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The Role of Ancestors and Living-Dead in the Life of Kenyan Christians

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1. Introduction

1.1. The African Worldview

According to African understanding, there is a close relation between the visible and the invisible world. They are connected so closely together that we can describe the African worldview as mono-sectional. The deceased don't leave the living but are always present, whether it is for good or for bad. Death is interpreted as a rite of passage to the ancestral level.

There are many ways of interaction. The ancestors are guardians of the tradition and intermediaries between God and the community. They bless and protect. If the community or individuals break the moral law, ancestors punish to remind the living of their duties. But this intervention is for good because it has an educational purpose.

Ancestors who have died recently are called the living-dead. They visit the community in dreams and visions and give specific orders. Naming of children is a common reason why the living-dead speak to a family member. The names of the deceased contain their good character which will be passed on to the next generation. Wrong naming causes sickness or even death. Without naming, the child is not part of the community; it is not considered a human being. To become a living-dead and an ancestor, one must have been a role model in the community.

In the African universe, there are evil forces, too. It is believed that evil human spirits haunt the living. This applies to those who have lived a bad life, suicides, babies not yet named or ancestors not buried properly. They live in rivers, trees, rocks or close to their grave. If a misfortune happens – a disease, an unexpected death, an accident, or even unemployment – people try to interpret it as a message from the ancestors. If no transgression can be found, it might be that an evil spirit haunts the community, or a witch is at work. Diviners are the spiritual leaders to reveal the cause of a misfortune and give indications how to restore the harmonious order.

1.2. The Arrival of Christianity in Africa

The Christian missionaries of the 19th century presented to the Africans a new worldview that is not mono-sectional. The visible world is clearly separated from the invisible world,

and after death there are heaven and hell. The spiritual world (God, angels, demons or the devil) can interact with people, but the role of African ancestors is unknown to Christianity. However, there are some similarities to the communion of saints as will be discussed later. The main actor in Christianity is God who gives or destroys life. It is he who blesses or punishes. The African converts learned further that their ancestors had little or no chance to be in heaven or to act as intermediaries to the living. Concerning the curses of evil spirits, the missionaries regarded these experiences as imagination and superstition. The converts were left alone with their fears.

But the missionaries didn't just come with the biblical teaching of the spiritual world. They were influenced by rationalism and a scientific worldview that could not understand the African holistic experience of the mystery of life. For the missionaries, life was divided into sacred and profane. For the African, everything was (and often is) interrelated and has a religious meaning.

This alienation has accelerated in the 20th century through Western liberal theologies which have demythologized the Christian biblical heritage. In this stream of thinking, there is no room for ancestral curses or visits from living-dead, as well as rational interpretations don't believe in the existence of supernatural faith healing or deliverance prayer to cast out demons.

In August 2005, I participated at a course about the challenge of inculturation. An Anglican professor said that African Christians "don't own their faith yet". They feel more like guests in the Christian house and not like "fellow citizens of the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph 2:19) as the apostle Paul wrote to gentile Christians. When problems arise, many African Christians consult diviners or make sacrifices to the ancestors. This is never openly acknowledged. But all churches that were founded by missionaries are aware of this fact. The situation is different among African Independent Churches (AICs) because they integrate more easily the African heritage.

1.3. Objective and Methodology

In this study, I will present how today's Christians have integrated or modified in their personal faith the African worldview as it is explained in the introduction. What long-term impact has the mission that introduced first 19th century European Christianity and later modern theologies in Africa? Are African beliefs assimilated, ignored or rejected?

The principal source for this paper is the field research as it is documented in the appendix. My informants are Kenyan Christians who live in or close to Nairobi except two from Western Province. I spoke with Pentecostals, Catholics, Adventists and members of African Independent Churches. All informants agree on the basic Christian beliefs of the Trinity, the incarnation, the saving sacrifice of Jesus and his resurrection. They were open to share their faith and gave me the impression that all are identified with their church.

The literature review covers the theological debate on the African worldview and deepens the issues arising from the research.

The conclusion summarizes cultural patterns that have emerged in my research and gives a theological answer concerning the encounters with living-dead in the light of the communion of saints and concerning an appropriate inculturation of the Gospel in Africa.

2. Field Research

2.1. Relations with the Ancestors and the Living-Dead

The first part of the field research presents opinions about the relation between the living and the deceased. Most of my informants have had contacts with the living-dead, their recently deceased family members. But the interpretation of what this means differs considerably. There are those who see it as the normal way of interaction between humans. Others interpret it as a bad omen.

2.1.1. Pentecostals

One Pentecostal who has been visited by his deceased relatives believes that every living-dead, whether Christian or not, has the right to come and give orders, for example to name a child (app.: research no. 3, 1/10/2005). Like most Pentecostals, he believes that only explicitly born-again Christians are saved. That means that his African ancestors, except those who have been converted, are all lost. In spite of that, they pass on their good character through naming while they themselves remain in hell.

In a similar conversation, another Pentecostal affirmed that children who are named after condemned ancestors inherit their good character (app.: no. 1, 8/9/2005). He also gave me an example to prove that naming works: He never met a person who is called Emmanuel with a

bad character because it is a name of Jesus. My informant is member of a church where they “exactly believe what is written in the bible”. He is not aware how deep he is rooted in the traditional African belief system. Although naming is o.k., we are not allowed to be in contact with any deceased person, including Christians. He is not sure where the spirit of a Christian stays after death. The unsaved souls live near the grave. When spirits visit the house, they have to be bonded and cast away through prayer.

A third Pentecostal has been visited by her deceased Christian uncle in a dream (app.: no. 1). She believes that this is the normal way to stay in touch but is not sure if this also applies to non-Christian living-dead.

Her view is shared by a prophet-diviner who also believes that we are in contact with the saved ancestors (app.: no. 2, 17/9/2005). Similar to African Religion, they visit us and pray for us, and we pray to them. Contact to non-Christian ancestors is not allowed. But it is possible to name after any ancestor, whether saved or not, because the traditional clan system remains important for Africans.

I interviewed a Pentecostal theologian who interprets the visits of living-dead as an imagination (app.: no. 8, 12/10/2005). In contrast to the other Pentecostals, he believes further that the non-Christian ancestors in Africa have a chance to be saved. Those who didn't hear the Gospel and couldn't reject it will be judged according to their response to the moral law written in their hearts (cf. Rm 2:14-16). The reason why the living-dead can't come is because humans in heaven and on earth are separated until God unites them at the end of time. If it is not imagination, it is the devil who disguises himself. But bad human spirits can haunt the living. According to the theologian, this is the main difference to Western Pentecostals who acknowledge only the presence of demons, fallen angels. The curse of human spirits is part of the African experience since time immemorial and, if the churches want to be meaningful to their members, they have to address this issue.

I asked him why there can be a contact with evil human spirits but not with the good ones. He admitted that African Pentecostals are in a dilemma. From their Western missionaries they were told that there are neither good nor bad spirits around us. They are either in heaven or in hell, and there is absolutely no contact with any of them. But the African experience is so strong that the belief in evil human spirits has entered into most of the Pentecostal churches. In the question of the living-dead, protestant orthodoxy prevails in many cases. But in the end, the bible is not very clear on that issue, and my informant is open for a more African approach in Pentecostal churches that would confess a fraternal communion with the living-dead.

2.1.2. African Independent Churches

I interviewed the theological director from the Organization of African Instituted Churches – more commonly referred to as African Independent Churches – that represents around 200 AICs in East Africa (app.: no. 10, 27/10/2005). The aim of the organization is to train the churches theologically. AICs are known for their openness to integrate the African worldview into Christianity. They split away from mainline protestant churches, and some from the Catholic Church, because the members felt alienated from their African origin. The director is very open to the African concept of ancestors and living-dead. Some deceased relatives have visited him. They greet and bless, make requests or give prayer orders.

A pastor of the Holy Spirit Israel Church, an AIC in Nairobi, has a contrary opinion (app.: no. 6, 8/10/2005). The living-dead, whether Christian or not, have to be chased away when they come. We are not allowed to name children after them, only after biblical persons. There is no character inheritance, what brings him close to the Catholic model to choose names of Christian saints in order to imitate them. Although the pastor rejects the positive influence of naming, he believes that it has a negative one if the name of an unsaved person is used. This spirit can possess the child and cause a lot of problems.

The two testimonies of AIC representatives indicate the wide spectrum of different opinions among these churches. Since there is no instituted doctrinal authority, every church has its own approach to integrate African beliefs in the Christian tradition.

2.1.3. Catholics

I interviewed an old Catholic couple living in a village in Western Province who have repeatedly received visits of living-dead in dreams (app.: no. 4, 2/10/2005). The deceased give orders to pay their debts or to name children after them. The living-dead belong to the family of God. In the past, upright non-Christians entered this family if they didn't know about Jesus Christ and therefore weren't able to accept him. But not all are saved. These are the evil human spirits who haunt the people. Traditional religion locates them close to graves or other places. The husband believes that they are coming from hell.

A Catholic charismatic priest explained me that the experiences with ancestral spirits are in reality contacts with demons (app.: no. 11, 6/11/2005). They have the power to disguise themselves and appear in the form of deceased relatives. If, for example, a diviner is possessed and speaks with the voice of a known relative, it is in reality a demon imitating the person. Usually, demons demand sacrifices through the command of the diviner. This is a sign that they draw people away from God. Therefore, African Christians should trust alone

in the sacrifice of Jesus, who has liberated humankind once and for all. Ancestors have no right to conduct our lives. Asking about the frequently reported visits of the living-dead, the priest doesn't exclude the possibility that those who have died in the grace of God might be sent for a specific purpose. But the African ancestors should never be invoked to bless us or to name a child. If they are not saved, people unknowingly invite demons in their life. To be on the safe side, it is advisable only to pray to the officially canonized saints of the Church. They don't draw us away from God but bring us in his presence.

Again, just two Catholic witnesses demonstrate how different the supernatural world is perceived in the same church.

2.1.4. Seventh Day Adventists

The Seventh Day Adventists are convinced that all humans sleep in their graves until Jesus returns. Therefore, there are no visits of the living-dead or of evil human spirits.

I spoke with an Adventist who is professor of Religious Sciences (app.: no. 7, 9/10/2005). Her mother, to whom she feels a strong affection, passed away a few months ago and appeared in dreams. But she interprets it as an imagination. Nevertheless, the respect to the ancestors requires obedience to them because Jesus promotes relationships. This is not in contrast to obeying God and to the teaching that they are sleeping. Ancestors are role models. Therefore, God wants us to follow them.

The impact of the living-dead and the ancestors in the life of Africans is strong. The professor also feels this impact and interprets that the good or bad deeds follow us after death and have an effect on the community. But not the ancestral spirits are alive. What we perceive are forces inherent in nature which were planted by humans before dying. Naming means remembrance, not character inheritance.

My informant interprets her experience with an intellectual Adventist theology. Others may not be all in line with their church teaching. I interviewed an Adventist who believes in the existence of ancestral spirits and has named his children accordingly (app.: no. 1). He has done this in secret because his local church prohibits it.

2.2. Blessing and Curses from the Ancestors

The second part of the field research is linked to the power of ancestors in the lives of Africans. Can they bless and punish?

One extreme is the opinion that only God has power (app.: no. 8). If we say that ancestors bless, it is God in reality who blesses our obedience to follow their example.

The other extreme is the plain acknowledgement that God has given them power to intervene in our lives (app.: no. 10). God has given the ancestors power because he wants us to be in relation with them. It is a common experience in Africa that wrongly named children get sick or die. This proves the authority of ancestors, and we have to follow their instructions.

In between these two opinions is the experience of the AIC pastor (app.: no. 6). He is convinced that there is only God who is acting. But this is valid only for those who have a strong faith. For non-Christians or for those with a weak faith, the ancestors are powerful realities. The pastor has the gift of healing. But it doesn't work if the patient is bound by traditional believes. For example, if the person has broken a taboo and has been struck with a sickness, the pastor sends him to a traditional diviner who makes a libation to the ancestors. This heals the patient. Only the person who lives in the mindset where taboos exist can commit taboo breaks. An outsider who does the same thing can't be affected. This example demonstrates well how African Christians are torn between the two worldviews. The supernatural world seems to be divided into a Christian heaven and an African ancestral place.

A Catholic sister told me that her dying grandfather had cursed the family because the husband of her aunt didn't pay the full bridewealth (app.: no. 5, 6/10/2005). Within a few months, the husband's aunt, their daughter, a cousin and finally the aunt died. The people in the village who are mainly Christians are convinced that it is the power of the curse. Officially, the Catholic Church dismisses superstition and interprets it as a coincidence. But the sister believes that Christians should integrate the traditional view and reconcile curses by faith. We have to evangelize the curses instead of ignoring them.

In my conversation with the Adventist professor, I asked her opinion on that case. Again, she offered a rational explanation without denying what has happened. A curse has power not because of the words, but if there is a reason behind it, nature itself carries out the curse. The power is inherent in nature. A false curse would have no effect. That means that the grandfather had said the right thing. The professor can't escape the mystery behind the event. She doesn't expect that the grandfather's spirit is acting, but how can nature execute punishments in moral issues? Nature would have to be personalized or has to receive from somebody directive orders.

2.3. Experiences with Evil Spirits

The third part of the field research presents beliefs about evil spirits. Their influence is feared deeply in the African society. In AICs and Pentecostal churches, there are frequent disturbances or possessions by evil spirits (app.: no. 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 10). Pastors emphasize the importance of faith in the power of Jesus to chase them away. But often, these spirits are so strong that many churches have developed a healing ministry of deliverance. When Christians don't find spiritual guidance, or when Christian prayers don't help, a lot seek help at traditional diviners. In the past, mission churches were ignorant of the double life of their believers. Today, there is a greater awareness of the need to address this issue.

The Catholic husband told me of a deceased cousin who was possessed (app.: no. 4). The spirit demanded to eat six goats, but the family only had sheep. They decided to slaughter them, but the spirit remained insisting on the goats and tormented the cousin. Then they brought her to the priest who expelled the spirit through prayer.

One of my Pentecostal informants lives in an area where there is a possessed house which has been abandoned for this reason (app.: no. 1). People hear the spirit roaming during night.

The prophet-diviner is battling with evil spirits when she prays for deliverance. She feels their presence around (app.: no. 2).

During a Pentecostal worship service, I listened to a dream of a boy that was interpreted by the pastor (app.: no. 12): The boy and two of his friends were in a house with monsters. His friends each killed one but the boy didn't want to. The interpretation was that it is the negative influence of his grandfather who was a murderer and after whom the boy is named. Now, the boy has to be liberated. It was not proposed to change the boy's name. But the influence of deceased relatives is significant if their sins can disturb our lives.

2.4. Consultation of Diviners

Most of my informants reject the practice of divination because it operates with non-Christian powers. The Catholic husband knows of parishioners who consult diviners secretly, but he rejects this totally. We must only trust in God. But he concedes that Christians are allowed to go to herbalists since they use natural methods that don't involve mystical powers. The prophet-diviner, who gives herself the name "Christian diviner", works with the power of the Holy Spirit and is convinced that traditional diviners are possessed by gins, the evil

spirits that were introduced by Islam in Kenya (app.: no. 2). The AIC pastor also believes that diviners are using gins or ancestors, but he is more tolerant to cooperate with them if it helps the client (app.: no. 6). The Catholic priest explains that the sacrifice of Jesus is all-powerful and enough to help us (cf. Heb 10). A diviner can't give us more than Jesus. He recommends celebrating the Eucharist (app.: no. 11; similar no. 8).

The theological director has a different opinion (app.: no. 10). God was not absent before Christianity arrived in Africa. The diviners had an important role in the community and, if they counsel the people well, there is no contradiction to the Christian faith.

2.5. The Legio Maria Church

I conclude this chapter with a report about the Legio Maria Church (app.: no. 9, 23/10/2005). It is mainly an ethnic church among the Luo. They separated from the Catholics in the 1960s and still use the pre-Vatican order of the mass in Latin, although God reveals himself to them in Luo language – even to those members who don't understand the language. Supposedly, Jesus and his mother Mary descended from heaven in the 20th century as the Black Messiah and the Black Mary to present the Gospel to Africans.

The catechist explained to me that they have the same belief as Catholics. The only additions are healing and prophesy. Like some of the oriental churches, people walk barefoot within the compound of the parish. After the mass, we were blessed with healing water. Then we gathered around a white cross in the courtyard. Consecrated healers – men and women, dressed in green – were praying for the sick individually after listening to their confession of sins. Prophets, dressed in purple, drew inspired lines with a pen on small pieces of paper. Others were gifted to interpret these writings.

The Legio Maria members are missing in the Western churches an African way of relating to the supernatural world. The myth of the Black Messiah is an obvious rejection of the “white gospel” brought by the missionaries. The elements of deliverance and prophecy are similar to traditional practices of diviners, for example the confession of sins and the writing of unidentifiable lines, inspired by the Spirit. I witnessed how a woman who supposedly was possessed by a spirit was tamed with a plastic rosary. It was put around her neck and kept her down as if it had a great weight.

The Legio Maria Church makes no clear difference between demonic possession and ancestral curses or witchcraft. The African demons are not primarily fallen angels but human

beings: ancestral spirits or witches. Similar to the function of the traditional diviner, specially gifted healers are needed to deliver the victims.

2.6. Summary

The African worldview remains relevant to African Christians. One result of my research is that none of the informants follows modern theologies that reject the interaction between the supernatural and the visible world. It seems that Africans are immune to the presumptions of liberal exegesis.

The picture is more diverse when African Christians express their opinion on how the supernatural world interacts with our lives. African traditional and biblical elements are mixed together in every possible combination. There is no common guideline of interpretation, even among Christians of the same denomination. The different and often confusing beliefs about ancestral spirits and the living-dead can be summarized as follows:

- 1) There are no ancestral spirits around us. (Adventists)
- 2) There are ancestral spirits visiting us but no contact is allowed. (AIC and Pentecostals)
- 3) There are ancestral spirits visiting us but only contact with the Christian ones is allowed. (Catholics and Pentecostals)
- 4) There are only evil spirits visiting us; encounters with Christian ancestral spirits are imagination or with the devil. (Pentecostals)
- 5) There are only Christian ancestral spirits visiting us; other encounters are with demons. It is better to believe only apparitions of canonized saints. (Catholics)
- 6) We are in communion with our ancestral spirits; all who have been role models and are now in God's presence. They respond to our actions with blessing or correction according to the African tradition. (AIC)

3. Literature Review

3.1. The Resilience of the African Worldview

Various theologians affirm that an African Christian Theology has to consider seriously the spiritual worldview of the believers. I gave a summary of the basic elements in the

introduction. J.N.K. Mugambi notes: “World-views tend to be so resilient that they will re-emerge after many centuries of suppression... The epistemological foundation of every culture is its basic world-view. All other layers of a culture may be seriously damaged through conquest or internal disruption, but the foundation is likely to remain intact.” (Mugambi, 2002, p. 116) African converts who accept the Christian doctrine usually continue to live in a mono-sectional world. In this perception, a dying person doesn’t go to another world but changes merely its physical mode of existence to a spiritual one (cf. *ibid.* p. 51).

Osadolor Imasogie describes the impact of traditional beliefs on Christians and answers to those who think that the African worldview has passed away because of Western influence: “[S]uch people are living in an ivory tower and are out of touch with African ways of thinking and perceiving. It may be good for them to come down to where the action is and mix with the people to learn the truth from them. The experience of a typical African pastor who sits where his parishioners sit during the weekdays is that the world view described here is very much alive today.” (Imasogie, 1993, p. 69-70) He doesn’t want to defend or revitalize African beliefs but wants to bring them to a conscious level to deal with them. “A psychiatrist does not dismiss his client’s anxiety as irrational even when he personally feels it to be so.” (*ibid.* p. 70) To be relevant to a particular people, theologians have to understand their self-understanding. This is the unison appeal from Mugambi and Imasogie.

According to Mugambi, the African worldview should be appreciated and the Gospel communicated in terms which the people can understand (cf. Mugambi, 2002, p. 52). Christianity can be inculturated in a mono-sectional worldview as it can enter any other culture. He argues that the biblical worldview is not part of the Christian revelation – which is only the person of Jesus Christ – but its vehicle. The Gospel will eventually transform a culture from within.

Imasogie takes a similar approach: African believers are free to modify their worldview, especially those aspects that cause anxieties, the more they understand the meaning of Christ and his liberating power. This does not lead to a Western way of thinking but to a biblical understanding of the reality. Often, African Christians have identified the Gospel wrongly with Western culture and theology. Imasogie is convinced that the African worldview is much closer to the New Testament church perception than today’s Western theologians (cf. Imasogie, 1993, p. 52.65-66). He quotes Paul: “Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Eph 6:12) For Africans, this is their daily experience; for most Western Christians, it is very far from their

perception. Below, I will present his three guidelines for an African Christian Theology that address this experience in a meaningful way.

3.2. The Popularity of African Independent Churches and Religious Movements

Independent of the conclusion that is drawn above, one fact is clear: The rejection and incomprehension of local customs and beliefs by the missionaries have caused a great fragmentation among churches. The African Independent Churches (AIC) and religious movements that have split from the missionary churches are uncountable. Estimations in Africa lie by 60,000 (source: Organization of African Instituted Churches in Nairobi).

Opinions among theologians are very diverse, from skeptical rejection (e.g. Oborji, 2005, pp. 138-178) to sympathetic understanding (e.g. Mpagi, 2002, pp. 100-105; 202-209). There are many factors why these churches are attractive to Africans, for example an enjoyable liturgy, faith healing and the stress on evil spirits that resonates with the African worldview (cf. Mpagi, 2002, p. 204). Mpagi urges theologians to go beyond the dogmatic presentation of the Gospel and consider seriously the needs of the people. "African Christians who are joining these popular religious movements are hungry and thirsting for an inculturated African Christianity which is within their African world view." (ibid. p. 206) Since they don't have a unifying authority, they are free to combine the biblical tradition in any combination with the African heritage. Therefore, the current appearance of AICs is very confusing. But Mpagi invites Christians from the missionary churches to discover their genuine values and to make them a source of inspiration for us (cf. ibid. p. 100).

3.3. Five Guidelines for an African Christian Theology

Imasogie explains the need of an African theological approach with the fact that Western Christianity with its "quasi-scientific" worldview is not able to relate properly to the African mentality (cf. Imasogie, 1993, p. 52.66). The universe has been desacralized. Illness is just a natural disorder. There is no need for divination, sacrifices or protective charms. But this "quasi-scientific" worldview itself is neither biblical nor shared by the early Church. It is cultural and contingent as any other interpretation of reality. Because it fails to address the majority of Africans in their self-understanding, its legitimacy has to be critically reviewed. He continues that the depth of Christian faith can't be fully grasped by the believers of one

time or one cultural context. Different contexts may unfold new aspects of the Christian revelation. Taking seriously the new cultures where the Gospel is preached, we have to remain “open to the possibilities which that context may offer for a new perception of human self-understanding.” (ibid. p. 44) His guidelines can be summarized as follows (cf. ibid. pp.79-85):

3.3.1. Appreciation of Christ’s Power over Evil Spiritual Forces

The African worldview is close to the biblical worldview in the sense that people are struggling with evil spirits and cosmic powers (cf. Eph 6:12). Any authentic savior must be capable of destroying the cause of their fears and anxieties. Christianity will only be relevant to Africans if their supernatural experience, as they perceive it, is recognized by the churches. Otherwise, they will seek other means to cope with their reality.

3.3.2. Emphasis on the Role of the Holy Spirit and the Mediatory Efficacy of Christ

Traditionally, Africans are living in close communion with the ancestors and maintain relations with them through sacrifices. Ancestors are the mediators between man and God. Christians should present the Living Christ, mediated by the Holy Spirit, as the One who unites the human and spiritual communities. It is he who assures the order of the community and the cosmos. His sacrifice on the cross is all-sufficient that there is no need for further sacrifices (cf. Heb 7:24-27). This might not be an existential experience anymore in Western countries but in Africa, ritual sacrifices are a daily reality. Even ritual killings of humans are still practiced. The message that the Risen Christ, our High Priest, has liberated us once and for all through his self-sacrifice is a hopeful gospel (= good news) in Africa.

3.3.3. Emphasis on the Omnipresence of God and the Sacramental Nature of the Universe

African Religion doesn’t distinguish between the sacred and the profane. The universe is seen as the temple of God which must not be profaned. The missionaries have regarded this awareness of spiritual realities as superstition creating a spiritual vacuum. Instead, the churches should analyze carefully what these elements symbolize and integrate them in the omnipresence of God as it is taught by the Gospel (cf. Acts 17:28).

Mpagi adopts Imasogie's ideas in his book and adds two more proposals that mainline missionary churches should learn from the AICs (cf. Mpagi, 2002, pp. 231-241):

3.3.4. Reawakening the Church's Ministry of Prayer, Exorcism and Healing

When Africans convert to Christianity, they are supposed to abandon traditional healing rituals and divination. But the spiritual reality remains the same. These people have nowhere to go to in their existential struggle except to return to a diviner or join an AIC. Therefore, missionary churches can learn from the AICs the practice of faith healing and deliverance.

3.3.5. Emphasis on the African Ritual Acts and Sacred Objects

Not only prayers but also rituals and objects are important in Africa to express the faith. The AIC rituals often are similar to practices of African Religion. Africans understand their symbolic meaning. The important difference lies in the Christian foundation. Rituals and objects only make sense if they are rooted in a relationship with Jesus Christ. From there, they receive power and meaning. Magical misunderstandings have to be avoided.

3.4. The Diviner

Can a Christian seek a cure from a diviner, for example in the case of a suspected ancestral curse? Generally, it is seen negatively that Christians go to diviners if their problems can't be solved in the church (cf. Mpagi, 2002, p. 191; Imasogie, 1993, p. 68).

Michael Kirwen (cf. Kirwen, 1987, pp. 80-106) takes a pragmatic position that represents a minority among scholars but probably is sustained silently by many Christians. Knowing that most churches reject divination, Kirwen gives an indirect answer by presenting the figure of the diviner in a positive way that the reader can appreciate his stabilizing function in the society. A diviner is the mediator between the visible world and the ancestral spirits. He is the spiritual counselor of the community and interprets what is happening. His work should be considered legitimate for Christians because he serves the people.

This is a functional approach which looks at the well-being of the community. According to Kirwen, it is apparent that true diviners have spiritual powers to detect hidden sufferings and to indicate effective treatments. He asks if ancestral spirits or psychological skills are the

source of their powers but leaves the answer to the reader (cf. *ibid.* p. 90). The objection that divination doesn't always cure is not proving its inferiority to modern medicine. There are also certain diseases which can't be cured in a hospital but are treated effectively by diviners (cf. *ibid.* p. 101). Usually, this is the case when it comes to particular African problems like taboo breaking or ancestral curses.

Whether the work of traditional diviners among Christians will become acceptable or not, Christian leaders have to integrate this spiritual role in their ministry. "The more a Christian priest takes on the role of the diviner – the divinely inspired healer – the more effective and meaningful he becomes in the lives of the Africans. The fact that the African Christians can find nothing wrong with calling Jesus a diviner, in song, is a clue that the kind of religious leadership that the people know, want, and understand is that provided by diviners." (*ibid.* p. 106)

Many AICs offer a Christianized version of the African diviner that borrows a lot of traditional elements as I have reported from the Legio Maria Church.

3.5. The Communion of Saints

The persisting African worldview is also a challenge for an ecclesiology that is acceptable among believers of the Universal Church. In the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the African Synod in 1994, the Catholic bishops asked if the African belief in ancestors could be harmonized with the teaching of the Communion of Saints (n. 72). Positive aspects are (n. 105):

- The invisible world of spirits and ancestors is always present.
- Ancestors mediate between God and man.
- Ancestors are invoked by rites.

Negative aspects are (n. 106):

- Man is enclosed within a universe of fear; fear is often the motive for religion and cult.
- God is regarded as too remote and therefore absent from the daily lives of men; this leads to the cult of spirits a substitutions for God.
- Some prayers invoke a curse.
- Spirits and ancestors are sacrificed to.

The aim of the Catholic Church is to correct the deviations and to lead believers to a Christian understanding.

Bénézet Bujo has presented an outline for an African theology that brings together the essential aspects of the Christian faith and African tradition. Concerning the ancestors, he writes that their words, actions and rituals have a deep meaning for Africans (cf. Bujo, 1992, p. 77). They are the source of life for the next generation. Remembering the life of Jesus, Bujo suggests calling him the Proto-Ancestor. This title is appropriate because it explains his role in a way that can be understood by African Christians in their cultural context. In the early church, Jesus also has been called “the new Orpheus” to reach out to people in the Greek milieu. The title Proto-Ancestor implies that he lived as the perfect role model which is required to be considered an ancestor in the African culture (cf. *ibid.* p. 81-87). His final command to love one another is his last will for us like elders traditionally leave a last will.

But the title has to be understood in an analogous way. He is not just one among many ancestors following the authentic ideal but has brought salvation to all by his death and resurrection (cf. *ibid.* p. 91). This only makes clan ancestorship possible. Jesus is the life-giving Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 15:45) who purifies African ethos and brings people to conversion.

Bujo dismantles the powerful role of the ancestors and places them under the dominion of Christ without abolishing the belief of a close relation to them. The African concept of ancestors is interpreted in terms of the Christian model of the communion of saints:

“Africans, who live in close communion with their ancestors, should not think that becoming a Christian means abandoning the ancestors. Christ died for the virtuous ancestors too, and they live in communion with him, Proto-Ancestor and source of life. Biological life comes to us directly from our ancestors. But our real life, the life of the spirit, comes to us through Jesus Christ, who is for us grace and truth (John 1:17)...

Pilgrims setting out on the final journey [to die] should know that they can reach their destination only by the power of God who saves through Jesus Christ. They should know too that their hope of living on in the memory of those who remain on earth is realized in the Christian community of faith united with him forever in prayer and in the Eucharist.” (*ibid.* p. 129)

Bujo’s conception displays a profound comprehension of his Catholic and his African background. The reception among theologians and believers will show if his approach is successful.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Cultural Patterns

The research illustrates how the African worldview has mixed with Christianity in different ways. Still, there are cultural patterns which are shared by all or most of my informants:

- African Christians have a deep respect and usually a grateful memory of their deceased relatives. Even if they don't believe that a real relationship exists, or if they have doubts about their salvation, Christians want to honor their ancestors and fulfill the moral obligations.
- Naming remains an unbroken practice among African Christians. In spite of different interpretations what naming means, I've sensed that the underlying motivation is to continue the family lineage that binds the living with the ancestors and the yet to be born together. It fulfills the human needs of remembrance and belonging.
- The intervention of ancestors has a great impact even if, according to Christianity, it shouldn't be so. Those who deny on theological grounds the presence of ancestors come up with other constructions to explain, for example, the obvious effect of a curse. The spoken word of an elder has power when he has passed to the ancestral world.
- The belief in evil spirits is the aspect of African cosmology that is almost transferred one to one in the Christian faith. These spirits are perceived – together with witches – to be the cause for many misfortunes.
- The figure of the diviner is very important. Even if Christians reject the traditional institution because they belong to a different religion, other healers and prophets have taken the place of the diviner. Churches that have “baptized” traditional divination rituals are attractive to many Africans because they address meaningfully the needs of wholeness and reconciliation.

4.2. The Living-Dead and Church Theology

Each church evaluates African Religion from her own perspective and accepts more easily those aspects that are close to the own teaching. This explains some of the different opinions of my informants.

Some denominations deny any religious value of what Africans have lived for centuries. Especially Pentecostal Africans are torn between the teaching that all non-Christians are in hell and the experienced visits of the living-dead, relatives who are considered god-fearing role models. That is why they come up with conceptions to place them in hell – because they didn't accept Christ – and, at the same time, acknowledge their good character that is passed on to the children by naming.

It is easier for Catholics – and some AICs – to establish a positive relationship with their non-Christian ancestors because for them, the communion of saints in heaven and on earth includes the just pagans from Abel (cf. Heb 11:4; the most significant pagan saint is the priest Melchizedek, prefiguring Christ, cf. Heb 6:19-7:10). Could this become a model for other churches in Africa? International ecumenical dialogues that focus on ecclesiological issues usually discuss valid ordination, the apostolic succession and the Eucharist/Lord's Supper. In Africa, the task would be to reflect on who belongs to the communion of saints and how God enables communication within his family (between the deceased and those on earth).

4.3. The Living-Dead and the Bible

In 1 Sam 27, King Saul visits in secret a necromancer to speak with Samuel. Samuel comes but rebukes Saul for this act. The living are not allowed to get in contact with the dead. At the same time, there is no doubt that this is possible.

The prohibition to communicate with dead saints is abolished with the resurrection of Jesus. Heb 12:22-24 proclaims that Christians are in communion with all the spirits of the saints in heaven. They bring our intercessions in front of the altar of God (cf. Rev 5:8; 8:4). Jesus meets with Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration (cf. Lk 9:30). This is, first of all, a theological statement about Jesus' divinity. But the encounter can also be understood that in Jesus, who unites all the saints off all times, there is a new way of communication. Later in the Gospel he explains: The Lord is “not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive“ (Lk 20:38; cf. Rm 14:7-9). Matthew reports that many saints rose from the dead and visited (!) the people of Jerusalem after the resurrection of Jesus (cf. Mt 27:51-53). This could provide a biblical basis to interpret the visits of the living-dead in Africa in the case that they are part of the communion of saints.

In Lk 16:27, the rich man in hell pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus to his family. This is denied because it doesn't convince the people, not because it wouldn't be possible. The

worldview behind the parable is that there is communication between heaven and earth, but not between hell and earth. What does this mean for the experience that “good” relatives from hell give naming orders? Or that bad ancestral spirits from hell come to haunt us? The Catholic priest (app.: no. 11) interprets that, if the person is not saved, it is not he but a demon that pretends to be the relative. Only, there is no example in the Bible that a demon has done this. I conclude that the New Testament addresses only indirectly issues concerning the African cosmology presented in this paper.

It still remains unsolved why the deceased primarily like to appear in Africa and not, for example, in Europe. This is an indication that people interpret events within their cultural context. The same vision/dream happening to Africans possibly is perceived by them as more real than to others.

4.4. Consultation of Diviners

In the Christian faith, there is no mediation outside Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Tm 2:5). Divination is condemned harshly in the Old Testament because it leads people to trust in an authority other than the One God (cf. Dtn 18:10). That is why churches generally reject African diviners. But probably, it is also true that many African Christians would seek a diviner when all other attempts have failed.

One informant explained that diviners use the natural knowledge of creation for the benefit of the community (app: no. 10). That would make them acceptable, as it is acceptable that Christians get cured through a non-Christian physician. But diviners have a spiritual function to mediate between the visible and the invisible world. Only if their work can be linked to the mediatorship of Christ, their consultation would be legitimate. Can a Christian thank God for the service of the diviner? Is the libation to ancestors respecting the First Commandment? The criterion is if the Christian can answer with Yes.

I am skeptical to Kirwen’s functional approach. We can’t just look at the short-term effect to cope with life. Everything Christians do has to bring them closer to Christ. The reason why Christians seek a diviner is exactly the opposite: They feel neglected by the Christian God. Christ seems to be silent in their problems. With this attitude, the use of divination is not helpful to deepen their faith. Christians from various denominations confirm that a true understanding of Christ’s atoning sacrifice and his dominion over all negative forces helps Africans to find peace with the spiritual world.

4.5. Inculturation

I conclude this paper with some general remarks on inculturation that can be helpful for an evaluation of the African heritage.

When the Gospel enters into a culture, it shapes the new environment. At the same time, the expression of the Christian faith is shaped by those who have accepted to believe in Jesus Christ. In the case of Africa, culture and religion are inseparably linked together. Everything has a religious meaning. Therefore, integration of the African culture in Christianity means integration of religion. It is not possible to take “neutral” cultural elements. Acknowledging their Christian value implies the acceptance of genuine African religious elements. The line between inculturation and syncretism is very thin. It has to be clear that the Gospel prevails over the culture if there is a conflict; any culture, not just the African one. The editors of the (Catholic) *African New Testament and Psalms* write in the introduction to the Gospel of Matthew:

“[T]he message of Matthew to Jewish Christians can be a source of enlightenment and strength for African converts. Jesus insisted that he had not come to abolish the Jewish law but to bring it to perfection, and African Christians should realize that this applies also to those genuine values found in African traditional religions and cultures. We must emphasize here the importance of family and community, relationships with the ancestors and the living-dead, and the importance of reconciliation as a contribution to peace. These and other African values are in accordance with the Christian faith.

Where there is a need the Christian faith should not hesitate to criticize the negative aspects of African culture in the light of the teaching of Christ. This will often be painful but that is a condition for following Christ. We should realize that anything contradicting the message of Christ cannot be a genuine human value and there is nothing to lose in giving it up.” (p. 12)

This approach seems to me a reasonable starting point for theologizing. Imasogie, too, wants to return with his guidelines to the Gospel. According to him, it is the Western worldview that is an obstacle for Africans to evangelize their culture. I agree that the “sacramental nature of the universe” (his third guideline) is the key to understand the living African culture. But I don’t believe that this would be totally foreign to Western theology. Imasogie’s first two guidelines explain the centrality of Jesus Christ to deal with spirits.

Again, this applies in the same way to Western Christians and their existential problems. To accept that Christ is the Lord of creation and over all powers is a challenge for people of all cultures and continents.

It still remains unclear to what extent the African spiritual world really exists and, if so, which of the options in the summary in 2.6. should be chosen. This requires careful discernment and should be an ecumenical African project.

Some of my informants have shared with me their opinion about inculturation. I want to leave to them the last words because it is the task of African Christians to build up a church that is faithful to the Gospel and, at the same time, meaningful to believers in their cultural context.

“Inculturation is legitimate and important in Africa. It means reflecting the Christian faith within a cultural context. Pentecostals often have a wrong concept of culture and copy superficially Western prejudices. There is a guilt consciousness against their own culture.” (app.: no. 8)

“We don’t need superiority [in international church relations], rather reciprocal evangelization. And we should trust in the African people. If the Gospel is taught well, people are mature to take the right decisions. They will abandon what is not in accordance with the Gospel.” (app.: no. 5)

“African customs are good as long as we don’t worship other gods but Jesus Christ.” (app.: no. 4)

Appendix: Field Research Summary

1. 8/9/2005, Lenana – Nairobi: Interviews with a Seventh Day Adventist, a Pentecostal from the Redeemed Gospel Church and a Pentecostal from Brooks Restoration Center about their Christian faith, their relationship with the living-dead and the practice of naming.
2. 17/9/2005, Ongata Rongai: Interview with a “Christian diviner”. Her power comes from the Holy Spirit. Traditional diviners work through ancestors or gins. For Christians, it is not allowed to consult them.
3. 1/10/2005, Rambula – Western Province: Interview with a Pentecostal Christian who has been visited by the living-dead. They have the right to give orders even if they are not saved. It is prohibited to go to diviners, even in the case of a deadly sickness.
4. 2/10/2005, Rambula – Western Province: Interview with an aged Catholic couple. The living dead have given them orders to name children or pay debts. But ancestral spirits from hell are dangerous. It is not right to seek diviners. Catholics have to trust only Christ.
5. 6/10/2005, Tangaza College – Nairobi: Interview with a Pauline sister who told me how the grandfather has cursed her family. After his death, four relatives died. The village doesn’t believe in a coincidence.
6. 8/10/2005, Kibera – Nairobi: Interview with a pastor of the Holy Spirit Israel Church. According to him, good ancestors don’t visit the living. Only evil spirits come and haunt us. But we can chase them away.
7. 9/10/2005, Lang’ata – Nairobi: Interview with a Seventh Day Adventist who is professor of Religious Sciences. According to their theology, all humans sleep until Jesus returns. Therefore, all contacts with ancestral spirits and the living-dead are an imagination. But we have to follow their example.
8. 12/10/2005, Tangaza College – Nairobi: Interview with a Pentecostal who is a member of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWT). Western churches – including the Pentecostals – should integrate more the African worldview to prevent that believers live in separate worlds.
9. 23/10/2005, Korogocho – Nairobi: Visit at the Legio Maria Church. They separated from the Catholics in the 1960s because they missed the African (Luo) way of relating to the supernatural.
10. 27/10/2005, Tangaza College – Nairobi: Interview with the theological director of the Organization of African Instituted Churches. He values African Religion positively although the Gospel has to purify it. Ancestors are those who died in the grace of God and are our intermediaries now.
11. 6/11/2005, Lang’ata – Nairobi: Interview with a Catholic priest who thinks that ancestral spirits are demons who disguise themselves. But God may send a saved living-dead for a specific purpose. To be sure, it is better to consult only the canonized saints.
12. 13/11/2005, Ongata Rongai: Visit at a Pentecostal worship service. We started with tee and biscuits. After some singing, there was a moment of free prayer. Then there was sharing of visions, interpretation of dreams, testimonies of God’s work in our lives and bible reading. Everybody was invited to speak at each part of the service. The pastor interpreted a dream, indicating the negative influence of a spirit.

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