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Christianity and Ancestor Veneration in Botswana

This paper is about Christianity and ancestor veneration in Botswana. It will be argued in this paper that though Botswana is predominantly a Christian country, belief in and veneration of ancestors continues unabated to the present day. It will be noted in the paper that the resilience of the belief in ancestors in Botswana is based on the fact that it is the core of Tswana Traditional Religion. It gives the people a sense of self-identity. Christian attempts to supplant this belief have failed, and many Christians today – especially those belonging to the African Independent Churches – live ambivalent lives with one foot entrenched in African traditional beliefs and the other in Christian beliefs and practices. The paper starts by analysing the belief in ancestors in Africa generally and then in Botswana in particular and concludes by observing that the Christian stand against belief in and veneration of ancestors has only created another brand of Christianity which is attracting many Botswana Christians because they feel it is relevant to them as Africans in their struggle for human existence both spiritually and materially.

1. THE POSITION AND ROLE OF ANCESTORS IN AFRICA

One of the most contentious issues in the missionary field in Africa generally and Botswana in particular has been the question of the veneration of the ancestors. In almost all African societies there is a strong belief in ancestors despite strong Christian presence. This is true in Botswana, where belief in ancestors continues unabated. Charles Nyamiti in his book *African Tradition and the Christian God* has postulated that in anthropology the word 'ancestor' has broad meaning. Generally it is used to signify the dead progenitors of a family, clan, or tribe. At other times it means dead members of a social group as long as the living members of that group pay regular cultic homage to him or her.¹ A close examination of the way in

which Africans use the word 'ancestor' seems to embrace all these meanings.

The ancestral spirits are mostly those of human beings, who continue to live in the unseen world. To many African people the dead people are not dead at all. Death is only a transitional state to a spiritual life free from material hindrances. The deceased are at once dead and alive, and because of their paradoxical nature they are known, in much of recent literature in African Traditional Religions, as the living-dead. Charles Nyamiti in the book that I have referred to has observed that

in Africa, the living and their dead ancestors are related to one another as if the dead were still on earth, since the family relationship continues. The living are a continuation of the family line began by the ancestors, who are believed to be usually benevolent to the family although they can become angry ... the ancestors are supposed to care for their living relatives by procuring their bodily welfare and averting evils from them.²

R. Laroche has intimated that generally speaking Africans believe in the existence of the soul, which is distinct from its envelope, the body. According to Laroche, Africans believe that the spirit or soul, which is the essential part of the human being and which constitutes his immediate personality, survives the destruction of the body when a person dies.³

As regards their abode it is generally believed that as spirits the people whom we call 'dead' are not confined to any locality. They may be in the grave, in the forest, in the houses of the living, on the mountains, on trees, in the rivers, in caves, in the spirit world, in the body of a human being, or wherever they choose to be. They may also assume the form of snakes or any other animal. Dominique Zahan has postulated that in the mind and thought of the Africans the living world of the ancestors is associated with the ideas of repose, tranquillity, and peace – something that conveys the idea of perfection. The world of the ancestors is prestigious because of the nature of its inhabitants.⁴

It is important to note that regardless of their mode of existence it is commonly believed that the ancestors still live, though invisible, and that they are certainly present in the life of the individual and the community and that they are aware of what is taking place on earth. They see everything, hear everything, are interested in the affairs of human beings, and wish, above everything else, to be remembered and to be informed of what is happening here on earth. The most significant element in their interaction with the world of the living is that they are ever concerned with the

well-being of their descendants, and any breach of traditional customs is viewed as an offence against them. They have the power of displaying their wrath upon those who break the laws of the family and neglect their ancestors. But for as long as they are not neglected they act benevolently.⁵ One of the most distinctive characteristics of the belief in ancestors is that at death they are endowed with great power and that through this power they impose their wills and prescriptions on the living. The presence of the ancestors is felt at each moment by the African people. What is more significant still is that people recognize and submit themselves to the authority of the ancestors. Recognition and submission to the authority of the ancestors, it is believed, enables people in their social settings to avoid falling into dangerous situations.⁶ Geoffrey Parrinder for one has observed that the ancestors are believed to show their power through the welfare or misfortunes of their family by sending children and blessing crops, or the reverse. They are often associated with God in prayer. Just as a chief is approached through an intermediary, so prayer may go to God through the ancestral spirits.⁷

It is important to bear in mind that not all deceased persons are elevated to the rank of ancestors. In each society it is the people who select the living-dead for the rank of an ancestor. Quite often ancestorhood implies moral superiority. Ancestors become models rooted in the idea of exemplarity, that is, models to be imitated in order to avoid perdition. To become an ancestor one must possess certain qualities. These include, among others, long life, the individual's physical integrity and morality, the person's social standing and self-control. In some societies a person may not become an ancestor unless he or she has descendants. In other societies, however, all the dead people regardless of whether they have descendants or not are considered as ancestors, the only exception being the notorious ones such as witches, which are considered evil in the highest degree.⁸

In most African societies the ancestors often serve as the Supreme Being's intermediaries because of their moral superiority and because they are able to communicate with God since they are god-like, and they are able to communicate with human beings because they are men-like. The ancestors are at the other end of a long chain of intercessors whose ultimate function is to intercede on behalf of humankind. Accordingly, in order to ensure that they deliver good services to the people as intercessors, it is necessary to make certain that they are not annoyed by anything going on at any time. Donald M'timkulu, in his paper entitled 'Some aspects of Zulu religion', has observed that among the Zulu, if people

neglect the ancestors, they turn their backs on the living and no longer use their powers of mediation or their own intensive forces to make certain there is harmony and well-being within the family. M'timkulu has also noted that the ancestors have certain limitations. For example, they are not in themselves either omnipotent or omnipresent. By and large they are bound by the relationships of consanguinity and propinquity to land.⁹

Edwin Smith has observed that the idea that the ancestors play a very important role in society is based on the belief that the human personality survives the death and decay of the body.¹⁰ The belief that the human personality survives after death seems to be widespread among Africans. For example, M'timkulu has indicated that among the Zulu it is commonly believed that when the spirit leaves the body at the time of death it leaves with a large part of its personality intact. If it is an angry father who dies, one expects him to be a rather angry ancestor. If family members had a short-tempered elder as their head, they become particularly careful in making certain that after he is dead he is not annoyed, knowing that he always was a man who became annoyed very easily. On the other hand, a more placid head of the family would not rouse so much concern when he died because he was a happy person with whom it was easy to deal. Thus at death one carries along one's personality into the next life.¹¹

It is important to bear in mind that among Africans the living and the living-dead live in a symbiotic relationship. There is no iron curtain that separates their existence. Consequently, they are interdependent and capable of communicating with one another. The well-being of the living is dependent on the goodwill of the living-dead and of those yet to be born. T. Cullen Young in his study of the religion of the people living in northern Malawi has observed that 'the African community is a single, continuing unit, conscious of no distinction, *in quality*, between its members still *here* on earth and its members now *there* wherever it may be that the ancestors are living'.¹² This point has been explicated further by M'timkulu who, discussing Zulu religious belief in ancestors, writes as follows:

Society is one and consists of the living and the dead; the community is a continuum without a break. The interest of the elders in their children not only springs from this concern for their welfare and the welfare of the ancestors but also from their own welfare and the welfare of the ancestors now dead. They are concerned with the continuance of life of both the dead and the living as one, and even the continuance of those who are yet unborn.¹³

Writing about the ancestral spirit system among the Tonga of Zambia, Cecil R. Hopgood, in his paper entitled 'Concepts of God amongst the Tonga of Northern Rhodesia', has observed that among this group of people the ancestors are believed to be constantly impinging on the life of the living. As a result it is deemed essential to keep on good terms with them for they possess considerable power both for good and ill. By and large sickness and misfortunes of every kind are commonly attributed to the influence of an offended ancestral spirit, and in times of trouble it is frequently necessary to make offerings to please the ancestors.¹⁴ During his anthropological study of the concept of God among the Tonga and their relationship with the ancestors as intermediaries, Hopgood reports that he was told by an elder that

the ancestral spirits are subordinate chiefs under God, the Supreme Chief. Just as in our human courts of justice you first take your affairs to a subordinate official, and he is able to take them to the higher chief, so also the ancestral spirits play a similar part in relation to *Leza*. We approach them first and they lay our affairs before God.¹⁵

The role played by the ancestors as mediators between God and the people is also exemplified in the religious system of the Swazi. Edwin Smith puts it aptly thus:

On earth it is against the law to approach a grandfather direct if the father is alive, or to appeal to the king without first speaking to his induna (minister, counsellor). In the spirit world the hierarchy of age and authority is similarly respected. Requests are made to the invisible father and he forwards the message to the next above him, unless a specific ancestor is demanding attention. Swazi believe in the unbroken continuity of kinship after death and vaguely assume that eventually the wishes of men reach Umkhulumcadi (the First Being).¹⁶

Kwesi Dickson has made a distinction between what he calls family ancestors and clan, or tribal, ancestors. The family ancestors are by and large called upon at the important moments of life, especially at birth, puberty, marriage, and death. They are also called upon on occasions when new undertakings are envisaged by members of the family such as trade, travel, and so on. The clan and tribal ancestors are called upon in times of great national importance, especially at the death of a particular important person such as a chief and other occasions of a national nature.¹⁷

David Barrett in his study of African societies has noted that the belief

in ancestral spirits is predominant in almost all African societies, mainly as an expression of family and clan continuity and solidarity. The recently deceased ancestors are quite often regarded as still inhabiting the family land. They exercise control over the living, and all life exists under their surveillance. Barrett observed that the ancestors are treated with awe, fear, reverence, respect, and veneration, and their influence penetrates into almost every sphere of life.¹⁸ According to Barrett, the resilience of the belief in ancestors is founded on the fact that

among the Bantu race in particular it represents the hierarchical social system carried over into the spirit world; it validates the traditional political structure; it ensures fertility, health, prosperity and the continuity of past and future in family life; it is a sanction for the respect of living elders.¹⁹

2. THE ANCESTORS IN THE LIFE AND THOUGHT OF BATSWANA IN BOTSWANA

Belief in ancestors is central to Tswana Traditional Religion. They are known by different names in different ethnic groups, such as *badimo* (Bangwato, Bangwaketse, Batawana, Bakgatla, Bakwena, Balete, and Barolong), *afu* (Lozi), *hathimo* (Hambukushu), *wazhumu* (Bayeyi), *badzimu* or *midzimu* (Bakalanga), *ikaba* (Basubiya), *unzdimu* (Banajwa), and *qđangwa* (San Bushmen). In this paper we shall use the term *badimo* throughout since it is the most widely used word among Batswana.²⁰

Generally speaking, ancestral spirits are spirits of human beings who have passed away and are now living in the spirit world, which is sometimes conceived as the underworld – possibly because the dead are buried in the ground. Quite often the ancestral spirits are interested in the affairs of their descendants as much as they used to be when they were still alive. It is believed that when wrongdoing happens in the family the ancestors resent it and punish the evil-doers, since the ancestors are the guardians of public morality and of the traditions of the elders.²¹ The ancestral spirits are also concerned with the fertility of their descendants, the fertility of the soil, and the availability of good weather upon which the other two are dependent.²² Because of their close association with the living and their proximity to God, the ancestral spirits are considered as the most effective and the most reliable means of communication between God and man. J.T. Brown in his studies on Tswana Traditional Religions came across a number of motifs among Batswana which point to the belief that in one way or another the ancestors are still alive – that dead people have only

moved physically away from the living and are very much alive. 'As a matter of fact,' Brown writes, 'no Mochuana ever speaks of his deceased father or mother as being dead.'²³ They are always referred to as 'they who have left us' (*ba re tlogetsen*), 'those who are no longer with us' (*ba re sa tlholen re na nabo*), and 'those who have passed away'.²⁴

T.J. Larson, who carried out anthropological studies among the Hambukushu of Ngamiland, has observed that according to their belief a person does not really die. Though at death a body is laid to rest, the soul or spirit (*hathimo*) leaves the body and goes to the spirit world. Good peoples' spirits, it is maintained, go to heaven (*diwiru*) to live with *Nyambi* (God). Evil peoples' spirits go to live in *Shadapinyi's* (*Nyambi's* evil messenger of death) abode, where they work hard in the sun and eat bad food and drink bad beer. It is also held that the spirits, both good and evil, return to earth to visit their relatives, to make demands upon them during the visitations, and to maintain Hambukushu established values.²⁵ This seems to indicate that in Tswana Traditional Religions life in the spirit world is perceived as a carbon copy of the present life, the only difference being that in the spirit world the living-dead live very close to God. It is commonly believed among Batswana that dead people have power not only to bless and send prosperity to their relatives, but also to curse or reverse their fortunes. Since the spirits of the dead are nearer to God than living men, the living normally solicit their help as mediators to secure favours from God such as rain, good health, and other material benefits. It is important to bear in mind that among Batswana the ancestors have never been objects of worship either in the past or in the present. While *Modimo* is worshipped the *badimo* are venerated. J. T. Brown left behind the following testimony, which is worth noting:

After much enquiry I have come to the conclusion that the attitude of the ordinary Mochuana towards the dead is on a footing with that of the devout of some higher forms of faith, who, while they adore their saints and often times fear them, only look upon them as mediators, and do not place them in any pantheon as gods to whom worship is due.²⁶

Batswana believe that every family and every individual is under the supernatural guidance and protection of the ancestors. It is on this account that their favours are sought through prayers and sacrifices. It is generally believed that the ancestors should not be offended because their favour can be lost. Should this happen, the people, their herds, and crops can suffer. The spirits of the ancestors, therefore, are quite often venerated.

This is done by means of prayers, offerings, and sacrifices. The importance and significance of ancestor veneration among Batswana lies in the fact that it strengthens the bonds of unity which bind together the ancestors, members of the same family, lineage, and tribe as a corporate group. To this effect some ethnic groups in Botswana have special religious ceremonies which enable them to cement their relationships with each other and with the ancestral spirits. It may be necessary here to mention some of these ceremonies to illustrate the points we have made above.

*a. Offerings and Sacrifices for the Remembrance of the
Living–Dead (Mogoga)*

There are times when Batswana perform a ritual to remember the dead. Such a ritual is called *mogoga* (meat prepared for the remembrance of the dead). It takes place after a period of one year or ten years from burial. A long time ago *mogoga* was intended for old people and not for young people. This was done in order to send dead people away with respect so that other spirits in the spirit world should see that the deceased was an elderly person. It was also intended to persuade the deceased not to look back. The idea behind *mogoga* is that the deceased person should not feel bitter for the belongings that he/she left behind such as goats, cattle, and sheep when those people remaining behind use them. It is also held in order to tell people that the dead are dead indeed (*golatola motho*). When this ritual is performed an animal is chosen and slaughtered without consulting a traditional healer. Normally it is a castrated bull of any colour. The blood is allowed to flow on the ground as a sacrifice to the ancestors. Traditional beer is brewed. The meat is traditionally prepared without salt. A large quantity of food is prepared. People come to eat and drink this offering. Nobody is allowed to take any food from the sacrifice to his or her place. This is taboo. In some ethnic groups a portion of the sacrificial meal is taken to the grave of the ancestor being remembered; in other ethnic groups, however, this is not done. In the olden days the offering was made early in the morning. By the time the sun rose the ceremony was over.²⁷

b. Offerings and Sacrifices for Healing of the Sick (Dithota)

It is important to note that among Batswana when a person is sick he or she would normally consult a traditional healer or a diviner to find out the cause of the disease. If it is established that the sick person is afflicted by an angry ancestor, he or she will be advised to make a sacrifice to the aggrieved ancestors in order to mend broken relationships, restore peace,

and achieve healing. Such a ritual is called *dithota* among the Batlokwa. This ceremony takes place with the advice of a traditional doctor or diviner. The diviner would normally tell those afflicted by the ancestors to sacrifice either a sheep or a cow. Traditional beer is brewed. The sacrificial animal is slaughtered. The offering takes place early in the morning. The animal to be sacrificed (a sheep or a cow) is slaughtered in the evening prior to the day of the sacrifice itself. It is ritually slaughtered at the back of the head. The blood is allowed to flow as a sacrifice to the ancestors. The meat is cooked. In the past no salt was added to the meat, but now salt is added. The traditional healer attending the person who is afflicted by the ancestors takes some dung from the sacrificial animal and mixes it with traditional medicine. The afflicted person also takes some dung and blood from the animal and unrefined beer and goes to drop them at the grave of the ancestors concerned. The sick person prays as he or she drops the mixture, 'Please do not trouble me, make me feel better. Rest in peace. I will carry out your wish.'

After this ritual has been performed, dung and blood from the sacrificial animal and unrefined traditional beer are mixed. Then the traditional healer takes his concoction and smears the whole body of the afflicted person. This ritual is carried out privately without the presence of other people. It is called *go forola* (anoint or massage a sick person with the contents of the stomach of a sacrificial animal). When the smearing is done and the person is dry, the substance is removed from his or her body, and he or she is now allowed to mix with other people. Early the following morning when the food is ready, people come to eat the food. The food is eaten until it is finished. People also drink traditional beer, which is supposed to be drunk and finished the same day. Nothing is supposed to remain behind. This ritual, it is believed, can heal the sick person if it is accepted by the angry ancestor, who is afflicting the family member.²⁸

c. Offerings and Sacrifices for Rain

In Botswana religious beliefs the economic pursuits of Batswana are dominant, especially on matters pertaining to agriculture. Lack of rain is quite often explained away through religious reasons. Consequently, in order to secure a good supply of rain Batswana employ religious ways and means to secure their goal. In this vein when there is drought, Batswana pray to their ancestors for rain. As a matter of fact, the socio-economic life of Batswana is dominated with the desire for rain to the extent that practically all social gatherings are concluded with a prayer for rain – *pula* (rain), *pula* (rain)! In this regard rainmaking ceremonies continue to the

present day. For example, in Moremi village in the Tswapong area in central Botswana, when there is drought people are told that they cannot get rain because the ancestors are angry. When there is no rain at all, the chief of the village instructs the people through *batho ba sedimo* (religious specialists) to take a black cow and slaughter it at the *kgotla* as a sacrifice to the ancestors for rain. The chief also tells the people to make traditional beer. When the animal has been slaughtered and traditional beer has been brewed, people assemble at the *kgotla* for the rainmaking ceremony.

Once people have assembled at the *kgotla*, *batho ba sedimo* take some pieces of cooked meat and some traditional beer in a small pot to a secret location on the Tswapong Mountains as a sacrifice to the ancestors. It is commonly believed that the meat is eaten and the beer drunk by the ancestors there. This, of course, is very difficult to verify since these things are taken there at night, and no one is allowed to go there. When they return from the mountain, there is normally a sound of ululating believed to be that of the ancestors. This is an indication that they have accepted the offering and that they are very happy. Once the sacrifice has been offered, the chief tells the people to drink the beer and eat the meat early in the morning as a community. It is a kind of eucharistic fellowship in the presence of the ancestors. The chief and the religious specialists, who represent the ancestors, assure the assembled congregation that after this ceremony it will rain without failure. People then start dancing and singing rain songs full of joy, knowing full well that the rain will come. Thereafter, people disperse to their respective homes, hoping that the ancestors will fulfil their promises to send rain to give them and the land much needed water for the crops, the animals, and for themselves.²⁹

d. Offerings and Sacrifices of Thanksgiving after Harvest (dikgafela)

One of the prevalent rituals in Botswana today related to the veneration of the ancestors is a harvest festival commonly known as *dikgafela*. It is a thanksgiving festival. It involves gifts in kind given by people to indicate their gratitude to God, the ancestor, and the chief who nourished the farm produce with rain. When the time for observing this ceremony approaches, the chief of the tribe decides on the date when it will take place. The day is announced well in advance. Women are asked to prepare traditional beer for the occasion. On the appointed day people assemble at the *kgotla*. The chief takes a sip of the beer prepared for this very important occasion and pours a full calabash of beer on the ground for the ancestors. Prayers are said at the *kgotla* thanking God for the rain that he has bestowed upon them. After this, people eat and drink traditional

beer. They ululate, sing songs of praise and thanksgiving to God and the ancestors, thanking them for the blessings of rain received in the previous year and petitioning them to give people more rain in the coming rainy season. People do whatever they like in order to express their happiness. Everyone at the ceremony assumes equal status, including the chief. The chief represents the ancestors on the one hand and his people on the other. Sometimes people may pour beer on the chief without fear or cause for fear. The mood on such occasions is basically one of joy. The purpose for *dikgafela* is to celebrate life, to rejoice together, and to thank the chief and the ancestors for being generous to the people.³⁰

4. CHRISTIAN MISSIONS AND THE BELIEF IN AND VENERATION OF ANCESTORS

Botswana is a predominantly Christian country. Christianity was introduced here in the first half of the nineteenth century, and since then it has grown from strength to strength. There are at present three main groups of Christian churches. The first group comprises mission or mainline churches, consisting of Congregationalists, Anglicans, Methodists, Roman Catholics, Dutch Reformed, Lutherans, and Seventh Day Adventists. The second category comprises Pentecostal Churches, consisting of churches such as the Assemblies of God, Pentecostal Faith Mission, Church of God of Prophecy, and others. The third group consists of African Independent Churches, comprising churches such as the Zion Christian Church, Spiritual Healing Church, Antioch Church of Botswana, and many others.

It is important to note that practically all mission churches as well as Pentecostal Churches condemn strongly Botswana's belief in and veneration of ancestors, which they perceive as 'ancestor worship'. Offerings and sacrifices to the ancestors are forbidden as evil. The Christian stand against the veneration of the ancestors should be understood within the general perception of the Christian faith. Christians belonging to mainline as well as Pentecostal Churches, on the basis of Karl Barth's theology, understand the biblical revelation of God as the only revelation in the world that imparts knowledge and truth about God. They stress God's absolute powers and man's dependence on God, which does not allow room for other intermediaries such as ancestral spirits. This negative attitude towards ancestor veneration is based on the fact that prayers and sacrifices to the ancestors quite often are associated with Tswana belief in traditional medicine, witchcraft, sorcery, and divination. It appears that the mission churches as well as Pentecostal Churches discourage Botswana from using traditional medicines and charms because it is felt

that these are unchristian means of achieving their wishes that can be secured through belief in Christ, whom they proclaim as the Saviour of humankind. But most important of all, the role of the ancestors as intermediaries tends to challenge the Christian Church's teaching that Jesus Christ is the only mediator, who has ascended to the holy of holies and is now sitting on the right hand of the Father interceding on behalf of human beings. This state of affairs has put Botswana Christians in a great predicament. The general tendency has been for Christian and traditional beliefs and practices to exist side by side without the former completely supplanting the latter, as has been the case wherever the Christian gospel has been preached in tropical Africa. E. Bolaji Idowu has described this predicament among African Christians in the following words:

There is no doubt that the urgent predicament of the Church in Africa today is that of the apparent foreignness of Christianity ... By mis-carriage of purpose the church has succeeded in preaching to and in teaching Africans about a strange God whom they have somehow come to identify as the God of the white man. But what happened to the God as known to their forbears – the God who is the foundation of their traditional life? He remains still with them. And so we have them with two Gods in their hands and thus made of them peoples of ambivalent spiritual lives.³¹

In the context of Botswana, the desire to preserve the God of the fathers as encapsulated in Tswana cosmology led to the emergence of African Independent Churches, which comprise today almost 64% of the entire Christian population in the country.

5. ANCESTOR VENERATION AS A FACTOR IN THE EMERGENCE OF AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCHES

Because of their importance in Tswana society, attacks on the ancestors by mainline as well as Pentecostal Churches are viewed as an attack on the very foundation of tribal and family structures. Consequently, the Christians' onslaught on the ancestors has become one of the factors that led to the formation of African Independent Churches in the country. Harold Turner, who carried out extensive research on church independence, has pointed out that African Independent Churches 'may be described as having been founded in Africa, by Africans, for Africans to worship in African ways and to meet African needs as African themselves feel them'.³² Kofi Appiah-Kubi, in his article titled 'Indigenous African Christian Churches: Signs of Authenticity', has defined these churches as

churches founded by Africans for Africans in our special African situations. They have all African membership as well as all African leadership. Some were founded by Africans in reaction to some feature of the Christianity of missionary societies; most were founded among those people who had known Christianity the longest.³³

A close examination of church independency in Botswana shows that the question of African identity has contributed tremendously not only in the formation but also in the proliferation of African Independent Churches in the country. As a matter of fact it appears that the veneration of the ancestors and rituals associated with them, especially healing by means of divination and traditional medicines, is a source of attraction in many of these churches. The situation regarding the place of the ancestral spirits in the new religious movements in Botswana seems to be similar to that occupied by the ancestral spirits in the African Independent Churches among the Akan people of Ghana. Kofi Appiah-Kubi, writing about the role of the ancestors in the indigenous churches in Ghana, documents this as follows:

Another important area of attraction is the importance these churches place on veneration of ancestors, who are said to be the custodians of law, morality and ethical order of the Akan. The mission churches, while overlooking the Akan ancestors, urge their members to venerate St. George of England, St. Andrew of Scotland or St. Christopher of the Vatican, who are very much removed from the convert's daily wants and anxieties.³⁴

It is important to note that in most African Independent Churches, such as the Zion Christian Church, Mount Ararat Church, and others, the ancestors are considered as an extension of the church (militant) and form a community of saints (the church triumphant). They are intermediaries between God and his church here on earth and as such prayers are made to God through them. For instance, in the Citizens Apostolic Church belief in ancestors is preserved in the faith and practice of the church. It is believed that the ancestors have power to help the church. They are part of the *ecclesia* (the church). Prayers and offerings are made to the ancestors to heal the sick. Offerings of flour (burnt offerings) are made to God, during which the names of the ancestors of the sick persons are mentioned, petitioning them to heal the sick people concerned.³⁵

On this score a number of African Independent Churches allow and encourage their members to pray to God through their ancestors in accordance with their culture. It is argued that Christ as a Jew prayed to

his father, mentioning the names of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, his ancestors according to Jewish culture. According to the Nazareth Church of Botswana, belief in ancestral spirits persists in many churches because Jesus said that he came not to destroy the traditions of the people but to fulfil them (Mt 5:17).³⁶ By and large, a number of the African Independent Churches believe in the saving powers of the ancestors. Ancestral spirits appear in dreams and visions. It is generally believed that this shows the immortality of human beings, thereby assuring us that there is life after death. When the ancestral spirits appear in dreams and visions, they help people who are sick to know the cause of their sickness and show them the proper medicines which can cure them. This applies more specifically to members of their families. Quite often a number of churches make offerings to the ancestral spirits asking them to take prayers of the people to God so that he can help them. A considerable number of leaders of the new churches argue that before the church came to Botswana, Batswana had a strong belief in their ancestral spirits, who acted as intermediaries between them and God. The arrival of the Bible did not abrogate the role of the ancestors as intermediaries, but provided an additional channel of communication with God. Because of this their role as intercessors still continues.

The ancestors play a vital role in the belief systems of many Independent Churches in regard to the questions of immortality and the resurrection of the dead. People can see them in their dreams and visions. The immortality of the ancestors as seen in the dreams is taken to be an indication that Jesus is alive and that we can also accept him as our Great Ancestor, living here and now. The ancestors have a direct impact in the lives of people in the community, and on this account they need respect from the living. Respecting and honouring the ancestors helps people to maintain their identity with the corporate group in the extended family. Ancestral spirits are not worshipped in the new churches, but help to strengthen the family bond. People can pray to God through them for good health, food, shelter, bearing of children, and acquisition of other material and spiritual blessings in the way they feel appropriate.

Quite often no distinction is made between the Holy Spirit and the ancestral spirits. It is believed that their roles are complimentary and not antagonistic. On special occasions the Holy Spirit can and does speak through the ancestral spirits. The ancestors are an integral part of the hierarchy of spiritual beings. At the head of the ancestral spirits as spiritual beings stands God as the greatest of all the ancestors. He is the Greatest Ancestor, the Ancient of all the ancestors. When offerings are made to the

ancestors in the church for the sick, the unemployed, and school children asking them to help them, they only occupy an intermediary role with God as the ultimate recipient.

The majority of African Independent Churches in Botswana believe that it is wrong when Christians persuade the African people to reject their ancestors, their African heritage, which leads to loss of identity. Ancestors are an effective means of communication between God as a spiritual being and man. One function of the ancestral spirits is to guide members of the church in times of conflict by warning them before hand through dreams of the impending dangers and how to overcome them. In some churches the saving assistance of the ancestral spirits is sought on a daily basis. For example, in St Mark's Service Church, the ancestral spirits are prayed to daily in the morning and evening, asking them to help the church to heal the sick, and also in times of drought. Appeals are made to the ancestral spirits by means of offerings and sacrifices. Animals or a drinking party using local traditional beer and snuff are offered to them because the ancestors used to like these things.³⁷ Certain African Independent Churches recognize the intercessory power of the ancestral spirits, especially in connection with rainmaking ceremonies. This is specially so among the Kalanga, where some African Independent Churches associate themselves with the Mwari Cult. For example, the Messiah Church of Ten Commandments maintains close ties with the Mwari Cult at Ramokgwebana. Whenever need arises, members of the church and followers of the Mwari cult pray together at the mountain of Mwari for rain.³⁸

It would be fallacious to think that the ancestors always play a beneficial role in society. In some churches it is believed that the ancestors are the cause of certain diseases among sick people who come to church for healing. In this regard their role in society is considered as evil because they afflict men and women with various diseases. This is the view adopted by the St Matthew's Apostolic Faith Mission. In this church during healing services offerings are made to drive away the ancestors who cause diseases to people in the community.³⁹

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has examined belief in and veneration of ancestors in Africa generally and Botswana in particular. It has shown that many Africans still continue to believe in their ancestors despite the fact that they have been living under the influence of Christianity for many years. The failure of Christianity to supplant belief in ancestors and practices associated with

them is based on the fact that they form a central part of African spirituality. The Christian stand against such beliefs has only created African Independent Churches, which currently continue to attract many Batswana Christians because they feel at home in such churches in terms of meeting their spiritual and material needs, especially in the area of healing.

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NOTES

1. Nyamiti, [n.d.]: 45.
2. *Ibid.*, 46.
3. Laroche, 1968: 291.
4. Zahan, 1979: 49.
5. Smith, 1950: 84. See also Smith, 1927: 192.
6. Zahan, 1979: 48.
7. Parrinder, 1969: 69.
8. Amanze, 2002: 64–5.
9. M'timkulu, 1977: 21.
10. Smith (ed.), 1950: 24.
11. M'timkulu, 1977: 18.
12. Young, 1950: 39.
13. M'timkulu, 1977: 19.
14. Hopgood, 1950: 62.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 67–8.
16. Smith, 1950: 111.
17. Dickson, 1984: 69.
18. Barrett, 1968: 119.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Information collected by means of fieldwork by the author in many parts of Botswana from 1999 to 2001.
21. Willoughby, 1928: 76–7.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
23. Brown, 1926: 98.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
25. Larson, 1985: 33.
26. Brown, 1926: 99.
27. Amanze, 2002: 73–4.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 326–7.
30. Amanze, 1998: 29–30.
31. E. Bolaji Idowu in Dickson and Ellingworth (eds), 1969: 13.
32. Turner, 1979: 10.
33. Appiah-Kubi, 'Indigenous African Christian Churches: Signs of Authenticity', p. 117.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
35. Amanze, 1994: 75.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 200.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 273.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 277.

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