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African Traditional Religion in the face of Secularism in South Africa

It is a well documented fact that African Traditional Religion was discriminated against by the missionaries, as well as colonial and apartheid governments. African traditionalist and academic Nokuzola Mndende¹ points out that under these regimes the public profile of African knowledge systems declined and African religion became an “underground praxis”. Religious historian David Chidester² has documented a history of intolerance toward African religious traditions from the time when settlers set foot on South African soil. Initially there was a denial that Africans had a religion, based on the idea that Africans had no idea of a Supreme Being or God. Such an assertion implied that Africans were at the same level as animals and therefore had no human rights, thus justifying the seizure of land and oppression of Africans in general. Later there was acceptance that Africans did have religion, but it was considered inferior, as it was ‘superstition’.

The 1993 Interim Constitution ushered in a dispensation of racial inclusiveness and human rights. Freedom of religion was one of the rights introduced. There was an attempt by the writers of the Constitution to avoid making the same mistakes as the previous regimes by privileging one religion over others. The Constitution recognised that South Africa is a religiously plural society, and aimed to protect people’s rights to belong to any religion without fear of being discriminated against or persecuted. Freedom was also extended to those who hold no religious beliefs. This protection of religious freedom should be understood as part of the project of cultivating tolerance in a previously deeply divided society³.

Section 15 (1) of the Bill of Rights says “Everyone has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion”. Ebrahim Moosa⁴ holds the view that the South African Constitution has a dualistic view of religion, that is,

- religion as an abstract and unarticulated dogma and
- religion as practice.

The translation of belief into practice is severely limited by the constitution. The constitution individualises religion and confines it to a private space. If religion appears in public spaces it must be regulated in such a way that it does not interfere

with the norms and values of the secular state. Individuals can hold beliefs and put them in practice as long as they do not violate the constitution or the law. In other words, Muslims, African Traditionalists, and Hindus can believe in polygamy but the law will not recognise such unions. The same is true for Rastafarians: they can believe in the spiritual power of cannabis (dagga) but it is illegal to possess or smoke it. The state, on the other hand, cannot afford to allow the practice of forced marriages, ritual murder and other violent crimes in the name of religious practice.

The 1996 Constitution ushered in an era of openness, democracy and human rights in South Africa. The Bill of Rights was designed to protect people from abuses by private citizens or the state. Religion is subordinated to the authority of the state. It has the ability to mould people but it has to do so within the parameters of state authority. Historically, religions have been implicated in human rights violations throughout the world. State morality has clashed with religious morality: thus the the failed Constitutional Court challenge by Gareth Prince to put aside a decision by the Law Society of the Western Cape not to register him as an attorney because, as a Rastafarian, he had been convicted on two occasions for possession of cannabis (dagga)⁵.

The aim of this paper is to reflect on how African Traditional Religion (ATR) has fared in the face of secularism in South Africa. We will consider a number of practices that have caught the attention of the public. Chirevo Kwenda⁶, in defining ATR, bemoaned the fact that African intellectuals, in their attempt to define what it means to be African, were preoccupied with trying to correct outsiders, paying homage to Western shrine keepers, and seeking acceptance from the West.

For Kwenda, the version of ATR produced by the scholars is tainted. However, there is a version that is produced by ordinary people, who simply do what they do without caring who is watching them. In the post 1994 period a number of events related to ATR have been brought to the public attention through the media. Some of these events were highly controversial: botched circumcisions, *ukweshwama*, ritual slaughter of animals, virginity testing, polygamy, “*muthi*” murders, witch-finding and burning, etc.

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ATR in the aftermath of 1994

The post 1994 dispensation opened up space for ATR and other marginalised traditions; space to have a public voice and profile. The dominant public view of ATR was generally negative before 1994. For some African Christians, it was deemed an embarrassment to be seen to be engaged in traditional rituals and practices, or to consult traditional religious specialists. African Christians continued to practise some of their rituals, albeit without the knowledge of the missionary authorities. Sacrifices would be performed at night and feasts would be held during the day. These traditional rituals would be referred to as either “tea” or “dinner”. Many Christians were uneasy with the use of the traditional terms *umsebenzi* or *tirelo*, that is, “service”, because these terms (“tea” and “dinner”) were part of the missionary discourse. The same is true for consultations with the sacred specialists, which would be done secretly. Nokuzola Mndende⁷ accused African Christians of double talk and serving two masters. Among fellow Christians they professed the power of the blood of Jesus but among traditionalists they swore by the power of their ancestors for health and good fortune.

House opening rituals have become common in urban areas. McAllister⁸ observed that among AmaXhosa, ancestral religion was adapted to meet the needs of a changing socio-political and economic reality. With the advent of migrant labour, African men moved from their familiar rural setting to the unfamiliar and supposedly dangerous urban areas. Ancestral religion was affected by this movement. There was an appeal to the ancestors for protection on the journey as well as during their stay in the urban areas. Initially, urban areas were not perceived as places where people settled permanently because the rural areas provided all the elements that made one human. Migrant labour became another aspect of male initiation – in this instance a man has to prove his manhood through his ability to earn money to both build a homestead and cater for the needs of his wife and children. Post 1994, with Africans being allowed to stay permanently in the urban areas and being able to purchase property in former white suburbs, there developed an idea of ‘house opening’. During this ritual, ancestors are invited to come and stay in the house with the owner and the family.

Ukweshwama is one of the rituals that have captured the nation’s imagination and sparked a fierce debate and contestation that ended up in court. The meaning and content of the celebration were not the contested subjects. The Animal Rights Activists petitioned the High Court in Pietermaritzburg to instruct the Zulu King not to allow the ritual killing of the bull during the celebrations in 2009 because it constituted cruelty to the animal in question. *Ukweshwama* can be described as the

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that he was reinstating circumcision as part of male initiation. Being aware of problems experienced by AmaXhosa with regard to this issue, he pointed out that he was going to consult other African groups and enlist the help of the medical fraternity in carrying out circumcisions. By doing this he responded to critics of virginity testing that it only focussed on girls. He was seen to be doing something to create awareness among boys about HIV/AIDS. His decision stood on two pillars; first, restoration of an old custom and, second, medical evidence that circumcision reduces chances of contracting HIV.

The subject of ritual slaughter came to the public view after the release of Tony Yengeni from prison. The family believed that there was something defiling about prison. He had paid his debt to society for corruption and he needed to be cleansed and restored to his previous position both in the family and the community. The family maintained that it is part of their tradition to slaughter a bull for a cleansing

ceremony. Since the animal is dedicated to the ancestors, it is expected that it should bellow to indicate that there is acceptance of the offering in the ancestral world. The public debate that ensued highlighted the tension between culture and aspects of the law. The ability to negotiate these tensions points to the strength of the South African constitution and the institutions that support it.

Rainmaking and fertility rituals are very prominent among Southern African people. Queen Mudjadji of Lovedu people was known throughout Southern Africa as the rain queen. Eileen Krige⁹, in her important work, *The realm of a rain-queen: a study of the pattern of Lovedu society*, points out that Mudjadji received delegations from all over Southern Africa for her rainmaking abilities. Such rituals indicate people's uncertainty about what nature would do. The aim is to ask nature to be kind to them. Thereby creating a situation where there is harmony between people and nature, which is a critical realisation that humanity depends on nature for survival. For Chirevo Kwenda, through

going beyond co-operation with nature, itself a progressive step, human beings learn to bear themselves with humility in the face of nature. They sit at its feet to be taught seemingly familiar yet unfathomable wonders, which may contain keys to intractable human problems. They come to see, or rediscover, that nature is there in its own right, for itself primarily, and secondarily for mutual co-operation with humankind. They make the sobering discovery that while they need nature, nature does not need them. Perhaps they must not stop there; they must move on in boldness to affirm that human beings are ontologically not caretakers or stewards of anything, but dependents and beneficiaries of the universe. They are only caretakers by default, as a result of their status as *naturicides*.¹⁰

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The celebration of *Nomkhubulwane* and *ukweshwama* were some of the ways in which AmaZulu demonstrated their dependence on nature. *Nomkhubulwane* is the only daughter of Mvelinqangi. She is the Zulu divinity in female form. Eileen Krige described as "Inkosazana, personification of nature, was symbolised as standing on the threshold of summer like a girl at her puberty ceremony, ready for marriage and procreation"¹¹. Mazisi Kunene points out that

Nomkhubulwane is the most central symbol of creation. She establishes the female principle as philosophically the primary force in creation. Through the female principle, the seemingly irreconcilable elements are brought together. Thus the conciliation of opposites and the establishment of balance become the very essence of growth and creation¹².

In Zulu cosmology *Nomkhubulwane* is associated with light, rain, and fertility. Fertility is an all encompassing term which includes the land, animals, and humans. For the woman, fertility was important, as her womanhood was pegged on her ability to reproduce. Keeping pure and celebrating *Nomkhubulwane* meant that once married the woman would be able to reproduce. In the past she was celebrated locally by a group of girls who would cultivate a field in her honour. Such a field was not tended and no one was allowed to harvest anything from it. The celebration of *Nomkhubulwane* disappeared during the colonial period and, when it was re-

introduced, it was made into a national spectacle, which was led and directed by *izangoma*. As part of the spectacle the facilitators included virginity testing. The reasons for the re-introduction of the celebration were twofold:

- to assert an African cultural identity; and
- to respond to calls for moral regeneration and increased HIV/AIDS awareness.

Virginity testing is meant encourage girls to abstain from sexual activity until they are married. It serves to keep them pure while at the same time protecting them from HIV/AIDS. The practice received a barrage of criticism from various sectors of the South African population. The Commission on Gender Equality has been the fiercest critic of the practice. Interestingly, the practice not only got support from traditional establishments¹³ but also received the backing of Kwasizabantu Mission. In a media statement on 9 February 2000 Rev. Stegen made it clear that the practice promoted the same values of purity as they did and, as such, they could not condemn it.

The major complaint attributed to the ancestors is that they have been neglected. Rapid urbanisation has seen African culture, tradition and custom being watered down by the influence of other cultures.

American researcher Kendall¹⁴ reports that Nomagugu Ngobese re-introduced the festival of Nomkhubulwane in 1995 after an instruction by her ancestors in a dream¹⁵ in 1994. According to Kendall, many sacred specialists in KwaZulu-Natal explained the plight of AmaZulu and other Black people as a result of the wrath of the ancestors. In his discussion of sacred specialists, Geoffrey Parrinder points out that,

In all religions one finds experts in religious matters, whether full-time or not. The sacred is dangerous to ordinary mortals, its demands are mysterious and perhaps its character capricious, so that intermediaries are needed who themselves partake of the divine nature¹⁶.

The major complaint attributed to the ancestors is that they have been neglected. Rapid urbanisation has seen African culture, tradition and custom being watered down by the influence of other cultures. Africans are accused of turning away from their roots. When the African people turned away from their core spiritual entities, Nomkhubulwane in particular, society lost its balance. With the loss of balance,

- disease swept through the people (HIV/ AIDS);
- there was disharmony in society, which explains the high levels of crime and civil discontent;
- respect for women was lost, resulting in the high incidence of rape and abuse of women.

The political violence of 1980s and 90s and civil strife experienced by AmaZulu could be traced back to the neglect of *Nomkhubulwane*.

Gender issues in African thought

President Jacob Zuma's rape trial and the fact that he had a child with a woman to whom he was not married created an opening for a debate on gender relations in African communities¹⁷. The dominant view is that ATR has many elements which deny women their human rights and dignity. The idea of purity, especially as promoted by the advocates of virginity testing, is burdensome to women. In the case

of virginity, it is the sole responsibility of the girl to remain so until she is married but the same demands are not made of men¹⁸. Deidre Badejo¹⁹ argues that African oral tradition and myths placed women at the centre of production. Furthermore, power and femininity are intertwined rather than antithetical. What happened here? What created a scenario where power and femininity are antithetical? What happened to the power of femininity? Do the powerful take such oral traditions seriously? What needs to be done to place such aspects of oral tradition at the centre of public discourse and practice? Badejo alludes to the fact that western sexism played a critical role in distorting African gender relations. Celebrations like Nomkhubulwane have the potential to open up the debate on gender inequality. Zulu cosmology has an in-built principle of complementarity. Oyeronke Olajubu, commenting on the Yoruba context, asserted that “neutral complementarity describes more accurately than subordination the relationship between male and female roles in various precolonial African societies”²⁰.

African Religion in the future

Rosalind Hackett²¹ argued that New Religious Movements are not only about providing relevant spiritual expressions or validating their cultural roots, but are also about negotiating new indigenous forms of Christianity. South Africa experienced the rise of various movements within the Christian fold that incorporated aspects of African religion and practice and are collectively called the African Indigenous Churches (AICs). These movements were able to keep alive some aspects of ATR. The most important aspect of ATR is the emergence of Dr. Mathole Motshekga’s Kara Institute and Dr. Nokuzola Mndende’s Icamagu Institute. The two institutes saw the need for preservation, recording, classification and research on various aspects of ATR. Given the fact that ATR is an orally transmitted tradition, with the passing away of many of the elders it became imperative to have these recorded. Both Drs. Motshekga and Mndende have written a number of books on leadership, ethics, morality and other subjects. Mndende went as far as to establish contact with communities in her endeavour to receive and disseminate information. Her vision is to place ATR at the centre of public discourse on all issues because she is of the view that it can make important contributions to building a better country.

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Conclusion

This article has looked at a number of appearances of ATR in public. Often when Africans appeal to institutions of their culture they are accused of hiding behind tradition. I wish to put forward a different opinion, echoing the view of Jean and John Comaroff: “it is often a mode of producing new forms of consciousness; of expressing discontent with modernity and dealing with its deformities”²². Often when these issues are debated in public, the only content of these traditions taken into account is those aspects that people find repugnant. *Nomkhubulwane*, on the other hand, deals with the erosion of morality, the detachment that modern society has from the environment, and provides a response to the problem of HIV/AIDS. Kendall mentioned one incident at a luncheon after one of the Nomkhubulwane festivals when female *izangoma* politely refused to serve food to their male colleagues. For me, that was an important statement by female *izangoma*. Male and female *izangoma* are equals as they both serve the ancestors. Their position is not defined by gender; *isangoma* embodies both femininity and masculinity. In other words, the spirit medium is asexual. This represents a progressive approach to gender relations, which South

Africa society could learn from.

South Africa faces many challenges, like poverty, unemployment, racism, etc. It would be foolhardy to ignore any of the resources at our disposal. I would therefore concur with Philippe Denis²³ that African Traditional Religion has a future in South Africa.

NOTES

- 1 Nokuzola Mndende (1998) "From Underground Praxis to Recognised Religion: Challenges facing African Religions". *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 11(2): 115.
- 2 David Chidester (1994). *Authentic Forgery or forging authenticity: comparative religion in South Africa*. Inaugural lecture no.186, University of Cape Town. David Chidester (1996). *Savage Systems: Colonialism and comparative religion in Southern Africa*. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia.
- 3 Laurens M. Du Plessis (2001). *Freedom of or Freedom from Religion? An Overview of issues pertinent to the constitutional protection or religious rights and freedom in "the New South Africa"*. *Birmingham Young University Law Review*, 442.
- 4 Ebrahim Moosa (2000). *Tensions in legal and religious values in the 1996 South African Constitution*. Mahmood Mamdani (ed.) *Beyond Rights Talk and cultural talk*. Cape Town: David Philip.
- 5 Mail and Guardian (2005) "Rasta Lawyer to petition UN for the right to dope". <http://mg.co.za/article/2005-09-02-rasta-lawyer-to-petition-un-for-right-dope> Mail and Guardian (2002) "Africans are still looked down upon". After losing his constitutional court battle, Gareth Prince criticised the court for suppressing African practices. It has to be noted that the decision of the Constitutional Court was not unanimous; it also drew strong criticism from the minority report compiled by Justices Albie Sachs and Yvonne Mokgoro. <http://www.org/articles/5593/>
- 6 Chirevo V Kwenda (1997) "African Traditional Religion", in David Chidester, Chirevo Kwenda et al, *African Traditional Religion in South Africa*. Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 1–9.
- 7 Nokuzola Mndende (1998) *Siyacamagusha*. Cape Town: Icamagu Institute, 9.
- 8 P. A. McAllister (1980) 'Work, Homestead, and the Shades: The ritual interpretation of labour migration among the Gcaleka'. Philip Meyer (ed.) *Black Villagers in Industrial Society: Anthropological Perspectives on Labour Migration in South Africa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 205-253.
- 9 Eileen Jensen Krige (1978) *The realm of a rain-queen: a study of the pattern of Lovedu society*. New York: AMS Press
- 10 Chirevo V. Kwenda (2000) "Beyond Patronage: Giving and Receiving in the construction of civil society". James R. Cochrane and Bastienne Klein (eds.) *Sameness and Difference: Problems and Potentials in South African Civil Society*. Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 243-268.
- 11 Eileen Jensen Krige (1968) "Girls' puberty songs and their relation to fertility, health, morality, and religion among the Zulu". *Africa*, 38(2): 173.
- 12 Mazisi Kunene, (1981) *Anthem of the decades: a Zulu epic dedicated to the women of Africa*. London: Heinemann, XIII-XL.
- 13 Philippe Denis(2006) "The rise of traditional African religion in post-apartheid South Africa". *Missionalia* 34:2/3 310–323. He points out that there was political support for initiatives in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape but that change with the introduction of Children's Act in 2005, which limited testing on children under the age 16. The Children's Act was criticised by the King Zwelithini as an infringement on the parent's rights to raise their children.
- 14 Kendal (1999) "The role of Izangoma in bringing a Zulu Goddess back to her people". *The Drama Review*, 43(2): 94-117.
- 15 Dreams in African thought are an important and powerful medium of communication with the ancestors. Some are straightforward and could easily be interpreted by any family elder; however, there are complex ones that require the expert knowledge of a sacred specialist. Izangoma not only have specialized knowledge but also have access to the supernatural world, thus they are able give decisive interpretations. The truth can only be uncovered through accessing the supernatural world. What happens in the seen or visible world is formed and directed from the unseen or invisible world. The truth can only be uncovered by connecting to that world. The sacred specialists are the key to unlocking that truth.
- 16 Edward Geoffrey Parrinder (1962) *African Traditional Religion* London: SPCK, 100
- 17 For many, Mr. Zuma symbolises the traditional simplicity and elegance reflected by his lifestyle as a polygamous man, as well as modern suaveness and sophistication reflected in his position as leader of the ANC and president of the Republic of South Africa.
- 18 Fiona Scorgie "Virginity Testing and the Politics of Sexual Responsibility: Implications for AIDS Intervention". *African Studies*, 61(1): 55-74. She makes a very strong point that in the sexual politics of the community, the idea of testing reinforces the ideal that men are the initiators of sexual relations. Her fear is that the virginity testing movement will produce young women who will find it difficult in future to negotiate relationships as the messages that come though are such that young girls should stay away from boys.
- 19 Diedre L. Badejo (1998) 'African Feminism: Mythical and Social Power of Women of African Descent'. *Research in African Literatures*, 29(2): 94-111.
- 20 Oyeronke Olajubu (2004) 'Seeing through a woman's eye: Yoruba Religious Tradition and Gender Relations'. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 20(1): 43.
- 21 Rosalind Hackett (1986) "African New Religious Movements" *African Studies Review* 29(3): 141-146.
- 22 Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff (1999) "Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony" *American Ethnologist*, 26(2): 284
- 23 Philippe Denis(2006) "The rise of traditional African religion in post-apartheid South Africa". *Missionalia* 34:2/3: 321