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ANCESTORAL CALLING WITHIN THE METHODIST CHURCH OF SOUTHERN AFRICA.

INTRODUCTION.

We live in a continent and country that has many, many different cultures and traditions. It is a good thing to say as Christians we only have one culture, the Christian culture, but until we define what that is for us today, we remain with all the different cultures!

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) has no official position on the Traditional African Cultural practices of our Southern African communities. Our congregants who are members of these communities are affected by these cultural practices which are part of their daily lives, are then forced to live double lives. One in the shadows and one in the public domain. *"A Methodist by day and a Pentecostal by night."*

Conference resolved to encourage local Circuits and Societies to give greater priority to ministries and services of healing and to explore in greater depth means by which this vital aspect of *Christian Ministry may be exercised within our Connexion in a manner that is scriptural, contextual, inclusive and holistic*. In this vein, *it is our hope that the healing wisdom inherent within African spirituality be further explored to foster ministries of healing that are authentically rooted in a spirituality that is both deeply Christian and deeply African.* (italics mine). (BOO 2014:214).

African Cultural practices is a very wide domain, and for the purposes of this paper I have concentrated on the traditional healers / diviners (*sangomas*), who have a "double calling" as a diviner and a prophet/ess.

THE NEED FOR CHRISTIAN TRADITIONAL HEALERS.

In Africa it is believed that usually it is human beings and not God who is viewed as the author of evil. As Anderson rightly says, "the witch is the one to be feared in traditional Africa, and from whom protection must be sought, *therefore* Pneumatology in Africa does not so much have to correct a mistaken theism as to provide answers for this very real evil." (Anderson.1991:14).

I agree with Anderson that when there is uncertainty about the traditional African's position in relation to the Supreme Being, when the fear of evil is overwhelming, and when trouble in any form arises, one will often need outside assistance. One needs strengthening against the uncertainty and unpredictability of life. The traditional healers are specialists in this field, and very often will provide answers that the person in trouble seeks, judging by the

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long queue often witnessed at the homes of these diviners despite the sometimes bad weather conditions!

The traditional healer will often instruct the afflicted individual to give attention to the ancestor cult in order to resolve the problem. But there are times when neither the traditional healer nor the ancestors will appear to solve the problem, one is then forced to take the problem to the Supreme Being and this is often the last resort. One needs a practising Christian traditional healer who can give guidance in this situation.

A METHODIST BY DAY AND A PENTECOSTAL BY NIGHT.

We have a huge number of our members who live a double life. The main reason for the rise of this category of people is believed to be "Spiritual hunger". As Barrett (in Daneel. 1987:78) puts it "The gospel proclaimed by white missionaries was often superficial and impoverished, it did not even touch on many facets of the life or struggle of the African! The really was no answer to man's (*sic*) concrete physical needs".

Interviewing people visiting the traditional healers, most of them Christians from historic mission churches, I agree with Maimela (1985:71) that: A large number of African Christians believe that the church is not interested in their daily misfortune, illness, encounter with evil and witchcraft, bad luck, poverty, barrenness- in short all their concrete social problems.....most Africans often do not know what to do with their new, attractive Christian religion and yet one which dismally fails to meet their emotional and spiritual needs.

THE AFRICAN SPIRITUAL WORLD.

People interviewed both traditional healers and their clients believe that the spirit world permeate the whole of life, the all- embracing Spirit is involved in every facet of individual and community life. This is supported by Oosthuizen (in Anderson 1991:8) This pervading Spirit is simply a continuum of the traditional religion, where(quoting Lediga): "the essential thing is that your life should always be identified with the will of the spirit, at work and at play, at worship, at a wedding perhaps, at meal times, in the harvesting and preparation of your food!

The average African traditional person does not distinguish between secular and sacred, physical and spiritual- everything is at the same time""sacred" and "spiritual"(Anderson. 1991:75). As Anderson continues to say: "The same essential reality permeates everywhere and is experienced rather than verbalised. All things are saturated with religious meaning". Therefore as Mbiti (in Anderson 1991:75) observed, Christianity will fail to be meaningful in an African context unless it fully occupies the whole person at least as much as traditional religions do: "The whole environment and the whole time must be occupied by religious

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meaning, so that at any moment and at any place, a person feels secure enough to act in a meaningful and religious consciousness".

Most people struggle to establish a close personal relationship with a God that is inscrutable, so for the most part God is "unknown", and no relationship exists with the Supreme Being. The ancestors on the other hand are known to have a "transcendent soul" which is believed to be what human beings have in common with God and receives directly from the Supreme Being, are known, and the strong community and family relationships are unaffected by death and this is the reason why African traditional people turn to ancestors as they can more easily relate to them, they are understandable. One can argue with them, plead one's case and even scold them.

ILLNESS AND HEALTH IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT.

I want to agree with W.H.R. Rivers (in Sundkler. 1961:221) that in African Culture, medicine, magic, and religion are closely related and that their domains overlap in many respects. From the people interviewed there is a definite connexion between medicine on the one hand and religion and witchcraft on the other, as Sundkler says constituting the warp and woof of the whole pattern of *African* traditional belief. (Sundkler.1961:221) (*Italics mine*).

Witchcraft and the whims of ancestors are believed to be the two main causes of illness, and the ancestor cult is without question the most prominent aspect of African traditional religions. What Anderson sees as "the heart of African Spirit World!". (1991:79). Contrary to what some Christian leaders and some researchers have said, I believe this is not a belief which is today dying out. In fact, the cult still plays an important part in the lives of most Africans who are converted to Christianity. (Daneel.1985:94). Those interviewed believe that ancestors have protective powers over them, and that if and when ignored they become angered and can cause destruction.

It does seem though that ancestors are regarded merely as "agents", the ultimate cause being the Supreme Being. Although ancestors are generally believed to be much nearer to God than living people, they are conceived to be quite distinct from God and ancestors are not worshipped. It is almost blasphemous therefore to describe the ancestor cult as "worshipping". This is supported by Mbiti (in Anderson 1991:81).

CALLING.

The ancestral calling is in some ways similar to Gods calling, in the sense that it never leaves you until you succumb to it. As Sundkler says "The urge to be possessed by the spirit and to become a diviner is felt in an irresistible force". And once the spirit has made known its intention to enter the person concerned, the spirit must have its way. (1961:22).

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The intention is communicated through dreams and visions. At times the person is plagued by chronic illness that sometimes lead to death, some experience trouble in their marriages, broken relationships etc.. others , who get the call at school going age, like one of the diviners I interviewed, she lost interest in school because *izincwadi bezinginukela*"(the books were stinking) and she started using snuff to "get rid of the smell".

Few are those who consciously wish to become possessed, many would rather not go through that process, but because of the disruptions that happen in their lives because of resisting the calling, they succumb to the spirit and go to where the *idlozi* points for one to be initiated (*ukuthwasa*) to become a diviner. Having witnessed the initiation routine, I want to agree with Sundkler that "while in the later routine activities of the diviner, magic and religion are blended, the actual initiation process is predominantly religious because of the role of the ancestors. (1961:22).

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION.

Born and bred in the MCSA, I reflected on the teachings I received and as a minister continue to give about the dead. To this end, I looked at the 1974 Methodist Service Book, particularly at the funeral service contained therein. I looked at the prayers offered during the Committal, when the body is laid in the earth or on the catafalque, some of the prayers read thus:

For as much as our *brother* has departed out of this life, and Almighty God in his great mercy *has called him to himself*, we therefore.....**Amen.** (Italics mine).

Father of all, we *pray* for those whom we love, but *see* no longer. *Grant them* your peace; let light perpetual *shine* upon them; and in your loving wisdom and almighty power *work* in them the good purpose of your perfect will; through Jesus Christ our Lord.....(Ibid:F17) (Italics mine).

Almighty and everlasting God, Lord of the living and the dead, give to the living mercy and grace, to the dead, rest and light perpetual....(MSB:1975-page 18).

We praise you for the great company of the faithful who Christ has brought through death to behold your face in glory, who join with us in worship, prayer and service. (Italics mine) (MSB 1975-page 13).

All these prayers read at funerals held at the Methodist Church have conveyed a message to the people that is true, "Death is not the end, but the beginning of a new life in Spirit".

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I am concluding this paper with a Scripture verse and a question. -----he died, but through his faith he is still speaking, (Heb. 11:4b).

My question, "is Abel the only one who still speaks. How do the faithfully departed speak? Discourse continues.....