

“COMMUNIO SANCTORUM”: BIBLICAL OR NOT?

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Introduction

Ancestor worship, or *communio sanctorum* (the Latin) has been under discussion amongst theologians for many decades now. Much has been written, much has been said, many seminars on the topic have been held, and yet, it is still under the spotlight amongst theologians.

Therefore the field of our topic is not only very wide, but also very controversial. From the early missionaries who rigidly forbid any form of *communio sanctorum* to the most liberal postmodern theologian who argues that *communio sanctorum* needs to be part of the Christian's worship: it remains a burning issue in the development of a relevant Christo-centric African Christianity.

To try and address such a crucial issue in one paper would definitely not do justice to the topic. There are so many contributing factors that need to be addressed and explained: worldview, culture, theological presuppositions, hermeneutics, cross-cultural communication, modern theological and cultural trends, doctrinal views, and inculturation/contextualization, to just mention a few.

In order to streamline the topic at hand this paper would move from a theological evangelical perspective. This paper would argue that within the Biblical culture there is no place for worship of any other gods, except the worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: The Elohim and El Shaddai. However, it would argue further that within the context of the African culture, certain traditional cultural rites could exist that can be considered as *preparatio evangelica* to the writing of a relevant Christian African Theology.

It should also be said that it is never easy to evaluate foreign cultural rites and passages as the dynamics of any foreign culture will never be fully understood by the interpreter/facilitator/anthropologist. The question would then arise immediately as to whether an outsider should be given the opportunity to address issues. Fashole Luke (in Anderson & Stransky 1976: 135) a well known African Theologian addresses this question by saying: “it (the writing of an African Theology) should be looked upon as a medium by which Africans and non Africans can think together about the fundamental articles of the Christian faith in Africa. The quest must be ecumenical and all inclusive”.

Ecumenism would guide the discussion and evaluation not to be one-sidedly initiated. To be all-inclusive would ensure that the evaluation would incorporate all tools needed and available to come to a sound, reliable and just conclusion.

1. African Traditional Religion as foundation of the practice of *communio sanctorum*.

At the heart of the rite of ancestor worship in African culture lays the African Traditional Religion. And to make it even more difficult, ATR is intertwined with African Culture in a broader sense.

African Culture is a communal culture, a culture where the individual exist as result of the others. Taylor (1963:155) says: "...the African family is a single continuing unit, conscious of no radical distinction of being between the living and the dead". The individual's way of life is therefore dependant on that what is determined and predetermined by his/her ancestors and extended families. Amanze (1998:1) refers to the Tswana culture and then states: "..., it is important first and foremost to understand Tswana traditional religion as a living faith among Batswana today...."

The cultural practices within the broader African culture is, as it is with some other main cultures of the world, is intertwined with practices in ATR. This is important as it would do injustice to our question at stake to try and see it as something standing at its own. Something that can be theologically evaluated and dealt with accordingly.

The Ancestors amongst the Sotho/Tswana/Shona people

As this research has been done mainly under the Batswana, reference will be made in relation to their beliefs.

The ancestors in the Tswana culture are known as *badimo*. *Badimo* is the plural of the word *Modimo*, which is generally used and translated for "God". *Badimo* has been called by *Modimo* to be with him. But because *Modimo* cannot be the people, he assigns this responsibility to the *Badimo*. To fulfill this task certain special powers have been assigned to the *badimo*. *Badimo* is powerful but not all powerful. They are therefore the link between *Modimo* and mankind, they provide guidance to people and they direct the lives of the African people (Dreyer & Mjwabe 1995:553; Amanze 1995:8; Mbiti 1971: 27,28).

This thought links up with the ATR and African cultural thought that although a person has died he/she still needs to be cared for in the spirit world. This responsibility first lies with the closest family of the deceased. They need to visit the grave frequently. Offerings like bowl of food also need to be placed so that the ancestor will not get hungry in the other world. Communication with the deceased is also possible through the traditional - and witchdoctor (Daneel 1973: 46,48; Amanze 1998:9).

Practices differ however from sub-culture to sub-culture. The Shona culture for instance approaches the ancestors during rain-rites. The whole community forms part of this passage when each head of family is given an amount of sorghum for the brewing of sorghum-beer. The beer is then thrown onto the graves of the ancestors while leaders are speaking to the ancestors through mediums. The "great ancestor" is only approached at specific times (Daneel 1973: 52-53).

In the Tswana culture the ancestors mainly appear to the people in their dreams. Certain orders like the slauthering of an animal or the drinking of beer is then conveyed (Amanze 1998:13; Dreyer & Mjwabe 1995:554).

It is however during the funeral ceremony that ancestral practices are the most prominent. One can miss anything but you cannot miss a funeral. Not only would you upset the family (because of the communal worldview), but you would definitely upset the deceased and the ancestors. The whole funeral-passage starts with prayer meetings during the days preceding the actual funeral. At the evening before the funeral the body of the deceased is taken to the house and kept in the room where the death has taken place. Candles are lit to keep the evil spirits away. Early the next morning the funeral takes place. After the funeral there is a meal at the deceased's house.

From this it is evident that funerals are very time-consuming, tiring, emotional and expensive rites. One can actually refer to the Tswana-culture as a culture of funerals.

From the above discussion it has become now evident that *communio sanctorum* is practiced in many African cultures today. It forms such an integral part of the culture and lifestyle of the African people that a holistic approach is needed to make a proper evaluation.

1.2. The ancestors in the Xhosa culture.

Izinyanya/amadlozi/badimo/vadzimo/abeZimu refer to those who have died and joined the spiritual world. The departed from this world, the ancestors, are believed and felt to be the mediators between the living and the spiritual world. Death is not understood as the destruction of life. It is understood as partial physical separation from the living because ancestors sometimes reveal themselves to the members of the family. Consequently, to the clan members the deceased are not dead but "asleep".

The way ancestors are perceived in African life in general points to five fundamental beliefs and principles.

- A recognition that each human being is made up of not only flesh, bones and blood, but also of spirit or soul.
- Death only means the physical separation between this world in which we live and the spiritual world. Therefore only the human body dies and decomposes; the spirit (soul) does not perish. As a result even in the grave bone symbolize life.
- As ancestors are part of the community, human relations especially within the clan (family circle) do not die. People come and go, they are born and at some point die, but their relationship, once established, goes on for ever.
- In the light of the above, ancestors or the spirits of the departed, play the vital role of intermediaries between the God and human beings (www.nalane.net/xhosa: The Xhosa Virtual Resource Network).

2. *communio sanctorum*: worship or veneration?

Most of the African theologians (Mbiti 1971; Nyamiti 1984; Mosothoane 1973: 86-95; Taylor 1963) argue that ancestors are not worshipped, but just honored. In contrast with this view are the classical protestant perspective one of ancestor worship and therefore a contravening of the 1st Commandment (Daneel 1973:57; Thom 1990:73).

Yet, as it has been already suggested, the answer is not as simplistic as it seems to be. From a biblical perspective the following reasons would then be given in support of the view that the ancestral rite is indeed in its roots unbiblical.

2.1. *communio sanctorum* and the Trinity.

2.1.1. The concept of God.

It is clear that the African concept of a god is one that is foreign from the Biblical perspective. In summary (see Amanze 1998:4; Coetzee 1969:19; Idowu 1973:139; Mbiti 1971:27,28; Nyirongo 1997:27):

- The African god is a distant god. It is clear from the Bible that God, though sin has separated us from Him, He still wants the presence of with His people. This is not only evident in the NT but also in the OT.
- This god does not communicate with ordinary people. The God the Bible very much want communion and communication with His people. This is also evident in the OT and NT.
- He makes use of the ancestors to communicate to the ordinary people. Yet it is never stated in the Bible that God made use of any ancestors to communicate messages to His people. What the Bible does state is:
 - God used the history of the ancestors continually to warn and guide His people.
 - God used living prophets in the OT and apostles in the NT to carry His messages (eg Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel).
 - History is always evidence that what has been prophesied by the prophets, did in fact happen.
 - There are many examples in the Bible where God has made use of ordinary people to convey messages (eg Samuel to Eli in [1 Sam 3](#); Nathan to David in [2 Sam 12](#)).
 - There are instances where God made use of angels to appear to certain people, yet angels is heavenly beings that were created by God at the beginning of times, and can therefore not be considered as ancestors ([Num. 22:21–35, 38](#); [1 Kings 13:18](#); [2 Kings 1:3–4](#); [2 Kings 1:15](#); [1 Chron. 21:18](#); [Dan. 8:16](#); [Dan. 9:21–22](#); [Dan. 10:5–6, 10–11](#); [Zech. 1:9](#); [Zech. 2:3](#); [Zech. 4:1](#)).

It is therefore as a result of a misconception of the God of the Bible that worship of ancestors is taking place. The ancestor take the place of God, in fact becomes a god in itself. Just like the God of the Bible this ancestral god have powers to punish, powers to kill, powers to decide on a life. And therefore the fear for them.....

2.1.2. The concept of Jesus.

It is necessary to say at this point that although Jesus is regarded as a very special figure in African Traditional Religion, and that there is indeed certain concepts regarding Jesus as a healer (Daneel 1974), as :162ff), these concepts can only be regarded as *preparatio evangelica* (a point from where the gospel can enter into a culture).

Fact of the matter, in the ancestral rite, there seems to be a total absence of any work Jesus has done on Calvary. As result of that Jesus is only regarded as a physical healer, He is the one that is an example, just as other ancestors, to the people (Nyamiti 1984). It is never evident that the risen Christ is being exalted above the ancestors and other mediums.

As time and place would not allow it, the message in the Book of Hebrews cannot be dealt with here extensively. Yet the message is clear:

- There is no other mediator than Christ ([Hebr.9:15](#)).
- Christ is the only one exalted to the right hand of God ([Hebr 1: 13](#)).
- Christ offered Himself so that there can be communion, communication and identification with the ordinary person again ([Hebr 8](#)).
- No more offering can convince God- it has been made in the death of Christ ([Hebr 9](#)).
- Christ is the ultimate, there is no need to look for anything else as [Hebrews 10:11-14](#) says so beautifully:

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

Scripture is clear that he who disregards Jesus in any way is not worth the Kingdom of heaven- even more, he has no part in God's Kingdom.

2.1.3. The concept of the Holy Spirit.

The African is a spiritual being. He lives in a world where spirits control the wellbeing of the person and the community at large (Maimela 1985:71; Theron 1987:8). It is therefore not strange for the African to form a concept of another spirit, that of the spirit of God.

Yet this spirit is seen as something separate from the triune God. It is not the Holy Spirit that comforts, that leads the person into God's presence. That is in essence the function of the ancestral spirits. Again the focus is away from the Trinity to that of ancestors. And that is in essence the worship of false gods.

2.2. *communio sanctorum* and Theology.

2.2.1. "Theology from beneath".

There are two ways in which the Bible can be interpreted. The first one is to look at the scenario, the culture of a people, the issue at stake and the try to evaluate it in a secular way. By this approach all humanistic tools are applied in order to come to an answer.

The Bible may regard as one of the tools, yet not considered as the main tool. In this way the Bible becomes only secondary to the outcome of the question under discussion. This is called a "theology from beneath".

Secondly, "theology from above" is a process that has the Bible as the primary tool. The Bible gives the main guidelines and forms the borders to move within.

Within the context of *communio sanctorum* this would mean that in order to determine whether the rite is Biblical or not, a **theology from above** is required. The issue would need to be interpreted from a Biblical perspective, from within the borders of the Biblical Culture. Then it would also interpret the cultural practice and the Biblical principles would be used to address and reform any views and practices which are contrary to Scripture.

Though this would not mean that the Bible would be necessary antagonistic toward other cultures, it would imply that the truths of the Bible cannot be "bent" in order to try and accommodate issues that are contrary to Scriptural principles.

A Theology from beneath would then argue that the practice of the ancestors is a cultural one, one that is very much part of the worldview of the culture and something that gives identity to the people. It has been a practice in the culture for ages and is to the benefit of the culture. It is also a religious practice and helps the people to understand death, it serves as a way of counseling and gives them direction as how to deal with the dead loved ones. This would imply that the ancestral rite is socially and humanly speaking acceptable.

From a religious point of view the concepts of God and the Bible would be interpreted in terms of the cultural views on the issue. As it is evident from our discussion above it has become clear that although there might be similarities between the African concepts of a godhead and the Biblical ones, it is not one and the same.

However, from a theology from below it would be argued that these concepts need to be interpreted from within the culture and if the culture is satisfied that they worship the same God, and that the ancestral rite is mere veneration, then so be it.

It has been stated already that not all forms of *communio sanctorum* does involve worship. Yet it is clear that the way in which many African theologians interpret the rite is from a theology from below. In the end this would lead to a cultural- not a Biblical theology. A kind of theology that is only applicable to the local culture. A theology in which the Christian community at large has no say in.

2.2.2. Christ above culture.

This brings us to the statement that Christ is above any culture. In short this would imply that no culture has the authority to assume any cultural practice as above the work Jesus has done on the cross (the gospel).

Niebuhr calls the people in this group synthesis's because they desire to shape their ethics according to **both** Christ **and** culture. Culture is viewed as "both divine and human in its origin. both holy and sinful..." (p.121) Also, the synthesist claims that "there are other laws besides the laws of Jesus Christ; and they are also imperative, and also from God." (p.122)

In [Galatians 3:24-25](#), the apostle Paul compares the Law to a *paidagogos*, a person who served as half teacher, half babysitter in Greek and Roman society. The idea is that the Law pointed the way to Christ and is then superseded by Christ. The synthesist looks at culture in much the same way. Although culture is affected by sin, it still acts as a restrainer against sin. Christ, then, is above culture and enables us to rise above the basic demands that culture makes on us.

The divine law revealed by God through His prophets and above all through His Son is partly coincident with the natural law, and partly transcends it as the law of man's supernatural life. "Thou shalt not steal" is a commandment found both by reason and in revelation; "Sell all that thou hast and give to the poor" is found in the divine law only.

This type is appealing because it is not too quick to reject either the biblical Christ or the possibility of God working through culture. Is there more to life, indeed more to ethics, than what is taught in the 66 books of the Bible? I think so. The problem is that when synthesists call people to follow a culturally based ethic they often don't realize just how culturally-based it is. The accusation, then, is that the synthesist inevitably "become[s] more concerned about the defense of the culture synthesized with the gospel than about the gospel itself...and thus becomes a cultural Christian."

The work of Christ has already been summarized in the [Book of Hebrews](#) and is also evident throughout the New Testament. This is the borders within which the ancestral rite needs to be interpreted then. No matter how important or well established a cultural practice may be, if it is contrary to the gospel, then it needs to be changed by those very Biblical principles. JS Mbiti (1978:281) sums the concept that the gospel (Christ) exceeds culture up so clearly:

...we must also, without fear and hesitation, bring the gospel to bear upon our culture in order to evaluate it, to judge it, to transform it. Because culture is created man, and because man is sinful, what he creates, however beautiful, however great, however cultivated it might be, it nevertheless bears the imprint of human sinfulness-... Culture has its own demons, which only the gospel is equipped to exorcise and disarm.

2.2.3. The danger of syncretism.

One can never allow any culture to interpret cultural practices from within the culture and then try to bring Biblical principles in, in order to try and make it kosher. This would lead to a weakened gospel, a gospel where there Bible then would be used as a type of spice to salt the cultural view. It leads to a distortion of the Biblical principles and a message that loses its power in the end.

As a result of a theology from below, and the fact that Christ is not seen as coming from above the culture, the ancestral practice has in many ways lead to syncretism. Distorted views of God,

Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, the church, the family, the importance and use of Scripture, and the role of the religious leaders is evident.

2.2.4. Total rejection or *preparatio evangelica*?

The question that ultimately arises is whether *communio sanctorum* should be disregarded and rejected and stopped completely within the African Traditional religions and culture. In summary the following notes:

- Biblical principals are universal and cannot be bent to accommodate *communio sanctorum*.
- *communio sanctorum* as practiced in the African culture, and the sub-cultures within it should be evaluated and tested under the spotlight of evangelical Biblical principles.
- Elements of *communio sanctorum* that can be used as a gateway to address the wrong perceptions and practices within the rite should be utilized.
- Elements which are contrary to the gospel should be discarded but needs to be done within the process of inculturation. In short this would imply that the unbiblical elements would be changed by the gospel by way of teaching and replacement of proper biblical cultural elements.

Mbiti (1978:313) sums this notion up as follows:

African Religion... has been a valuable and indispensable lamp on the spiritual path. But,... it cannot be made a substitute for the eternal gospel which is like the sun that brilliantly illuminates the path... The gospel has come to fulfill and complete African religiosity.

In conclusion it has to be said that from a Biblical perspective, and taken into account what is evident from an extensive study of the ancestral rite in the African traditional religion, that the rite is principally unbiblical. Yet some of the practices have already been renewed by Scripture through the ages and can be regarded as veneration of the dead. In the writing of a relevant Christian Africa Theology entry points need to be found that would serve as *preparatio evangelica* for a Biblical practice which would be relevant within the African culture.