

## Article

# A Decolonial Perspective on the Practice of Unveiling Tombstones in Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches in South Africa

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**Abstract:** Tombstone, the practice of demarcating a grave and unveiling it in some instances, has been common since ancient times. The practice is related to marking the grave in order to remember its geographical location, and subsequently for future generations to identify with it. This practice is very common in a South African context, especially in African traditional religion (ATR). In addition, they would have other ceremonies to revisit the grave and/or the tombstone of their loved one as a way of remembering them. However, some Pentecostal and Charismatic churches prohibit this practice as ancestral worship. This article argues that the erection and unveiling of tombstones does not necessarily need to be understood as ancestral worship. A distinction needs to be made between ancestral worship and ancestral commemoration in an African context. The conclusion is that when the practice of unveiling tombstones is carried out as a way of remembering and showing respect to our ancestors, but not worshipping and revering them, this practice should be supported by Christians from Pentecostal and Charismatic churches as well. There is therefore a need, from a decolonial perspective, to use the missional hermeneutics of discernment and naked truth to provide a proper biblical and acceptable Christian practice of the unveiling of the tombstone in the South African context.

**Keywords:** unveiling tombstone; Pentecostal and Charismatic churches; decolonial discourse; African worldview; African traditional religions; African culture



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## 1. Introduction

A cemetery is a place that tells many stories (Hay 2011), but an unmarked grave has no meaning and carries no significance about both the deceased and those who remain behind. The marking of graves is a custom that can be traced back to ancient times. The Old Testament also makes mention of stones marking graves (Togarasei and Chitando 2005). The narrative of Jacob erecting a tombstone over Rachel's tomb in Genesis 35:20 is one such example. In the Old Testament, such a tombstone served as a memorial stone, and to revere it would have constituted an act of idolatry, as recorded in Old Testament texts, such as Exodus 23:24, Leviticus 26:1, Deuteronomy 7:5, 1 Kings 14:23, and Hosea 10:1–2, among others (Togarasei and Chitando 2005, p. 174).

The marking of graves is now a common practice among different cultural and religious groups in South Africa and Zimbabwe among others. However, for African Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians (PCCs), this practice is causing tensions among church members and even within families. Writing about tombstone unveiling in the context of Christianity in Zimbabwe, Zwana (2008, p. 37) remarked that, "questions have been raised and suspicions expressed regarding the nature of the rituals and whether they are doctrinally acceptable within Christian churches". These suspicions are further compounded by the long-standing discourse whether Africans worship or venerate their ancestors or not. African scholars have, over the past two decades, held different views on this matter.

While ancestors are held in high esteem in African religiosity and are considered to be the living dead (Mbiti 1990, p. 81), they are said to play the role of intermediaries by others (Nyirongo 1997, p. 51), and as such their veneration can be integrated into Christianity, as noted by others (Bediako 1992, p. 226). In the discourse around African Christologies and inculturation, Nyamithi, a scholar, proposed that Africans should embrace Christ as an ancestor. However, it should be noted that there are African scholars who reject ancestral worship and veneration as an acceptable form of Christian response to how Africans should relate to their ancestors, including the performance of burial rituals and those that relate to tombstone erection and unveiling (Nyirongo 1997, p. 37; Setiloane 1976). It is argued that “the ancestors do not become what they were not before they died” (Alubafi and Kaunda 2019, p. 3). Ancestors are human and remain humans in the afterlife and therefore cannot be worshiped.

While the rejection of ancestral worship and veneration is considered by some African scholars, including some African Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians, as incompatible with the Christian faith (Bae and Van der Merwe 2008, p. 1299), the practice still exists today. Although worship is discouraged, service to the ancestors by performing certain cultural rituals is encouraged (Setiloane 2000, p. 30). There are some African Christians who, when faced with crises in their personal life, resort to communication with their ancestors through mediums, such as traditional diviners, and at times they use prophets, as in the case of some African Independent Churches in Africa. Others resort to the performance of certain rituals to appease their ancestors, as a way of seeking solutions to their problems. Hence there is a high level of suspicion among some African Charismatic Christians, when it comes to the unveiling of a tombstone (Zwana 2008, p. 38). What complicates matters is that in some instances, the public act of unveiling a tombstone is preceded by a private traditional ritual performed by a *maine* (traditional diviner in Tshivenda). This ritual involves some form of consultation or interaction with the dead. This act happens behind the scenes before the pastors arrive or after they have left. Some churches allow their members to participate, citing ancestral commemoration and not ancestral worship as a reason. In this instance, a distinction is made between the unveiling of a tombstone from a memorial/remembrance perspective, versus the unveiling of a tombstone as ancestral worship, which in some instances include a ritual bringing the deceased back home to join family ancestors. However, some Christians among the Shona of Zimbabwe, for instance, approach the two practices as open systems that continually borrow from each other (Togarasei and Chitando 2005, p. 167).

While there is nothing wrong in marking the graves, the foregoing creative tension between ancestral worship and ancestral commemoration still points to a deep-rooted creative tension between African Pentecostal and Charismatic churches and African traditional religious and cultural practices on the erection and unveiling of tombstones. To determine a praxis that is biblically and culturally acceptable among African Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians, this research is undertaken from a decolonial perspective. Therefore, the main research question that this article seeks to investigate is: What are the colonial aspects in the Christian prohibition of tombstone unveiling as a generally acceptable praxis among African Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians in South Africa? When does the placing of a tombstone and its unveiling become ancestral worship and when does it remain just ancestral commemoration? In outlining the distinction between the two, this decolonial discourse will clarify what constitutes a dis/continuity within both the colonial matrix and African traditional cultural practices regarding tombstone unveiling. This will be achieved through a literature analysis of the readily available sources on the unveiling of tombstones.

To reach the main aim of this research, this article will discuss the unveiling of tombstones as an African traditional practice and part of the culture, the unveiling of tombstones from the African Pentecostal and Charismatic perspectives, and lastly, we will discuss the unveiling of tombstones as an African Christian practice in decoloniality.

## 2. A Mission-Decolonial Perspective: Framing a Context

The current discourse around the erection and unveiling of tombstones is undertaken from a decolonial perspective. It should be noted, from a colonial missio-historical perspective, that the practice of unveiling a tombstone is a practice that Africans copied from White Christians in South Africa. [Becken \(1993, p. 337\)](#) opined, “[h]aving seen the whites unveiling their monuments in solemn celebration, African churches created their own rites to do so”. He further asserts that: “Even in mission churches, there are “specialists” who have the reputation of being able to perform this ritual well” ([Becken 1993, p. 337](#)). The need to further explore this discourse is further convoluted by the creative tension between Christian mission and the African traditional perspectives on burial rituals, the erection and unveiling of tombstones ([Mashau and Ngcobo 2016](#)). Informed by the historical link or marriage between Christian mission and colonialism, Western Christian missionaries undermined and marginalized the indigenous knowledge system, customs, culture and religious expressions. The approach in dealing with issues of the burial of the dead, erection and unveiling of the tombstone was one of polarization or outward rejection of African indigenous beliefs and epistemologies. [Simango \(2018, p. 3\)](#) aptly noted the lack of a legit conversation between Western missionaries and the African culture and religiosity. Africans, including Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians, were made to believe that everything African is demonic. [Nhengu \(2020, p. 257\)](#) captures it as follows: “The AFM missionaries who arrived in Zimbabwe in 1915 exuded colonial superiority over African indigenous beliefs and epistemologies in their churches”.

This discussion is framed from within a missio-decolonial perspective because of the assumption that there is no discussion on the decolonial perspective without pointing to the colonisation of the mind of many African people. Hence, [Ngugi Wa Thiong’o \(1992\)](#) speaks of the decolonisation of the mind of the people. The goal of decoloniality is therefore, according to [Sakupapa \(2018, p. 406\)](#) “to de-link from the colonial matrix”. [Urbaniak \(2019, p. 3\)](#) adds, “the decolonial project aims to unmask coloniality wherever it seeks to hide itself, to render it visible by exposing both its rhetoric and reality”. In his article, “The Denial of African Agency: A Decolonial Theological Turn”, [Chammah Kaunda \(2015, p. 73\)](#) defines decolonial as an instrument that can counteract the colonisation of the mind of African people. Thus for [Kaunda \(2015, p. 89\)](#), a decolonial perspective enables “African Christians to reclaim materio-spirituality as a form of African theo-pedagogy to aid them in the decolonization of the mind”. However, [Kaunda \(2015, p. 77\)](#), [Hadebe \(2017\)](#), and [Ndlovu-Gatshehi \(2013\)](#) have come to acknowledge that a decolonial perspective should not be monolithic but be able to embrace other views while at the same time, be particular about addressing its contextual or specific issues.

Therefore, the significance of a decolonial perspective for this article is demonstrated in four steps. First, this perspective assists in revisiting the position of missionaries who suppressed the African beliefs and practices about the unveiling of tombstones. Second, an acknowledgment of how Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians in South Africa have been made to think in coloniality that unveiling the tombstone represents an ancestral worship and therefore it should be condemned among Christians. Third, a decolonisation of the mind of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians in South Africa by reclaiming, with a great sense of discernment, the acceptable elements of the African traditional and cultural practices in the unveiling of tombstones. Last, a decolonial as non-monolithic thinking will assist in juxtaposing the African traditional and cultural practices with the Christian practice to produce a balanced and biblically acceptable African Christian practice of unveiling tombstones. In terms of delimitation, it is imperative to note that while coloniality is a factor towards a negative Christian view towards tombstone unveiling, some of the strong opposition to tombstone unveiling has not come from white missionaries, but from African Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians who desire discontinuity from the African religious and cultural past. It should also be noted that while efforts to engage the Western missionary paradigm towards the African religion and culture might be interpreted as an attack to Western Christianity and theology, we cannot ignore the damage caused by

the marriage between Western Christianity and Western culture. While making a clarion call on decolonising religion in the context of the Latin American/Caribbean context, An Yountae (2020, p. 947) pointed at the need “to resituate the Americans and the transatlantic historical experience as primary sites for theorizing modern religion”. The same applies to the South African context. It is for the same reason that Walter Mignolo (2021) talks about the imperative to delink, decolonise and de-Westernize in the effort to liberate the Global South from Westernization and the hegemony of Western knowledge and praxis which are deeply embedded in the colonial power matrix. Such a task marks a radical shift towards non-Western histories, cosmologies, beliefs, and the praxes thereof. Accordingly, “De-Westernization and decoloniality cannot ignore Westernization, but they do not have to obey it anymore. And both trajectories are founded on disobedience and delinking” (Mignolo 2021, p. xi).

### 3. The Practice of Unveiling Tombstones: African Cultural Perspective

The unveiling of a tombstone among the Vhavenda people of South Africa, for instance, constitutes an act of placing a big (natural) stone on top of a grave—more specifically on the side of the grave where the head of the deceased is placed. Traditionally, this ritual was strictly reserved for the elders in the family and excluded children and youths. To mark the grave, elders would place either clothes or shoes, or plates or mugs belonging to the deceased on top of the grave. It is only a year later (see Togarasei and Chitando 2005, p. 168), sometimes on the same date or during the week that the deceased passed on when they would conduct the unveiling of a tombstone ceremony called “*u tsikulula tshitombo*” (meaning “lifting up a stone”). However, today it is called “*u tibula tombo*” (meaning “unveiling a tombstone”). The erection and unveiling of tombstones in the South African context has grown to become a very expensive event/ritual economically. Adverts on radio stations and newspapers are now used by funeral parlours to advertise their tombstones, as well as by families to invite relatives and friends to attend tombstone-unveiling rituals (Togarasei and Chitando 2005, p. 166). Families buy expensive tombstones and organise big unveiling ceremonies where cows are slaughtered and traditional beer is served to the community. Members of the family and relatives, including other members of the community or those coming from outside buy and wear new clothes for the unveiling of the tombstone. Consequently, a family aspiring to perform the ritual must be able to afford the tombstone and related expenses (Zwana 2008, p. 44).

### 4. The Spirituality of the Unveiling of a Tombstone

The unveiling of a tombstone is part of the traditional religious practices in Southern Africa. While the unveiling ceremony is accompanied by a ritual called “*u vhuuyisa hayani*” in Tshivenda or “*kurova guva/umbuyiso*” in Shona (the “bringing back home” ritual) (Zwana 2008, p. 44), to those who are actively involved in the ancestral cult, this is a ceremony that is conducted to ensure that the spirit of the deceased is not only brought back home, but also appeased to ensure positive influence or blessings on the side of the living. The ceremony signifies that the spirit of the deceased is transformed into an ancestor (Zwana 2008, p. 44). Accompanied by their traditional diviner (*maine* in Tshivenda) and *makhadzi* (a senior aunt in the family who officiates the ritual, as per the instruction of the *maine*), the family visits the graveside, offers traditional beer and speaks to the deceased through the *makhadzi*, telling the deceased that their spirit is being brought home to look after the family.

### 5. The Significance of the Unveiling of a Tombstone

In the African context, people attach a great deal of significance to death, burial and the erection and unveiling of tombstones. Prescribed rituals are conducted as per one’s culture and prescription of the tradition to safeguard the continued relationship between the living and the living dead. There is a deep urge among Africans to retain ties with the living dead by performing the necessary rituals. Michele Hay (2011, p. 292) argues

that death, memorialisation and remembrance, and history merge from the “bottom-up”. Funerals, heritage memorials and monuments, and locally produced histories, all seek to capture a lost life or a lost world, to hold it dear, to understand the role that a place or person played in the life and perhaps to add meaning to it.

A closer reflection on the foregoing discussion points to at least five reasons why, according to African traditions and customs, it is important to erect and unveil tombstones. First, the erection of a tombstone and its unveiling is meant to mark the grave and serves as an act of achieving closure by the family—closure from life in this world to ancestry and the spiritual world. The unveiling of a tombstone also marks the end of the mourning period (Zwana 2008, p. 40). Second, the ritual/ceremony serves as a memorial event. It allows members of the family to celebrate the deceased’s life by remembering all of their good deeds. Third, this practice serves as a way to appease ancestors in general terms. Mashau and Ngcobo (2016, p. 34) remarked that “life in the ATR is understood to be a shared experience between the living and the living dead”. According to the African beliefs, ancestors must be appeased with gifts, such as the ritual killing of a cow, goat or chicken, a dish of porridge, the pouring out of a libation of sorghum beer, and other rituals as demanded by the ancestors themselves (Anderson 1993, p. 26). Fourth, the ceremony is instituted to seek the ancestors’ blessing. The act of appeasing one’s ancestors by bringing all sorts of gifts when rituals are conducted is also meant to ask for blessings from one’s ancestors. This custom has seen many, around the Easter period and other major public holidays, crisscrossing South Africa and beyond to go and offer rituals to ensure continuous blessings. Easter or any other public holiday is preferred because it is the only time that all members of families are able to gather, including migrant workers who prefer to travel to their respective homes during this time. Fifth, the ritual aims to seek protection from the ancestors. According to ATR beliefs, ancestors can be angered and thereby bring calamity to their descendants, especially when their instructions are not being carried out (Anderson 1993, p. 28). The underlying premise of an ancestral cult in Africa is the belief in a spiritual world with spiritual forces that have the power to inflict harm on the living (Mashau 2007, p. 637). However, not only are the ancestors able to inflict harm on the living, but they can also protect a person from his/her enemies. It should be noted that many Africans are afraid of attacks by evil spirits and witchcraft; hence, in dealing with this practical challenge of evil and misfortunes in their lives, they seek protection from their ancestors who are better placed to deal with spiritual matters. The ritual serves as an instrument to connect with one’s ancestors.

However, as highlighted in the introduction, despite its longstanding tradition, the practice of unveiling tombstones is perceived negatively among Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians in South Africa; this will be discussed in the section below.

## 6. Unveiling Tombstones in Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches

Pentecostal and Charismatic churches should be understood in the context of South African Pentecostalism, which forms part of the fastest-growing Pentecostal movement across the globe. Allan Anderson, a leading theologian and historian in African and global Pentecostalism, has categorised South African Pentecostalism into three main streams (see Anderson 1992; Mashau 2013), namely: Pentecostal Mission churches or classical Pentecostalism (Anderson 2002, p. 167; cf. Frahm-Arp 2010), the African initiated Pentecostal churches (Anderson 2005, p. 66), and the Charismatic churches. In this article, the discussion of the unveiling of tombstones focuses on the way PCCs in Southern Africa generally regard this practice. The position of these churches on the unveiling of tombstones is pivotal to understand their pronouncements on the practice and other similar rituals.

## 7. Pronouncements on Unveiling Tombstones within Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches

Writing in the context of PCCs in Zimbabwe, Nhengu (2020, p. 257) noted that: “The AFM missionaries who arrived in Zimbabwe in 1915 exuded colonial superiority over



African indigenous beliefs and epistemologies in their churches". This applies to issues around death, burial rites and the unveiling of tombstones. This view is well-recorded and expressed in the writings of several Pentecostal scholars (Anderson 1993; Zwana 2008; Togarasei and Chitando 2005). Thabang Mofokeng (2018, p. 121) opines that the early black pastors (1908–1940) in the AFM supported the unveiling of tombstones but later (1975–present) opposed the practice as ancestral worship. This, according to Mofokeng, came because of a Western influence in the AFM that caused what he described as "Afro-Western" practice that is "opposed to traditional religious practices" (Mofokeng 2018, p. 121). Therefore, over the years the practice of unveiling tombstones in the AFM has mixed feelings, where some view it as a remembrance of the dead, but others as ancestral worship. Given this debate on the issue, the AFM of South Africa (2017) has pronounced itself through an official statement on unveiling tombstones:

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

The pronouncement by the AFM of South Africa traces the practice back to biblical times. The church is clear that when the practice relates to ancestral worship, it should be discouraged. However, the question remains: what if the practice has nothing to do with ancestral worship? While the AFM of South Africa leaves that open, their fellow church, the AFM in Zimbabwe is adamant that the practice should be avoided at all times. Robert Matikiti (2017, p. 138), a lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe, states clearly that the unveiling of tombstones is prohibited in the AFM in Zimbabwe:

"There is no tombstone unveiling for the dead members of the AFM. The church regards such ceremonies as the heathenisation of Christianity".

Based on the foregoing, Nhengu (2020, p. 279) was led to conclude that: "The AFM shared similarities with the colonialists in that they regarded the Africans as inferior and their religion as demonic, primitive, fetish, magic, barbaric and witchcraft".

The Assemblies of God (AOG) in South Africa has not officially made a pronouncement on the unveiling of the tombstones but Kelebogile Resane, a researcher at the University of Free State (South Africa) who has been conducting research in the church said that the AOG has left the issue to the specific family to conduct the ceremony on their own.<sup>1</sup> The position of the AOG in South Africa suggests that even though the church does not prohibit its members from unveiling tombstones, the pastors and leaders do not want to be part of it possibly for similar reasons of perceiving the practice as ancestral worship. The Full Gospel Church (FGC) has also not made an official pronouncement on the unveiling of tombstones. However, Pastor Tshifango, the pastor of the FGC in Phalaborwa, South Africa, who has been a pastor for more than 22 years, said that he does not unveil tombstones. In addition, he added that they received a circular as pastors of the FGC not to conduct the ceremony of unveiling tombstones. However, Pastor Tshifango, cautioned that it is not the practice itself that is wrong but how it is carried out. He then admitted that if there could be a proper Christian way of conducting the ceremony, he would see nothing wrong about the unveiling of tombstones. Tshifango further said that the balance between the unveiling of tombstones by Africans and the Christian practices will win many people to their church.<sup>2</sup>

## 8. Attitudes towards the Unveiling of Tombstones within Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches

The practice of rituals, such as the unveiling of tombstones, evokes mixed feelings, and attitudes towards it cannot be generalised as these differ from one stream of Pentecostalism to the other (Anderson 1992, p. 37). However, Anderson is very clear in saying that most

members of classical Pentecostal churches demonise the practice of unveiling tombstones and call ancestors evil spirits (Anderson 1992, p. 32; cf. Anderson 2006, p. 116). Anderson continues by saying that most members of the AFM of South Africa do not believe in the practice, which is confirmed by the pronouncement cited above (Anderson 1992, p. 32). Solomon Zwana (2008, p. 37) adds that this type of church discourages the practice and sees it as unnecessary after one is born again. Kollman (2010, p. 118) reiterates that, unlike many other African Christians who practice the unveiling of tombstones, most Pentecostals regard it as evil. The practice of unveiling tombstones among South African Pentecostals has been discouraged among the youth and the new converts to Pentecostalism with most of them in turn discouraging the old people from keeping the practice (Togarasei and Chitando 2005). Frahm-Arp (2010) conducted research at Grace Bible Church in Soweto, South Africa, that can be categorised as a newer PPC, and found that the church also demonised the practice. This church also pronounced that Africa was a dark continent because of such practices and rituals. The negative and unwelcoming attitude of the unveiling of tombstones among modern PPCs was further compounded by the need for new life and total separation with the ungodly and demonic past. Engelke (2010, p. 177) opines that: “For many such Christians breaking with the past means renouncing one’s ancestral spirits, one’s extended family, and even, in some cases, one’s closest kin”. This argument is tied with the need to break away from generational curses. In this instance, African traditional practices, such as unveiling of the tombstones are therefore linked to demon possession (see Engelke 2010, p. 177).

### 9. Unveiling Tombstones in Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches: Worship or Commemoration?

There is a distinction between erecting and unveiling tombstones as an ancestral worship ritual and as ancestral commemoration. When is erecting and unveiling a tombstone to be classified as an ancestral commemoration and when as ancestral veneration? Commemoration, in simple terms, just means to remember someone, to recognise or honour them. Therefore, ancestral commemoration means the same: to recognise, remember and honour someone who has passed away. There are biblical examples (see Exodus 3:6, 15–16 cf. Matthew 22:32) where God told the children of Israel to remember Him as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This notion is also repeated in 2 Kings 2:14 when Elisha took Elijah’s mantle and asked, where is the God of Elijah? He was not necessarily worshipping Elijah but remembering the God of Elijah. The remembrance of those who have already departed, especially about the God they served, should not be confused with ancestral worship. Therefore, when one erects a tombstone as a memorial for the next generation, it can be seen as a commemoration. Anderson (2018, p. 86) explains:

Ancestors’ graves must be well looked after, and it is important to erect tombstones in the deceased’s honour, for this will help perpetuate their memory. These practices are not too different from practices in the West, like the erection of tombstones to perpetuate the memory and the regular laying of flowers at a grave. Indeed, they express the universal human respect for the “good” deceased and the desire to perpetuate the memory of loved ones.

According to Maimela (1985, p. 72), while some erect a tombstone for appeasing the spirits, the church should do so in remembrance of God’s good deeds throughout their lives. In addition, Maimela argues that the church should not see anything wrong with the erection and unveiling of a tombstone if it is carried out only in respect of the deceased and in remembrance of the deceased by future generations. Moreover, while the service of burial is performed in mourning the loss of the deceased, the ceremony of unveiling the tombstone is a more celebratory one to remember the deceased (Maboea 1999, p. 24). The unveiling ceremony, as a family gathering, can bring the members of the family and other relatives together in unity (Maboea 1999, p. 125). While it is true that the African religion practitioners go to the graves to worship ancestors during the ceremony, Christians can reverse this by going there only to remember their loved ones and for paying their last

respects. It is also important for future generations to remember what the deceased did for their family and the community (Maboea 1999, p. 157). Togarasei and Chitando (2005, p. 165) clearly state that Christians should not see the graveyard as a place of worship but only worship the almighty God.

Therefore, it seems that in condemning the unveiling of tombstones as ancestral worship, the PPCs are not open to engage in a fruitful dialogue that seeks to distinguish between ancestral worship and ancestral commemoration. Mashau and Ngcobo (2016, p. 46) argue that only when this distinction is made can the ritual be a possibility of commemorating the ancestors without worshipping them and this is what they said:

Commemoration and celebration of the contribution made by those who have gone ahead of us must form an integrative part of our interpretation and application of the concept “communion of the saints” without our revering or worshipping those saints.

They further point out that disapproval of ancestral worship should be made with a clear acknowledgment of the role of ancestry within African traditional and cultural practices (Mashau and Ngcobo 2016, p. 47). This should be observed with the realisation that ancestors deserve to be well respected, but in African Christianity, they should not be worshipped as God alone deserves to be worshipped (Mashau and Ngcobo 2016, p. 47). Khathide (2006, p. 316) adds, “ancestors by their status of not being ‘gods’, have never been and cannot be, worshipped or given the same status as God or the Supreme Being”. Ancestors are honoured and even commemorated but they are not worshipped. Any worship that is not directed to God Almighty results in idol worship; in our view, this is where many have failed to draw the line. Thus, an ancestor should never take the place of God in the life of the believer and should not be feared but acknowledged. The issue should always be approached in two antithetical ways: according to Nel, the ancestors need to be respected, but their worship should be rejected (Nel 2019).

Now that the question of commemoration has been discussed, the next one is, when does the erection and unveiling of tombstones become ancestral worship? Worship means to love and adoration expressed towards a deity. Therefore, ancestral worship becomes possible when there is an expression of love and adoration towards ancestors, as a replacement for a deity or God. According to Khathide, ancestral worship only becomes possible when there are sacrifices offered to the ancestors (Khathide 2006, p. 315). At such a ritual ceremony, according to Khathide (2006, p. 315) “there can be no doubt that the ancestors are invoked; they are the addressees of these prayers and the invocation of God is missing”. Secondary to the sacrifices is the direct prayer offered to the ancestors whereby Africans see them as collaborating with God to bring solutions to the people (Khathide 2006, p. 315). Hence, according to Khathide (2006, p. 314), those who conduct such ritual sacrifices have a propensity of saying that “they are praying to God and their ancestors”. In this way, people end up relying on their ancestors instead of relying on God for provision. The confusion between ancestral worship and ancestral commemoration in the context of erecting and unveiling tombstones calls for a rethinking of African Christian practice in decoloniality which is what we will discuss below.

## 10. Decolonial Conversation between African Christianity and African Traditional Culture and Practice

A decolonial conversation between African Christianity and African traditional religious and cultural practices is an effort to move beyond the existing dichotomy and the ongoing creative tension between ancestral worship or commemoration in the act of erecting and unveiling of tombstones by African families and churches. This discourse will unearth numerous layers underlying elements of continuity and discontinuity with regards to the unveiling of the tombstones, either from an African traditional or Christian perspectives, as advocated by the PCCs.

First, we need to resolve a hermeneutic problem that was created by the first Christian missionaries when influencing African Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians to reject the



unveiling of tombstones as demonic. Thus a hermeneutic of suspicion needs to be discarded in favour of discernment. As children of their times, some Western missionaries had two fundamental flaws in their hermeneutical approach to the Scriptures when mediating the Christian faith to Africans. On the one hand, they found nothing positive in the African Traditional religions which could be regarded as playing any useful role in God's redemptive plan of all of humankind, and on the other hand, they often used Scripture selectively to prove that God was beyond the reach of Africans (Maimela 1985, p. 72). The application of this hermeneutic of suspicion led to a flawed praxis regarding the relationship between Christianity and the African tradition religion and culture. There was lack of critical dialogue on matters, such as death rites and unveiling of tombstones. Some Christians in Africa, including PCCs, as influenced by Western missionaries, rejected the unveiling of tombstones as unchristian practice, as already noted.

If the hermeneutic of discernment is properly applied (the need to discern the spirits, John 4:1), a decolonised and Africanised approach to the unveiling of tombstones among African Christians, including Pentecostals and other different traditions, would encourage open dialogue. It is noted that: "[D]iscernment implies that we need to make a clear distinction between a biblical spirituality and the uncritical accommodation or assimilation of the phenomena of African spiritualities" (Knoetze 2019, p. 5). Such an encounter should be guided by the need to search for the truth and to be challenged by what others have to offer. Trying to make sense of this kind of dialogue, Simon Maimela (1985, p. 72) opines, "For that reason, Christians do not have all the answers wrapped up in their pockets but can learn some (not necessarily all) truth about God's creative and redemptive dynamics from the diversity of religious traditions and be challenged into the greater search for truth".

Second, it is a praxis matter. Matters of dis/continuity in the encounter between Christianity and African traditional religious practices and culture were never dealt with more satisfactorily. Everything African was in a way demonized and considered to be pagan practices that could never be redeemed, as already noted. Mashau and Ngcobo (2016, p. 35) assert, "Missionaries, in the colonial era, branded the primal religion(s) as being backward and evil. Western missionaries marginalised virtually everything that had to do with the traditional African worldview". Anderson (2018) explains that African Pentecostalism is not always in continuity with the African traditional religious practices and culture. At times, African Pentecostalism is in discontinuity with these practices, hence a need to talk about both continuity and discontinuity. For example, instead of demonizing African ancestors as demonic, the use of ancestors as intermediaries between God and humanity (Knoetze 2019, p. 3) should be discontinued because Jesus Christ is not only "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6) in Christianity, but also the only mediator between God and humanity (1 Timothy 2:5). However, reference to African ancestors and their witness in terms of their good memories, including their faith in God, should be welcomed by African Christians from all traditions, including PCCs. In this instance, Christians can in the process be stretched to rethink their understanding of God and how they should relate to him regarding certain traditional practices, such as the unveiling of tombstones. For instance, they can consider its significance in preserving family history, celebrating the witness of the deceased in terms of the beautiful memories left behind, and maintaining peace and unity with the notion of the African community which is embedded in the spirit and theology of *ubuntu* (see Mashau and Kgatle 2019).

Third, unfaithfulness and an inability to apply a hermeneutic of discernment by converts to Christianity today. In other words, African Christians, in general, and African PCCs, in particular, should be able to discern, using Scriptures as a measure, as already noted, the relevant practice with regards to the unveiling of tombstones. In this instance, issues around the "pre" and "after" consultation with ancestors, as facilitated by traditional diviners, should be rejected as part of ancestral cult that necessitates discontinuity. This includes practices where ancestors are offered sacrifices to appease them or to buy favours or blessings from them. However, if a memorial is held to celebrate the life of the departed relative without the fore-mentioned rituals of trying to communicate to them or appease

them, Christians from PCCs can participate without contradicting their faith. Consequently, change is needed concerning the optics we wear on matters involving African traditional religious practices and culture. Not everything in Africa is inherently evil. Some elements are evil, and when the hermeneutics of discernment and naked truth is applied, some evil elements in the unveiling of tombstones will be discontinued while others will be redeemed to a level of avoiding betrayal, confrontation, and contradiction to the gospel message on this matter. Thus, a memorial of ancestors will be welcomed while any form of ancestral worship will remain condemned. Regarding the matter of the unveiling of tombstones, Christians in Africa should therefore avoid hermeneutics of gullibility (accepting everything without questioning), suspicion (looking at every African unveiling of tombstones with suspicion) and judgement (judging every such African practice as demonic and evil).

Fourth, among African people, there is often a misunderstanding of salvation and disconnection with a powerless faith, especially in dealing with evil and misfortunes in their daily lives. Simon Maimela (1985, p. 72) talks about a “split-personality in the African soul” where the African traditional religious beliefs and the Christian faith are often allowed to go hand in hand. These syncretistic tendencies among African Christians are caused by how they perceive the two religions—they regard African traditional religions as meeting real needs in a “real” way by producing salvation for social ills, evil spirits and witchcraft, while Christianity is looked upon to provide salvation for the hereafter (Maimela 1985, p. 72). In this regard Zwana (2008, p. 38) talks about the inability of Christianity to satisfy African spirituality. However, African Pentecostalism is important in this regard as they can link the challenges of evil and misfortunes to the spirit world in the same way African traditional religions do but use the power of the Holy Spirit to confront the same challenges (Anderson 2018).

Christians in Africa should render themselves vulnerable as they encounter adherents of African traditional religious practices and culture on matters of death, burial, the erection and unveiling of tombstones and all of the rituals associated with these practices. Christ should be communicated as both Saviour and Lord—one whose sovereignty empowers those who are saved to face life challenges, including evil spirits, witchcraft and misfortunes, so that they will emerge victorious by the power of the same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead (Romans 6:10–11). Therefore, Bergit Meyer (1998, p. 316) is correct in calling out the need for local cultures in Africa to be rescued from Westernization by encouraging a constructive dialogue with African Christianity. Instead of being cautious, Christians in Africa have a responsibility to redeem the practice of the unveiling of tombstones by proposing a missional and liturgical praxis that drives away fear and promotes family unity in sharing redeeming memories of the deceased and commemorating those who have gone ahead of us without worshipping them.

## 11. Conclusions

In conclusion, through a decolonial discourse, there is a need to engage critically the practice of erecting and unveiling tombstones in Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. This engagement should establish a creative balance in terms of (dis)continuity of certain African traditional and cultural practices with regards to the unveiling of the tombstones. This must be carried out in the light of the Scriptures and the practical examples from which we can draw some lessons. In ancient times the practice was performed to mark the grave to remember its geographical location and in respect of the deceased. Practices where African people erect tombstones in order to venerate their ancestors must be discouraged and discontinued because it constitutes idolatry. It should be noted that where ancestral worship and ancestral commemoration overlap, it creates confusion and therefore must not be embraced by Pentecostal and Charismatic churches.

However, in order to create a biblically acceptable practice regarding the unveiling of tombstones, this article identified a need to resolve a hermeneutic problem that was created by the first Christian missionaries. It is important to un-demonise the African traditional and cultural practices that do not contradict the Biblical practices and to contextualise

Scriptures on issues of death and associated rituals, including the unveiling of tombstones, in a liberating way. Therefore, a hermeneutic of discernment must always be applied to determine elements of dis/continuity in the practice of the unveiling of tombstones among PCCs and other Christian traditions in Africa.

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- <sup>1</sup> The discussion was made through a cellphone call between the Author and Kelebogile Resane on 4 November 2020.
- <sup>2</sup> The discussion was carried out through a cellphone call between the Author and Pastor Tshifango on 4 November 2020.

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