuals are not supposed to be longer than two hours (according to the Western-orientated book of Taylor & Bogdan 1984). 'Group interviews' with groups between seven and twenty-five people, could last from three to four hours at a time. That, of course, also left you with less time to record field notes. I just had to adapt to the group interview process and conducted much longer interviews than were planned. Taylor and Bogdan (1984) warn that the researcher might experience some hostility in the field. Razafindrakoto experienced some criticism from the MLC. But he merely wanted to describe (as objectively as possible) his church's use of the Old Testament in connection with the crown and robe of Nenilava. There is of course no such thing as objectivity and to merely describe without defending or explaining is quite a challenge.

Field notes are supposed to include descriptions of the settings, of your own actions and comments, as well as the sequence and duration of events and conversations (cf. Taylor & Bogdan 1984:53). Describing the setting provides a mental picture of the place and the activity where the interviews took place. Drawing a diagram of the layout of the setting, enabled one to trace your movements and indicated on which page of your notes each movement is described. Your comments include your awareness, feelings, hunches, preconceptions and indicate future areas of enquiry. By way of metaphor, the 'flesh' added to the bare 'skeleton' created by the field notes, is the interview data (Clasquin 1995:271).

Although participant observation and in-depth interviewing go hand in hand, the main differences between them reside in the setting and situations. Participant observation contains 'natural field study', a first-hand experience of a social world. This participant observation provides a yardstick against which to measure data collected through interviewing and *vice versa* (Taylor & Bogdan 1984:83).

In-depth interviewing suggests that situations are arranged for purposes of the research and relies on second-hand accounts of others. In this manner Razafindrakoto gained specific 'theological' and other information from his arranged interviews with MRCC and MLC leaders and with tradition-practitioners. In-depth interviewing is well geared to study a relatively large number of people in a relatively short period. Due to time constraints, it is

necessary to turn to interviewing immediately after conducted participant observation for some time.

As a native Malagasy, Razafindrakoto had a huge amount of knowledge about the Malagasy context before he started his research. He has first-hand experience of the Malagasy social world. This enabled him to develop further guidelines for the interviews. These guidelines ensured that key themes were explored when interviewing a number of respondents.

## **C TO CONTEXTUALIZE OR NOT, THAT IS THE QUESTION**

Another important issue which comes to the fore in the investigation of Razafindrakoto is the concept of contextualization. He explores the why, how and what concerning contextualization in three Malagasy religious contexts. Questions from European theologians concerning the relevance of, for example, 'a contextual African theology' have become topical in recent years in theological as well as missiological discussion. I will now briefly summarize the three cases investigated by Razafindrakoto and then refer to parallel situations in early Christianity and during Old Testament times.

### **1 The Malagasy Roman Catholic Church and the *famadihana***

The Malagasy word *famadihana* expresses the action of 'turning over' and involves turning over or exhuming of the *razana* (living dead; ancestors) as well as the renewing of their shrouds. This ritual takes place two or three years after the death, i.e. after the flesh has completely decayed and only the eight primary bones are left. The 'eight bones' concept is a metaphor used to designate the body when the flesh is completely decayed. Thereafter, the ritual is periodically performed every five, seven or even nine years, depending on the family's agreement or ability. The ceremony of the *famadihana* involves a lot of expenses (Razafindrakoto 2006). People from the Merina and Betsileo ethnic groups believe that the *razana* get tired of lying down on one side for a long time and could feel cold when their shrouds are torn. Therefore they need to be turned around regularly and wrapped in new shrouds and sometimes transferred to new tombs (Razafindrakoto 2006:25). According to Molet (1979:279-281, in Razafindrakoto 2006:26) there are three types of *famadihana*: the transfer *famadihana*, the inauguration *famadihana* and the prestige *famadihana*. The purpose is not to discuss the detail here, but to summarize and briefly refer to some of the criticism of the MRCC for incorporating this Malagasy traditional religious ritual into the church.

Encouraged by the findings of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) to urge the Catholic Church to enter into dialogue with the diverse cultures in order to renew and purify them, the MRCC decided to perform the *famadihana* as a ritual within the liturgy of the church. The MRCC consciously rejects

some practices relating to this ritual which they consider to be undesirable elements (Razafindrakoto 2006:37, 38) and made a considerable effort to root its theology in the ancestral values. The concept of the *razana* received a new theological dimension, as they state that God, who is the Father of all humankind, is the source of the *razana*'s paternity. Therefore, the *razana* are regarded as *Raiamandreny* (father-and-mother), as sources of life and light, as factors of social integration, as masters of wisdom and sources of grace and protection (Razafintsalama 1988:17-20, cited in Razafindrakoto 2006:38).

In an endeavor to inculturize, to legitimize and to win more converts, the MRCC makes use of specific Old Testament texts (Gen 49:29-50:13; Exod 13:19; Exod 20:12) to indicate the presence of similar kinds of rituals to those found in ancient Israel. Many other churches, especially Protestant Churches, criticizes the way the MRCC uses these texts and condemns the practice of *famadihana*. They are convinced that it is Satan's means to draw Christians away from God's ways and to perdition because, according to them, it involves ancestor worship. They seek to abolish it and forbid Christians to participate in it, and took part in spreading hostile propaganda against it. Despite attempts to get Malagasy Christians to abandon it the practice, many of them continue to celebrate the *famadihana* with their non-Christian relatives. The MRCC feels it necessary to defend the ritual. To prevent it from being abolished they need to inculturize it so that it can be performed in a Christian way (Razafindrakoto 2006:62-67; 100-102); and they can maintain its important cultural values.

## **2 The Malagasy Lutheran Church and Nenilava's robe and crown**

The revival movements emerged from and spread within the contexts of Malagasy Protestant churches. These movements include four charismatic leaders called *Raiamandreny* ('father-and-mother') or 'servants of God'. One of these leaders was a woman, called Nenilava. All four of these leaders (also called shepherds) played dominant roles in the Malagasy Protestant churches as far as evangelization is concerned. The church considered them as prophets. Nenilava was recognized by the MLC not only as prophetess, but also as priestess (Razafindrakoto 2006:106).

Nenilava was the daughter of non-Christian parents. Her father was chief of his clan and a famous traditio-practitioner. She grew up with all the traditional religious rites and practices which her father performed with great success, but was greatly disappointed in the fact that her father could not give her a satisfying answer about the 'god' he served and invoked (Razafindrakoto 2006:107, 108). She was unhappy with the fact that this god was not known and that he could not speak. As a young girl she already had this strong desire to meet and see the 'real' God. Kneeling at the foot of a big tree she cried and asked God to appear to her. According to her, Jesus started to talk to her, calling her name everyday at noon, ordering her to go out and preach the

gospel, drive out demons and to glorify the Son of man (approx 1941). At the age of seventeen she was asked in marriage by a widower, a Lutheran catechist. After she was taught the Small Catechisms and was baptized in the church, she decided that Jesus wanted her to serve him in this church. She was illiterate, but gained wonderful spiritual gifts such as different modern languages from the Holy Spirit (Razafindrakoto 2006:107, 108).

According to Nenilava, Jesus consecrated her when he had called her, and promised that she would be shown in public as a priestess and prophetess. During this time (approximately 1959) she had a vision in which she wore priestly garments and a crown. As a humble person she was afraid to shock Christians who would not understand the reason for her wearing this particular robe and crown. When she fell very ill, she related her sickness to her 'refusal' to work according to Jesus' plan for her. Therefore, in 1983 she agreed to be consecrated in public by the MLC, wearing a special robe and crown made according to the description of those of the high priest described in Exod 28. The robe had to be made by talented Malagasy weavers and craftsmen who were all shepherds and members of the revival movement. It took them almost three years to make Nenilava's priestly robe and it cost the movement a lot of money (Rabehatonina 2000:3, cited in Razafindrakoto 2006:111-113). There was no model from the Bible according to which the crown could be made. Therefore it was made according to instructions given to Nenilava by Jesus himself. Different models had first to be made before the craftsmen obtained the one which corresponded most to the one Nenilava had in mind. As a result, the costs of the crown became exorbitant.

The MLC's Christocentric theologians interpreted the items mentioned in Exod 28 as the characters of the sacerdotal ministry of Christ. Despite their efforts to place Jesus at the center of their interpretations they always regard the Old Testament as the main source from which they draw heavily (Razafindrakoto 2006:123-134). Deut 28, which contains blessings and curses, was used by the MLC to make the Malagasy Christians aware of the consequences of the obedience and disobedience to the prophetic message that Nenilava's crown symbolically conveyed. Razafindrakoto (2006:138) concludes that the MLC has used these texts from the Old Testament mainly to justify Nenilava's priestly work and prophetic mission and to contextualize Nenilava's robe and crown into the church.

Some of the MLC's leaders argue that, contrary to the Catholic Church, the Lutherans have eliminated almost all visible symbols in the church. To enhance their faith Christians in Madagascar need visible symbols. Rasata (cited in Razafindrakoto 2006:141) argues that once explicated properly and interpreted Christo-centrally, visible symbols such as Nenilava's robe and crown, can serve as effective means to strengthen Christians' faith.



Obviously the MLC has been criticized much for including Nenilava as priestess and prophetess with her special garments into the structures of the church. Especially people who remained outside the revival movement are not completely convinced of Nenilava's prophetic vocation and do not recognize the spiritual authority she is supposed to have as a woman. Certain pastors and ordinary Christians became more skeptical when they knew that Nenilava was dressed like a high priest and crowned like a queen on the occasion of the confirmation of her consecration. They feel that wearing a robe modelled on garments worn by the high priest in the Old Testament in a Christian church is not only astonishing and out of place, but inconceivable (Razafindrakoto 2006:141-147). It would have been much more adequate and convincing if she wore a white robe, representing Jesus' bride on earth, instead of the high priest's garments. They further admit that there is no mention in the Bible of a prophet wearing a crown as symbol of prophethood. Some pastors and lay preachers also find the use of Exod 28 and Deut 28 as directive to make a priestly robe and crown totally out of context, but ordinary Christians as well as traditionalists do not share the same opinion. They are quite impressed with the idea of the robe and the crown (Razafindrakoto 2006:141-147).

### **3 The traditionalists' use of Old Testament texts**

Razafindrakoto's (2006:176-227) study shows that the use of the Old Testament has reached beyond the bounds of the church. According to him it is quite a new phenomenon in the Malagasy context that the traditio-practitioners make use of the Old Testament to 'ensure people's spiritual and physical well-being'. They have numerous functions as priests, diviners, seers, healers and astrologers. The Malagasy traditionalists emphasize the belief in Zanahary, the Supreme Being, the ancestors and mystical powers. They are also regarded as religious intermediaries, playing an important role between Zanahary, the ancestors and human beings. One of the reasons for their predilection for the Old Testament is that it speaks of a religious and cultural context which they consider more or less similar to their own. Different Old Testament texts are being used in different contexts to support various traditional religious practices such as traditional healing, traditional sacrifices and offerings and as references for morals. The use of the Old Testament by the traditionalists ('accommodation') increasingly attracts Christians (Razafindrakoto 2006:176-227).

It is the ancestral spirits who choose the people they destine to be traditio-practitioners. They come to the candidate through dreams or visions and explain to him/her what he/she is going to do. Ultimately the person is possessed by the ancestral spirit. The ancestral spirit can also take advantage of some illness to go into the candidate and to possess him/her. The possessed person usually gets instructions regarding taboos, clothes, responsibilities and a specific form of worship (Razafindrakoto 2006:180, 181). All the traditio-

practitioners are healers and their methods of healing are largely based on the hypothesis that most diseases have supernatural causes and in order to cure them it is necessary to fight those supernatural powers. A person can be ill for three reasons: he/she has offended God/god or the ancestors, or he/she is bewitched or he/she is possessed by evil or demonic spirits.

The traditionalists regard the Old Testament as a universal, sacred book which is not only for the use of Christians alone, but also to be used by religions whose fundamental religious principles are based on the belief in one Supreme Being, creator of heaven and earth (Razafindrakoto 2006:182-183). In their opinion the Old Testament relates more to the Malagasy traditional religion than to Christianity because most of the Old Testament traditions are not practiced by Malagasy Christians (e.g. sacrifices, offerings, healing, cleansing rituals and the belief in ancestors as conveyors of the divine blessings). Most Malagasy Christians criticize the practices of the tradition-practitioners and especially the way they use the Old Testament in their context.

#### **4 European ‘contextual theology’**

Does this approach especially by the MRCC and MLC sacrifice the distinct character of Christianity to what is distinct in Malagasy culture? What happened to early Christianity in Europe? What changes did the newly-brought, translated Christian faith undergo under the influence of these cultures and religions? How did Christianity and Christian faith combine with pre-Christian culture and religion? What elements of the old religion did Christianity abolish and what remained (Wessels 1994:14)?

The English nobleman and Benedictine monk Boniface is known as the ‘apostle to the Germans’. He wanted to ‘abolish’ the religion which he encountered and devastated pagan temples and in this way won people over to the new faith. He was influenced to a significant degree by the letter sent to him by Pope Gregory II in 732, which was hostile to these cultures (Wessels 1994:10). In Geismar, Hessen (Germany) in 724 Boniface had an old oak dedicated to the god Donar cut down ‘in the presence of thousands of amazed pagans and terrified semi-Christians’. He did that to prove to the peasants of Hessen that their belief in the power of Donar was mistaken (Keep 1979:11). While the Irish were tolerant of old cults and customs, according to Boniface these old cults of the gods were of the devil (Wessels 1994:10)

By contrast, Pope Gregory took a quite different approach to the work of Christianization in England. He revoked his earlier admonition to destroy temples as such and to exterminate root and branch of all that was pagan. As justification he referred to the Israelite people, who were instructed by God to take over the animal sacrifice of the Egyptians for the worship of the true God (Wessels 1994:11, 12). Pope Gregory the Great gave the abbot Augustine

instructions to preserve anything of the other religion which was not in direct conflict with the gospel. We can see clearly from this instruction the perspective in which Gregory gave his missionaries instructions for the inculturation of Christianity. This advice also tallied with what was to be done in Rome itself.

Pope Boniface IV (608-615), the third bishop of Rome after Gregory, was given the Pantheon, which was said to be a temple for all the gods, by the Byzantine emperor Phocas (602-610). On 13 May 609 this ancient Roman temple was dedicated to the Virgin Mary and all the Christian martyrs (Weiler 1989:17, 18). Willibrord, 'the apostle of the Friesians', was also to work in the spirit of Gregory's letter; we know that by preference he built churches on former places of sacrifice, but we also know of instances where he destroyed sanctuaries as Boniface did, against the advice given by Pope Gregory the Great (Wessels 1994:13).

Thus we find different attitudes in the history of early Christianization. One is more that of Christ against culture, the other more that of Christ the transformer of culture. On the one hand there was a break in the veneration of ancestors in the Germanic world, but on the other hand there was continuity in that the nobility established cultic centres where ancestors were buried. 'In the monasteries which they founded monks were taken into service to ensure the eternal bliss of ancestors through their prayers and penitence' (Ljungberg 1940:109, 317, 318).

The names of the days of the week still recall the old gods (Noort 1993:19). In Europe many Christian festivals go back to pre-Christian feasts: Christmas replaced the Yule feast, the solstice festival; Easter replaced the feast of the spring goddess Ostara. She was the goddess of resurrection of nature after the long death of winter. Pre-Christian European gods became Christian saints: Wodan, the god of war and death, became St Martin (of Tours); Freyr, the god of peace (and a bold fighter), St Leonard; Balder, the god of light, St George and Freyja, the goddess of marriage and fertility (she is also the consort and mother of Balder), the Blessed Virgin (Wessels 1994:96-160). But in all these cases they were given a Christian interpretation and raised to a higher level.

## **5 Contextualization in ancient Israel**

Not only early Christianity but both the Old Testament and the New Testament derived many of their customs and festivals from pre-Israelite or pre-Christian religions. We must not underestimate the degree to which the Old Testament also took over important elements from its religious environment, especially the Canaanite environment. Clearly the Old Testament both abolishes these elements and raises them to a higher level (Wessels 1994:175).

The book of Judges indicates how the Israelites lived among the different peoples in the Promised Land, married their sons and daughters and worshipped their gods (Judg 3:5, 6). The author of the book as well as the Deuteronomist state clearly that what they did was wrong in the eyes of the Lord (cf. also Deut 5:7). Throughout the Old Testament the prophets reacted vehemently against the worship of the other gods (Exod 23:32; Jer 19:4, 5; Deut 12:4; Ps 106:37, 38), but that does not mean that it did not occur. During the period of the kings in Israel, both Baal and Moloch were worshipped and cultic places were erected on the former high places of the Canaanite gods. Von Rad (and many others) refers to the many characteristics of both El and Baal (Canaanite and Ugaritic gods) that were taken over by Yahweh (1987:36, cit ed in Noort 1993:148-152). The process of interaction and assimilation started with the entrance into the Promised Land (Noort 1993:149, 150).

## **D CONCLUSION**

Wessels (1994:13) refers to the *abiding significance* which the Old Testament has for Christians in general (cf. Miskotte 1967). We can only witness that the Old Testament has an abiding significance for African Christians in particular. Wessels (1994:13) further suggests that we should ask whether we cannot also speak of a 'surplus' in other religions, which continues despite, or perhaps because of, their Christianization. Is not this, as Eliade suggests, also the explanation of the success of the new, namely that to a certain degree it preserved elements of the old and thus consummated them? (Wessels 1994:13).

The pre-Christian religions and gods may have been stigmatized by the church, but were the saints more than the successors of the gods? And although the veneration of the saints may be said to be in a sense pagan in origin, does the authentically Christian element in it have to be denied (Wessels 1994:169)? We find different attitudes in the history of early Christianization. One is more that of Christ against culture, the other more that of Christ the transformer of culture. According to Eliade, the archetypal images were 'completed' by Christianity and the pre-Christian symbols in no way 'annulled' (1961 27:143). Eliade clearly deals with the question whether the process of Christianization also affects the content of what was there before in the positive. Here we might think of Jesus' well-known saying in the Sermon on the Mount that he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it (Mt 5:17). Does that also mean that to a certain degree the old still retained its significance?

Eliade sees the secret of the success of the spread of Christianity in Europe as being the church's success in taking over the images and myths of Europe and raising them to a higher plane (1961:210, 211). Within your own culture you feel safe, every symbol or ritual has significance. Culture is the totality of symbols and rituals (Noort 1993:11). By its rites, symbols and images, myths maintain in the individual a sense of awe, gratitude and even ecstasy.

African (and other) theologians are often criticized because they do not pass the test of what is thought to be 'universal' theology, namely the theology practiced by Westerners. They are often dismissed by European theologians as 'syncretistic' (Wessels (1994:15). They are felt to make too many concessions to their own cultural context. Wessels (1994:15) is convinced that one of the reasons why European theologians take it for granted that they represent and defend a universal Christian theology is that they are often unaware of the question of their own contextualization, above all in the sense of their inculturation into European culture. In connection with the new tendency towards demythologizing it has been pointed out that 'myth must be reclaimed by Western Christianity in order to protect the dissolution of Western Christianity into myth (Campbell 1980, cited in Wessels 1994:176-177). The function of a living mythology is to support the social order by rites and rituals which make an impact on young people and shape them. A religion filled with myth, symbols and rituals tends to last longer (Ljungberg 1940:317-318).

The research done by Razafindrakoto is relevant both for the development of African theology and Africanized biblical perspectives. Some Christians deal very critically with the way the Old Testament is being used in the Malagasy religious contexts, but it contributed to raise the contextualized Malagasy rituals to a new level. In my opinion, the teaching of the Old Testament in connection with the life-world of African cultures needs to be undertaken before 'Christological teaching' can commence. The Old Testament has a role to play in the interpretation of African rituals and practices. However, it is important that only that which is beneficial from the Old Testament and from the culture should be encouraged (Le Roux 1999:257). Abe (1996:11) states that in Africa, all forms of inhuman structures and unchristian attitudes which cause human suffering and agony should be analyzed and vigorously combated. De Vries (cited in Noort 1993:6, 7) warns that it is only with great cautiousness that one should make use of traditional religious practices.

Real 'evangelization' also involves a change of culture. 'In the midst of our concerns for contextualization, we must not be lulled into thinking that contextualization will leave the culture untouched and simply affirm the good values there. Christ can be found in culture, but making that discovery explicit will have consequences for the culture' (Schreiter 1985:157; cf. Wessels 1994:171). Nevertheless, as far as qualitative research methods are concerned, what seems to be important is not how many settings or people one has studied, but that one has developed an understanding of something that was not understood before (cf. Taylor & Bogdan 1984:66). If this objective is not kept in mind, then the ideals and 'objectives' of qualitative study are not attained. Obviously, one could always have interviewed more people and visited more places. Likewise, one has to keep in mind that in qualitative research the

researcher does not seek 'truth' or 'morality' but rather a detailed understanding of others' perspectives. The challenge is that this 'story' must be able to reflect an honest account of how respondents actually view themselves and their experiences.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abe, G 1996. Redemption, Reconciliation, Propitiation. Salvation terms in an African milieu. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 95, 3-12.
- Andersen, I, Borum, F, Kirstensen, P H & Karnøe, P 1995. *On the Art of Doing Field Studies. An Experience-based Methodology*. Munksgaard: Handelshøjskolens.
- Clasquin, M 1995. Researching a city's faith: Methodological notes from the coalface. *Religion and Theology* 2, 256-273.
- Eliade, M 1961. *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*. London: Harvill.
- Hübsch, B 1993. *Le Christianisme à Madagascar*. Paris: Carthala.
- Hutcheon, L 1988. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge.
- Keep, D 1979. *St Boniface and His World*. Exeter: Paternoster.
- Le Roux, M 1999. In search of the understanding of the Old Testament in Africa: The case of the Lemba. Unpublished D Litt et Phil, Unisa.
- Le Roux, M 2003. *The Lemba: A Lost Tribe of Israel in Southern Africa?* Pretoria: Unisa.
- Ljungberg, H L 1940. *Die nordische Religion und das Christentum*. Gutersloh.
- Miskotte, K H 1967. *When the Gods are Silent. On the Meaning of the Old Testament*. London and New York: Collins.
- Mouton, J & Marais, H C 1988. The philosophy of qualitative research, in *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods* (module 3). Pretoria: HSRC.
- Noort, G 1993. *Germaanse cultuur en Christianisatie van Noordwest Europa*. Utrecht-Leiden: IIMO.
- Razafindrakoto, G A 2006. The use of Old Testament texts and rituals in the Malagasy context. Unpublished D Litt et Phil thesis. Unisa, Pretoria.
- Schreier, R J 1985. *Constructing Local Theologies*. Maryknoll: Orbis.
- Taylor, S J & Bogdan, R 1984. *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods. The Search for Meanings*. New York: John Wiley.
- Weiler, A G 1989. *Willibrords missie. Christendon en cultuur in de zevende en achtste eeuw*. Hilversum: Brand.
- Wessels, A 1994. *Europe: Was it Ever Really Christian? The Interaction Between Gospel and Culture*. London: SCM.

Magdel le Roux, Department of Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern Studies, University of South Africa, P O Box 392, 0003 UNISA, South Africa.  
E-mail: [lrouxm1@unisa.ac.za](mailto:lrouxm1@unisa.ac.za)