

## Article

# A Critical Evaluation of the Impact of Religious Belief (Christianity) within Post-Colonial African Burial Rites: A South African Perspective

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**Abstract:** The mystery of death, dying and funerals has been a universal phenomenon in the lives of almost all human beings, from humanity's fall from grace to today. Death visits every culture, clan and family, and yet it continues to be a terrifying, unexpected stranger and the most feared enemy of human beings. People from different cultures use different coping mechanisms to fight off the pain of death, but for some people in the Collins Chabane Municipality, a particular Christian religious belief has been shown to be the most reliable asset during the battle. It is questionable whether alternative traditions besides Christianity can compete with Christianity in bringing healing from the pain of death. Various methods of healing, like African grief therapy and psychological healing, are offered to bereaved family members after death and even after burial, but are they enough for Africans to return to their normal lives? This article discusses why (Christian) religious belief is essential during and after the burial of a loved one. This is carried out within the context of colonialism having eroded all African traditions, creating a space for Christianity alone to be a remedy in death and burying.

**Keywords:** death; culture; religion; African grief therapy; African burial traditions



**Citation:** Baloyi, Magezi Elijah. 2024. A Critical Evaluation of the Impact of Religious Belief (Christianity) within Post-Colonial African Burial Rites: A South African Perspective. *Religions* 15: 248. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020248>

Academic Editor: Dyron B. Daugherty

Received: 14 December 2023

Revised: 13 February 2024

Accepted: 15 February 2024

Published: 19 February 2024



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## 1. Introduction

This article <sup>1,2</sup> is part of a three-year project entitled “Critical reflections on the erosion of African funeral traditions: A case study of the Collins Chabane Municipality in Limpopo, South Africa”. While reflecting on the role of religions, particularly Christianity,<sup>3</sup> it is important to listen to the voices of formerly colonized people regarding their culture and traditions. I agree with Vuyokazi Nelly Sharpley and Leslie Bank, who argue that funerals in South Africa are family and community affairs where families and religious leaders are afforded the liberty to bury the dead in their own respective ways (Sharpley and Bank 2020).

Part of this report indicates a reaction during the peak of COVID-19, where only 50 people were allowed to attend a funeral. It is almost impossible to conceive of death and dying separately from spirituality and religious beliefs (Bukaliya and Rugonye 2016). Being notoriously religious, as Mbiti (1969, p. 68) argued, African people follow religion to the extent that every aspect of their lives is religious (Manganyi and Buitendag 2013, p. 3; Mndende 2006, p. 161). I agree with Ademiluka (2009, p. 17), who suggested that mourning is another way of preserving culture. One of the contributing factors for funerals to be led religiously is the basic general belief among some Africans, especially in the Collins Chabane Municipality, that death is not the end of human life, but it is seen as a transition from this world to the land of the spirits (Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata 2014). The author of this article acknowledges that culture is not static but a dynamic phenomenon; hence, this article does not intend to undermine or neglect the fact that some cultural traits deserve revision while others cannot be retrieved or defended at all. It should be appreciated that culture and religion influence each other in one way or another.

## 2. Problem Statement

The opening question is to ask how one can become a devoted Christian without losing his/her African identity. This question presses us to seek answers as to why some Africans are unable to completely identify with Christianity without seeking some assistance from African traditional religions. Kaoma is of the opinion that some Africans go to church but still practice traditional rituals and customs (Kaoma 2016, p. 60). While religion prescribes how people should conduct themselves during and after funerals, culture also prescribes the behavior expected from every member of the family during mourning (Nkosi et al. 2019). This concurs with what Lagat (2017) indicates in his article. These arguments require research to check how religion and culture, particularly African cultures, can work together during funerals. This is because, during apartheid, most traditional religious practices that were in harmony with indigenous people's cultures were practiced in secret because they feared being demonized by mainline churches. When death strikes, disruption, confusion, separation, loss and dismay demand that adjustments are made to fill the gap left by the departed; this process of mourning is accompanied by rituals in many African cultures (Bukaliya and Rugonye 2016, p. 51). For all this to happen, belief in religion cannot be left out.

## 3. Methodology of the Study

The above problem demands that we also have some knowledge as to what being African means in the context of this article since that will inform or even determine the kinds of methodologies that can be employed to undertake this study. This is because it is generally known that not much about Africa and Africans was written about because of colonial shifts that pushed every African epistemology to the periphery.

This is a scientific theoretical method (see Pieterse 2017) that includes the reading of newspapers and other relevant sources. This will be carried out within the framework of the decolonization of religion, which is demanded in this study (Oh 2020). It can be argued that for a decoloniality approach to be relevant, studies must delve into humanities and social sciences (Nye 2019, p. 1). This is a clear sign that there is a need for many African churches to decolonize themselves. Scholars from different African contexts agree about this need (Wa Said 1971; Graham 2017). For Sakupapa, in their work (2018), 'Decolonizing of African Theology', this kind of methodology is needed. For him, the emergency of African theology and decolonization is crucial. There is also agreement among a few scholars that decolonization is a good method to apply when dealing with issues that need to be reversed or undone due to colonialism (Omer 2020; Sakupapa 2018; Wiredu 1998; Esau 2020). To avoid generalizing about the whole of Africa in this article, I chose the local Collins Chabane Municipality to collect data for this decolonial research. This means the qualitative data that were gathered through questionnaires and structured interviews administered to Contralesa members in that region will be utilized. The use of the word "African" is not intended to generalize the peoples on the African continent but to specify that the people are of African descent and from that area so that this is not confused as including those in the area who are not black Africans. This is also to avoid calling people according to their ethnic groupings.

This article not only aims to expose the Christian religion as dominating funeral practices in Africa but also expose African people's dependence on that religion and how the situation where this faith is established but not always practiced developed. This is because many people describe themselves as Christian, but their true colors come out when death strikes. In other words, death is an eye-opener in terms of what it means to be an African. It should be noted that this article does not attempt to generalize Africa as one entity because the diversity of African people and ethnic groups is acknowledged while recognizing their similarities.

#### 4. Brief Background

Many scholars agree that the theories of bereavement are still dominated by Western contributors and Western epistemologies (Bowlby 1961; Kubler-Ross 1969; Stroebe et al. 1993; Sutcliffe et al. 1998). This implies that religions influenced by the West dominate how burials are conducted. Works on burials (like those of Yawa 2010; Manyedi et al. 2003; Maboea 2002 and Maloka 1998) are ignored, even by African traditionalists. It is clear that since the arrival of the colonizers and their missionaries, African traditions, culture and religions have not been the same.

It should be noted that although missionaries were notorious colonial assets that were used to dislocate and push African epistemologies to the periphery, African people still loved and embraced them for various reasons, including the comfort and hope they provided. It is this kind of illusion that saw and continues to see missionary churches and African Independent Churches contrasting and contesting with each other in more than one way (Martin et al. 2013). It will be too ambitious for this article to aim to end these rivalries and contestations, which have sometimes played into the hands of perpetrators of genocide; however, some of the causes will be pointed out as we together seek a way forward. It should be noted that during apartheid, the African Independent Churches performed their practices in secret because they received harsh criticism from mainline missionary churches like the Methodist Church and the Anglican Church (Denis 2006, pp. 310–23; Mills 1995, pp. 153–72). The continued contestations, despite the constitutions of countries protecting them all, are concerning.

African people are no longer where they were and no longer perform burial processes according to their cultures and traditions. I agree with the following statement:

*Black people have simply become shadows of themselves, have no longer been able to define or even identify with their real selves and have been living to please their colonizers. It is from this opinion, amongst others, that I see the problem of black self-hatred as a serious issue that needs to be addressed. (Baloyi 2020, p. 1)*

This informed the author of this article that there is a serious need to seek ways of understanding how colonization decentralized African epistemes by centralizing their own ways of knowing and doing so that Africans were and are left with only one way of doing things, which is Eurocentric. The quotation above can help the reader to understand that even the African religious aspects of funerals were affected. According to Kaya and Seleti (2013, p. 34), there is a notion that aspects of knowledge (including religious knowledge) are still dominated by European worldviews. Although this does not underestimate the growth of Islam and atheism, South Africa continues to be dominated by the West with regard to religion. Although this article is not anthropologically focused, briefly touching on its anthropological contribution with a view to future research is relevant. It cannot be ignored that the boundaries and sanctions of traditional moral life and ethics are influenced by the anthropological perceptions and religious and cultural perspectives of a particular people (Bielo 2015). This implies that the role of anthropology for people to understand how to interrelate these aspects is necessary. Eller (2021) sheds light on this in his book by covering topics like theories and definitions, beliefs, myths and traditions, and symbols that form the basics of an anthropological study of people and how their fundamentalism, secularization and religious movements are intertwined.

For Bradley (2007), a good understanding of how religion impacts cultural, social and political structures and their practices will help them to understand how issues of class, gender, race, ethnicity and age interact in terms of their history, resistance, and how they see the influence of religion and culture within their communities. Even though these vary from one community to another, beliefs are socially constructed and transmitted (Barber 1981; Clark 1990; Launay 1992; Masquelier 1994; Mosse 1994). Werbner (1988) and Mosse (1994) agree that anthropologically, religion does not replace traditional beliefs, but it must instead be incorporated into local cultural perceptions.

## 5. The Facts of the Matter

Death has and will always be the most disruptive element of human order in most parts of the world. In Shona communities, just like in many African tribes, dying and bereavement cannot be viewed in isolation from beliefs and spirituality (Bukaliya and Rugonye 2016, p. 53). In Africa and many other countries, the line between religion and culture is often difficult—if not impossible—to identify. There is strong evidence for arguing that African people have been and will remain religious people. For now, the question is not about which religion should be practiced. Mbiti (1969, p. 68) called Africans “notoriously religious” people. In simple terms, religion is not a way to practice faith but a way of life. According to Manganyi and Buitendag (2013, p. 3) and Mndende (2006, p. 161), Africans are followers of religion to the extent that every aspect of their lives is religious. This is because for every celebration as well as every sorrow, religion plays a part. For the purpose of this article, the focus is on death and religion.

The Pew Research Center estimates that 84% of the Christian population is Protestant, 11% is Roman Catholic, and 5% belongs to other denominations (as of 2010, which are the latest figures available). African Independent Churches constitute the largest group of Christian churches, including the Zion Christian Church (approximately 11% of the population), the Apostolic Church (approximately 10%) and charismatic groups. Other Christian groups include Methodists, Anglicans, Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Seventh-Day Adventists and members of the Greek Orthodox Church, Dutch Reformed Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, the Assemblies of God and Congregational churches. (Schoeman 2017). Muslims in South Africa are just 2% of the total population and are predominately found in the western cape, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal (Schoeman 2017, p. 3). Even though there is no specific mention of the percentage of Muslims in the Collins Chabane Municipality, their low representation in South Africa indicates that their influence is minimal in that area. Without undermining or underestimating their influence, Muslims were also not represented in the data collected from traditional leaders. They were also not represented in the interfaith mass prayer that the municipality convened at Malamulele in September 2023 (*Limpopo Chronicle* 2023). The prayer interfaith mass prayer hosted by the municipality in the Community Hall at Malamulele attests to the absence of some religions, for instance, Islam.

My experience as a church minister for some years is that there is no complete burial without religion, and for many South Africans living in the Collins Chabane Municipality, it is the leading aspect. The families of the deceased will make a serious effort to beg a minister from any Christian church to conduct the funeral service if the deceased was not a church member; it will be an expectation of the family and community that if he/she was a member of a particular church that the church should conduct the funeral service. It is not expected that a family will fail to have a church minister, regardless of the kind of faith or church.

However, as mentioned previously, it should be noted that during apartheid, the African Independent Churches performed their practices in secret because they were harshly criticized by mainline missionary churches (Denis 2006, pp. 310–23; Mills 1995, pp. 153–72). While Ademiluka (2009, p. 17) argues that death and mourning are a way of preserving culture, the other truth is that death is an irresistible meeting point between cultures and religions. There is agreement among some psychology scholars that people’s decisions and actions are usually determined by their belief system (Muswubi 2023; Bandura 2006; Dweck 2016; Rader 2005; Zimmerman 2013). It should, however, be noted that the very same psychology (which includes their religious convictions) has been influenced and dominated by Euro-American approaches (Nwoye 2013; Baloyi and Makobe-Rabothata 2014, p. 232). This means that even death is interpreted and understood in accordance with what influenced the religious belief to which the bereaved family belongs (Nkosi et al. 2019, p. 84).

## 6. Which Religion Dominates African Funerals?

It cannot be denied nor doubted that there are contestations among religions about which one is leading in terms of followers. As mentioned before, the Pew Research Center estimates that 84% of the Christian population is Protestant, 11% is Roman Catholic and 5% of people belong to other denominations (as of 2010, which are the latest figures available). African Independent Churches constitute the largest group of Christian churches, including the Zion Christian Church (approximately 11% of the population), the Apostolic Church (approximately 10%) and charismatic groups. Other Christian groups include Methodists, Anglicans, Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Seventh-Day Adventists and members of the Greek Orthodox Church, Dutch Reformed Church, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Assemblies of God and Congregational churches (Schoeman 2017).

From the 26 interviewed traditional leaders or chiefs (in the municipality) who serve as custodians of culture and tradition in Limpopo's rural areas, it is clear that the Christian religion dominates funeral proceedings in almost every village. This is regardless of the presence of the traditional religious people in the village and the family. Even if the family dislikes the church, if the deceased was a member of a church, the family will earnestly seek out the pastor and the leadership of that denomination and humble themselves as they inform them of the death of the church member as well as ask them to lead the burial service (Mapaya and Mugovhane 2014, p. 913). In addition, even if the deceased was a follower of traditional religions, the family will invite the Christian church to take charge of his/her funeral.

It has been suggested that some of the reasons why families, even those without Christian family members, rely on Christian clergy to bury their loved ones are as follows:

- Almost all traditional leaders who participated in the study answered the questions, "What are some of the first things to do when death is announced in your village?" The response was that Christian preachers and pastors practiced the good art of "*ku chavelela*", which was iterated by more than 98% of the participants. *Ku chavelela* is a verb that comes from *nchavelelo*, which is translated as "comforting" in English. This word has become so common that whenever it is used, one would understand two things: that there is a funeral and there is a church comforting the bereaved. It is widely believed that the preaching of the Gospel, particularly when it talks to the situation as a way of encouraging mourners, is *nchavelelo*. Others would even go so far as saying, "we are bandaged", because the preaching and prayers will close the wounds caused by death.
- The kind of preaching that they offer is healing, even to those who do not go to church. Almost all of the participants in the Limpopo study on funerals said that they felt better and healed from the agony of the loss when a Christian preacher preached the Gospel during funeral sessions. Normally, from the first day when the death is announced to the date of the burial, preachers of different Christian denominations will preach and visit the family in the evening for a week, and the community will be gathered to attend church services. It has been normalized that after work in most villages, around 17h00, is the time to attend funeral services, and it is from that that they obtain healing. Even though some arrangements for funerals may slightly differ in terms of time, the main program and general arrangement for the midweek services remain similar in funerals around that area. This is why Ngada and Mofokeng (2001, p. 46) say

*Apart from a number of African traditional rituals that take place in the mourning process, as well as some African cultural rituals that are performed during the burial... the rest of our funeral services are conducted and carried out in the same way as in any other Christian church.*

- The church is often seen as a moral agent by the community (Coertze 2005; Khathide 2003; Ngada and Mofokeng 2001).



- All of this happens regardless of the oppressive history. [Kaoma \(2016, p. 59\)](#) refers to the following:
- *The problematization of the role of religion in social transformation was done, where it was seen that religion can be said to be protecting the oppressive structures in accordance with what Chimurenga suggests.*
- Chimurenga is popular music that delivers social and political protests in Zimbabwe; some people have associated it with the political uprisings and liberation wars in Zimbabwe ([Beach 2009](#)). Although Kaoma wrote from a Zimbabwean perspective, some similarities in terms of cultural oppression—which is mainly a colonial problem—can be drawn between his/her context and that of the Collins Chabane Municipality. Hence, I used this source. This is an indication that Africa experienced colonial oppression and injustices.

## 7. Struggle for Relevance by the Church

[Khathide \(2003\)](#) says that African churches and their theologians still struggle to respond biblically and appropriately to the issue of ancestral practices, especially among Christians. The defensive argument of Mofokeng and other African scholars is that it is not worship; however, respect, honor and reverence for parents are contested in many ways, one being that the clear difference between respect and worship is not clarified. It should be remembered that for some black South Africans in Limpopo, the tradition of speaking to or asking something from the dead is not new. There is already a conflict and contrast between Christian and traditional religions that was sparked by the handling of mourning practices in Africa ([Martin et al. 2013, p. 56](#)). History has shown that colonization aimed to remove African epistemologies, and ways of conducting funerals and mourning were not exempted. Africans were seen as rebellious when attempting to protect their cultural practices.

### 7.1. Lack of Church Autonomy

For me, to a large extent, the identity of the church rests on its autonomy. This autonomy is of significance even in terms of how they conduct African burials. It is freedom of autonomy that reveals the truth about a particular church. I have raised the issue of European support to churches in Africa as another form of bewitchment that makes black people copies of themselves. For the author of this article, the financial support for African churches by their Western so-called “mother churches” is another way of colonizing a black church to the extent that it is not free to decolonize itself ([Baloyi 2016](#)). It is very difficult, if not impossible, to decolonize because money was and is still weaponized as a source of colonization. I came to realize that black theologians are supplied with sustenance from the West to the extent that they must often please the givers or supporters while they do not mean it at all. No one would doubt that most mainline churches are still obedient to white masters who fund their churches. The intention of being a church member can be clouded by other things, such as getting rid of poverty, and is not about spiritual changes.

I remember when most poor people who could not afford to study other fields at university were recruited to become theology students. We still have a lot of theologians who are contrary to and even irreverent about their calling; hence, issues of liberating the church are irrelevant to them. This has even crept into research, where theological researchers are writing and publishing to please editorial gatekeepers who decline to publish works that challenge their thinking. It is difficult, if not impossible, to Africanize or decolonize a church that does not belong to you. This notion was exposed in my inaugural lecture (2015), which was turned into an article entitled “*Unpacking the downside of sustentatie*” (2016). The editorial gatekeeping in some publishing houses and journals resulted from the fact that most African writers tried to publish material that went against the thinking of the owners of some journals. This means that, just like in the church, where most ministers simply maintain the status quo, some journals only publish work that complies with colonial agendas.

There is a need to liberate the church, which is European but in Africa. One of the first things to do for such a liberation is to ensure the economic autonomy and independence of the church. A church that continues to beg for its survival will remain indebted and continue to please its funders. It is time that liberation theology ceases to be what I call “lip theology” and “written theology” to become a practical reality. If writing was doing, the church could have been freed long ago because our libraries are full of liberation theology; however, the church remains in Western chains and bondage. That is why we keep hanging our dirty linen outside to please the funders. If Christianity is about another way of making money from the outside world (asking for one donor after the other), I doubt if it will make any impact on people on the ground. [Weinberger \(2023\)](#) indicates how the government allows and limits the church’s self-governance. My argument is that even between the so-called sister or other churches, some level of autonomy should prevail. [Baloyi \(2011\)](#) provides some direction to address this dilemma by arguing that the biblical teachings of the church can liberate the church from financial dependency, particularly since some Africans who are church members are becoming financially stable and rich. In that way, the church can be severed from Western governance, which will enable its decolonization and transformation to create relevance. It is not a fight against Christianity but an argument that the Christian church must also account for the context within which it operates.

### 7.2. Africans as Multireligious People

[Mbiti \(1975, p. 30\)](#) and [Adamo \(2011, p. 1\)](#) agree that Africans are followers of more than one religion. Hence, their being counted in a census as adhering to one religion is not correct. There is ample evidence confirming that there is already conflict and contrast between Christian and traditional religions that was also sparked by the handling of mourning practices in Africa ([Martin et al. 2013, p. 56](#)).

[Coertze \(2005, p. 17\)](#) argues the following:

*If Christianity is to be superimposed, to use Khathide’s term (see [Khathide 2003, p. 290](#)), on the African culture, as it was superimposed on the non-Judaist cultures of its time, Africa has never and will increasingly not be satisfied with expressing Christianity in a Western form.*

It is for this reason, among others, that the expression of Christianity in Africa is not always recognized or accepted by the West. Therefore, arguments made popular by scholars like [Ngada and Mofokeng \(2001\)](#) see this as one of the ways in which the African church is throwing away its white mask and thus should continue to be Africanized. They argue that the African church must cease to struggle for white recognition.

Although there may be a thin line between religious belief and traditional funeral practices, the two are different concepts that work together in most cases, at least within the African context. This is why the author of this article agrees with [Coronel et al. \(2023, p. 1\)](#), who argue that religion is one of the pillars of life and, therefore, it impacts the promotion of quality of life and the development of one’s character. This is regardless of whether religion is influenced by socio-economic or political factors.

[Manenzhe \(2007, p. 5\)](#), from the Vhavenda (some of whom live in the Collins Chabane Municipality), articulates the following idea:

*It is also noticeable that speeches presented on funerals of White leaders were mostly based on Biblical texts, while those of Black leaders centred on their contributions to the struggle against the oppressive policies of the White government. On the basis of the statement above, one can conclude that, generally speaking, the funerals of White leaders were of a more religious nature with a low level of politicization, while funerals of Black leaders in most cases turned into political platforms or rallies.*

The author of this article disagrees with the view above by arguing that the politicization of funerals usually dominates for the few who are politically active, but for many ordinary people, religion dominates. Even a politicized funeral will include religious aspects where the church minister will be given an opportunity to preach or lead the service.

A good example is that even the funerals of political figures like Nelson Mandela and Chris Hani included religion, and a church minister presided over the service. For instance, at Mandela's memorial and funeral, Methodist pastors like Ivan Abrahams led the preaching (Bloom 2013). The late Bishop Desmond Tutu preached during Chris Hani's service.

## 8. Critical Evaluation and Recommendations as a Way forward

Religious beliefs and culture influence each other in many cultures. Therefore, identifying that some Africans find it particularly difficult to stick to one religion without seeking some assistance or consultation with African traditions is very important. One of the ways to look forward is that Christianity must be decolonized.

Besides religion playing a role in the creation of one's identity, religion and culture are viewed as close relatives or friends (Beyers 2017). One of the ways in which this challenge can be mitigated is by bringing in the new methodology of studying religion and culture, which seeks ways to make peace with diversity and adversity. It cannot be ignored that although an element of cultural sensitivity is important in mourning ceremonies, grieving in Africa cannot be easily individualized because it is a communal practice; hence, the factors of religious influence remain. This being said, it does not mean that the mourning of a single person is not important and, therefore, African bereavement counselling, which according to Bukaliya and Rugonye (2016), is effective, should be given a space. Nwoye (2000) argues for African grief therapy, which can bridge this diversity. Kapolo (2001) conveys a similar opinion when he articulates the following notion: "A new model is required, one that retains traditional values while accommodating insights from other cultures and taking into account the rapid changes in family, politics, religion and economy".

There have been suggestions to begin a blending method. The concept of blending religions was raised by Selepe and Edwards (2013), who used it as a possibility of marrying the European Christian-based religion and indigenous culture to solve the dilemma. Of course, this route has its own challenges, and one will have to check how this would function since there may be similarities as well as dissimilarities between the two. It can also be asked which one between the two would have to make the necessary adjustments and "bend down" for the changes to be enacted.

The main question here is how can committed members of a Christian church practice their faith without losing their African identity (Manganyi and Buitendag 2013).

There is a need for an explicit explanation of concepts like worship, veneration and honor (Lagat 2017, p. 3). The misunderstanding and misrepresentations of these concepts cannot be left unaddressed in the whole problem. This is because if clear lines of difference between them are not drawn, it will lead to a slippery slope; for instance, some argue that Africans do not worship ancestors, they simply honor them (Chimakonam 2022). The question now shifts to what is being done when one is worshipping and when one is honoring. In other words, the action is necessary. This is an argument that is made by scholars like Mbiti (1975); Chimakonam (2022); Karani (2023). Karani (2023, p. 23) argues the following:

*Additionally, Mbiti disagrees with those who believe that giving offerings and sacrifices to ancestral spirits is a way of worshipping them. Instead, he says these offerings and sacrifices symbolize remembrance, communion, and fellowship.*

Liberation theology did not complete its task. It raised concerns about colonialism, apartheid and other inequalities but did not address what it means to be an African Christian. Is it only through church membership, or is it also the immersion of one's lifestyle?

Writing about liberation is one side of the story, but putting what we wrote into action is another. Africans and their churches need to be liberated in terms of issues of faith and religion. After liberation, everyone must be free to practice what he/she believes without being intimidated by a situation or anything else. Liberation also implies that African theologians need to sit down and not only write but seek ways to implement what they think is correct within their churches without fear or favor. Hypocrisy is not a solution. I have seen how hypocritical we become when trying to criticize and even persecute one



another without really facing one another. I once attended a conference where mainline theologians and pastors only discussed other African pastors who made people eat snakes, drink petrol, eat grass and so on. My questions were: Where are the people whom we are talking about so that they can speak for themselves? Where are the people who ate all those things to speak for themselves? We can talk about them and write about them, but without talking to them, I do not believe we will make any difference.

Ademiluka (2009, p. 18) points out that while Christianity bases their discouragement of mourning on 1 Thessalonians 4, pp. 13–18, it was found that the contention is how to accommodate African funeral rites, which are inseparable from African traditional religion, at least without damaging the essence of religion. The argument of most African scholars is that Christianity must identify with people's culture (Nthamburi 1983; Adamo 2005). This is not easy, which is why African scholars and theologians should seriously engage with decolonization. To avoid the double standards in which African people are always caught up, African funeral traditions and Christianity should be encouraged (Adamo 2005, p. 19).

Another point is that tolerance and mutual understanding between religions are needed (Adamo 2011, p. 1). Tolerance does not mean people or groups will agree on everything. Without taking away the power and the role of religion (particularly the Christian religion) in our communities, it should be noted that religious intolerance and misunderstandings are one of the biggest weapons for separation, black self-hatred, genocide and many other challenges that Africans face (Chimakonam 2022, p. 98).

There must be dialogue between faith communities (Isomae 2006, p. 85). I have always said and will always say that all the relevant people must be included when religious issues in communities are addressed. I have realized that most academics enjoy talking about another religious group and its practices only in its absence. Hence, many religious academic conferences that deal with African problems do not invite those who will be criticized. This just adds more suspicion, resistance and backbiting, which will not solve the problems. Being part of the solution instead of the problem demands that religious leaders and academics sit together and talk about their differences. One cannot deny that the lack of anthropological knowledge and approach is part of this problem. To add to this point, the reasons why their practices differ from mine, as well as why those who eat snakes were proud of doing that, cannot be unveiled by someone else but by the very same people that we write critical papers about without consulting them. This is a replica of what colonialism did, where missionaries wrote about us without us, and we have yet to correct that error. For me, the rivalry between religious groups must be arrested.

The point of contact between African Independent Churches (AIC) and traditional religions and Christianity, as well as other religions, must be identified and explored. It is my submission that such a point must be available. It can be suggested that the beginning of the discourse can be existing issues within the community that the religions are serving before they discuss their own differences. If there are channels of genuine communication between religions, there will always be a possibility of finding points of commonality (Gort 2008, p. 756). Working together does not mean that we have to agree on everything. We also do not necessarily need to be friends to co-exist and work together.

## 9. Conclusions

It cannot be ignored that there is a problem of contrast between religions, particularly Christianity and African traditional religion, and most of the African people targeted by this study are involved in both. This is a sign that there is a need for people to have these practices reconciled, and that takes the decolonization of Christian religion. The double standards simply prove that people lack something, which requires Christianity and African traditional religions to co-operate in order to come up with solutions to resolve their plight. It is the duty of theology and theologians to seek relevance from what is taught in order to provide possible answers that will help them liberate themselves. The clash between the Christian religion and African cultures must end. If Christianity continues to avoid dealing with the question, "How can one become a true devoted Christian without

losing his/her African identity”, the challenge is going to remain with us for some time, and this will be clearest during funeral practices. It is within the context of funerals where, among other issues, this question is relevant.

**Funding:** The data gathering used in this study was made possible by the Research Professorship funding from the University of South Africa while I also received discount for the publishing fees from the Religion Journal. Thirdly, a certain amount from the Center of Theological Inquiry (Funded by John Templeton Funding) also played its part.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted within frameworks of the research ethical policies of the University of South Africa.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study in a written form.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to ethical reasons.

**Acknowledgments:** The author would like to thank everyone who helped and participated in the collection of data, interviews based on voluntary capacity. I appreciate you Rebecca for the stunning work of translating the Tsonga data into English. I am thankful for Unisa language editors for the good work in improving the language of the article. In addition I also salute all members of Congress of Traditional Leaders in South Africa (CONTRALESA) for their support in collecting of data.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In this article, the word “African” refers mainly to the black people living in the Collins Chabane Municipality, unless it is indicated that Africans from other parts of Africa are referred to because many African tribes have similarities in terms of culture and traditions.
- <sup>2</sup> This article is a reworked version of the paper presented at the African Association for the Study of Religions conference held at the University of Nairobi from 2 to 5 August 2023.
- <sup>3</sup> Whenever the words “Christian Church” are used in this article, it is not to ignore the fact that Christian denominations are diverse but rather to avoid getting into the details of their differences because that is not the intent of this article.

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