

Towards Sacrificial-Cleansing Ritual in South Africa: An Indigenous African view of Truth and Reconciliation¹

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Introduction

Can symbolic ritual cleansing effect any change in the South African context? The death and suffering which befell South Africa during the apartheid era has not abated, especially in KwaZulu-Natal. There is no doubt that the past South African regime with its policies, ploughed the land for the germination of seeds of violence and vengeance. The separation legislature incarcerated black people in their tribal groups and in the process also divided them, thereby rendering them ineffective in collective sense (Reader's Digest 374). Lebowa, Gazankulu, Bophuthatswana, Venda, Kwa-Zulu, and Kwandebele² were brought about by this kind of system (Reader's Digest 378). In general, this lead to political instability and incoherence.

The effects of apartheid also impacted on popular political movements. In the Vaal Triangle, this was evident in the splits between members of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the Azanian People's Organization (AZAPO) (Reader's Digest 1995:477). Here necklacing was rife. In 1985 in KwaNdebele, people were divided into two groups. One which supported independence, and one which opposed it. Many people, especially youths, died because of this clash of opinions. Similar violence occurred in the same year at Khayelitsha township, about fifty kilometres from the city of Cape Town. People there resisted moving from the squatter settlements at Crossroads next to Langa (Reader's Digest 1995:476). Very few of these opted to move into four small roomed houses at Khayelitsha. The majority refused to move. The government of

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² Formerly referred to as homeland states.

the time, through its police, forcefully evicted these residents. As a result, their houses were burnt down. In 1987, violence started between the UDF and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) at KwaMakhutha. It soon spread to other areas in the region—Pietermaritzburg, Impumalanga and KwaMashu. Later, its effects were felt throughout the whole province (Reader's Digest 1995:474-476)

After South Africa's first democratic elections, people have started to speak the language of reconciliation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was instituted. Through its wide-spread hearings, it has started to bring to light many of the atrocities which were perpetrated during the Apartheid era. Within the conditions which Apartheid created, to various degrees, most were politically motivated. Many government leaders and operatives were implicated.

The TRC has created the conditions for people to come clean, to speak honestly about what they have done and to identify the reasons why. As such, it provided the possibility for South Africans to objectify and distance themselves from this horrendous era. It also assisted in re-locating the remains of lost people so that they could be laid to rest according to African culture. There is no doubt that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has initiated a process of ritual reconciliation in which both victims and perpetrators could participate. As this commission is winding down its activities, the question however arises as to how it can be continued—how can reconciliation be effected? How can peace be achieved, and how can the country be cleansed? Additional questions are: Has the TRC succeeded in bringing about reconciliation as African people understand it?—i.e. through ritual cleansing? Was it equipped to truly facilitate cleansing and reconciliation? And: what about 'the Church' and the traditional healers? Should they have been involved in the healing of the nation? What if both the Church and the traditional healers contributed to the death of some of these victims? Do they have the legitimacy to perform such a ritual cleansing?

During the second semester of 1995, I had the opportunity to offer four lectures on *African Theology and Rituals* at the University of Natal, School of Theology. I worked with a group of students who were enrolled for a course entitled: *African Theology and Modernity*. Some of my lectures dealt with the notion of ritual cleansing in the South African context. At the end of my lectures I gave students a brief task. They were asked to reflect briefly on the following questions: Which ritual cleansing activities would be suitable for the South African situation? Should the Church perform this ritual cleansing? or Traditional ritual elders? or Both? Which symbols should be used for this? The Church's or those deriving from Tradition?

This article tries to come to grips with some of these questions by looking at both ritual and sacrificial theory, in particular, ritual cleansing for the South African situation. Firstly, I reflect briefly on the views of two students in the *African Theology and Modernity* class. Then, I introduce three modern theorists on ancient sacrificial ritual. Issues raised by these theorists link with ritual cleansing theory. Finally, I offer

perspectives on the need for constructing a theological paradigm which is informed by a traditional ritual cleansing framework. In short, this paper argues that South Africa's healing strategy and mechanisms should also be traditionally informed in order for it to be meaningful, powerful, comprehensive and truthful.

The African Theology and Modernity Class of 1995

Student Jabulani Tshabalala, a pastor at the local Lutheran congregation in Machibisa, Pietermaritzburg, wrote interestingly on the issue of ritual cleansing. He pointed out that ritual cleansing should involve both the victim and the perpetrator. For him, black South Africans suffered more under the legacy of apartheid than other groups.

On how ritual cleansing is performed in a traditional setting, he provided the following information. *Izangoma*, *izinyanga*³, community elders, are usually called for an *imbizo*⁴ at the *inkosi*'s great place. A number of cattle are slaughtered for this occasion. The *amadlozi*⁵ are evoked to take an active role during this ceremony. Only the *amadlozi* of the king are evoked and appeased. This has hierarchical implications. The presence of the *inkosi* at this occasion is crucial. He acts as the symbol of unity. The *imphepo*⁶ is burnt continually to drive away any form of impurity or evil at the time. *Utshwala*⁷ is prepared and served to the ritual participants to both indicate their participation and to evoke the *amadlozi*. Rev Tshabalala noted the following symbols for this occasion: *isigubhu*⁸, *umkhomba*⁹, *icansi*¹⁰ or *ubuhlali* and *amanzi*¹¹.

Student Mbulelo Hina pointed out that African culture has practices that cannot be regarded as deterrents by the Christian religion. He referred to the Xhosa

³ A distinction is maintained between an *isangoma* and *inyanga*. *Isangoma* has the ability to diagnose an illness, while on the other hand an *inyanga* can both diagnose and heal (prescribe and apply traditional medicine on the patient).

⁴ *Imbizo* refers to a traditional summoning and gathering of the elders, chiefs and other subjects by the *inkosi* (King).

⁵ Refers to ancestors and ancestresses.

⁶ Zulu traditional incense. Associated with sanctification and purification procedures.

⁷ Traditional beer.

⁸ Traditional drum. This drum has a significant role as it evokes and entertains both the ancestresses and ancestors.

⁹ Refers to skin of either a goat or cow. It is commonly used to cover the body of the deceased person in traditional funerary rite.

¹⁰ Traditional carpet.

¹¹ Water is central in any traditional ritual context. It symbolises purity and perfection. Every step of a ritual process is marked by the use of water. Participants have to make sure that they are pure and that their cleanliness is guaranteed before engaging in ritual.

ritual practice named the *ukungxengezeza*¹² which literally means 'to ask for forgiveness'. The ritual is usually performed within the family when things are not running as they should. A cow is slaughtered and the *izinyanya*¹³ are evoked and appeased. Participants confess *amatyala*¹⁴ to each other. This then leads to a ritual purification ceremony which is usually performed by the family elder. If it happens that the elder himself had wronged either the *yiminyanya* or any person, he would ask for the *izinyanya* for forgiveness from the wronged person, to allow him to still continue to perform the ritual and thereafter correct the wrong which was committed. After the cow is slaughtered, the participants take its horns and put them above the kraal gate facing the direction of the main house. This symbolises that the ritual of purification was performed and there will be no other problem encountered by the concerned family. Only *uxolo*¹⁵ will be experienced by the family.

Theory of Ritual Cleansing

I

In his book, *Homo Necans*, Burkert outlines his approach—an eclectic blend of functionalism, structuralism, and socio-biology (cf. Burkert 1983:xix; 1987:150; Alderick 1980:3). He defines ritual as 'Forms of non-verbal communication' and 'patterns' which are accompanied by motives (Burkert 1987:150). For him, human society is shaped by the past. Therefore, there is need to examine the development of human society over long periods of time. Burkert focuses on the primary function of religious ritual. His ideas are shaped by scholars like Meuli (1946) who pointed out that 'aspects of Greek sacrificial practice, especially the care and handling of bones of animal victims, were similar to the practice of palaeolithic hunters' (Burkert 1987:24). Meuli maintained that the practice of sacrifice emerged from the palaeolithic hunting period. Hunters killed animals for food. Man, the hunter, distributed meat among the community after the hunt. This act of distribution anticipated the founding of communities by communal eating, and relates to the necessity of the foregoing kill (Burkert 1987:165). Later, during the Neolithic age, when the domestication of animals was introduced, sacrifice became 'a transfer of property', a 'gift', instead of 'forceful appropriation' (Burkert 1987:166).

Burkert further shows that the killing and spilling of blood is a central ritual of religion. This practice, as he maintains, affirms, paradoxically, the necessity of violence

¹² To ask for forgiveness.

¹³ Xhosa word and conception for ancestors and ancestresses.

¹⁴ Xhosa word and conception for debts.

¹⁵ Peace or harmony characterised by comprehensive well-being experienced by the whole community.

for the foundation of human culture. Even for Christians, salvation from the 'so-called evil' of aggression is confronted with the murder and the death of God's innocent son.

For Burkert, there are two important elements in this process: aggression and human violence. In his opinion, these two elements both mark the progress of our civilisation and continue to be central to the challenge to establish and maintain human community (Burkert 1983:1). Aggression, he points out, must be positioned within evolutionary human socio-biology. According to socio-biological theorists like Lorenz—to whom Burkert is deeply indebted—the human species is the sole species which has the aggressive capacity to destroy itself. Consequently, collective rituals, like hunting and its successor, sacrifice, evolved in order to channel this intraspecific aggression and so prevent the species from destroying itself. As Burkert (1983:40) concludes, 'killing justifies and affirms life, it makes us conscious of the new order and brings it to power'. Through the hunting ritual and later sacrifice, society was shaped, defined and rescued from the destructive power of intraspecific aggression. 'Sacrificial killing is the basic experience of the "sacred" *Homo religiosus acts and attains self-awareness as homo necans*' (e.a.). In other words, only man the killer (*homo necans*), has the capacity to become a truly religious being (*homo religiosus*).

Burkert's views are not without flaws. Lambert does not accept the view that Zulu sacrificers, unlike ancient Greek sacrificers who concealed the weapon in a basket of grain, do not attempt to conceal the violence of the act—'the *giya* almost seems to emphasise the violence of the act' (Lambert 1993:305,308). Lambert's comparative study seems to suggest that the association of hunting, guilt and sacrifice is not necessarily the case in all cultural systems, as Burkert seems to imply.

Therefore, one should be careful about the idea of bones collected, hunting theories and theories of sexual aggression. However, one should accept the relationship between rituals of sacrifice and the renewal of life. In addition, one can accept the community-forming and relationship building or restoring role of sacrificial ritual.

II

We now turn to another scholar on this subject. René Girard¹⁶ is a distinguished French literary critic whose views on violence, aggression and sacrifice are shaped by literary texts such as Euripides' *Bacchae*. He uses Freud's model of the conscious and unconscious. For him, ritual is an act which is a substitution of a prior event, while, on

¹⁶ His major work *La violence et le sacré* (Violence and the sacred) first appeared in French in 1972, the same year that Burkert's *Homo Necans* was published in German. Written independently of each other both are, arguably, reactions to the horrors of the Vietnam War and the problems which this raised about human aggression and the very survival of human culture and society. Girard concedes that he uses a literary approach and that his approach is close to Burkert's.

the other hand, myth is the verbalised concealment of the original event. Therefore, ritual becomes part of the social institution and it is repetitive because it claims to be a mimetic re-enactment of a prior event. Through the work of the myth-pretifiers the truth of the scapegoat phenomenon is repressed, and myth functions to describe the 'safer course, the most reassuring course from the standpoint of the community at large' (Girard 1987:99,100).

Girard views sacrifice as having originated with a fictional act of mob violence in the prehistorical period. This act of collective killing was generated by, he argues, the fact that 'humans have no breaking mechanism for intraspecific aggression' (Girard 1987:8). Therefore, the answer to one murder is another murder. Girard introduces another feature of human behaviour: mimetic desire. He points out that the vicious cycle of revenge murders was necessary because desire is learned by imitating the other (Girard 1987:9). For example, person A desires object C; person B imitates desires of person A for object C. In this process (mimetic desire), the closer person A gets to object C, the more persons A and B become locked in deadly rivalry. What began as imitation turns into murderous hostility. This cycle of murders can only be halted, maintains Girard, by making use of a surrogate victim. From within the group, one person is separated out as a victim and the killing of this person brings temporary peace in the community. Before the death of the scapegoat, there is disruption, while after its death, peace and reconciliation are attained (Girard 1987:92). The apparent ambiguity of the scapegoat is due to the fact that:

victimisers see themselves as the passive victims of their own victim, and they see their victim as supremely active, eminently capable of destroying them. The scapegoat always appears to be a more powerful agent, a more powerful cause than he really is (Girard 1987:91).

In conclusion, for Girard, the surrogate-victim is both the malefactor and benefactor. The entire:

mimetic cycle is projected onto him and interpreted as supernatural visitation destined to teach the community what to do and not to do in the future (Girard 1987:128).

This is due to the fact that people cannot share

peacefully an object they all desire, but they can always share an enemy they all hate because they can join in destroying him (Girard 1987:128).

In this case, the cure is really the same as the disease.

The details of Girard's thesis may be challenged, rightly, especially the reduction of everything to binary opposition and the positing of hypothetical original situations. But, the idea of projected guilt is helpful and could be combined with some of Burkert's views, especially on the community building aspect and the death-life exchange.

III

Lastly, Jonathan Smith, a religious historian specialising in Hellenistic religions, postulates the following about rituals. He defines ritual as a mode of paying attention and a process of making interest (Smith 1987:103; 1982:54). What underlies this view is the fact that someone or something is made sacred by ritual (*sacrificium*). Ritual facilitates transitive categories. Smith stresses the *realm of thought* as opposed to the *realm of reality*. He does not accept the view that ritual elements should be associated with substances, but rather that ritual elements function as purely differential and countless signs forming a system which is composed of elements which are signifiers and yet, at the same time, signify nothing (Smith 1987:108; 1982:60).

Ultimately, Smith theorises that ritual is an assertion of difference which provides an occasion for reflection on the rationalisation of the fact that what ought to have been done was not, and what ought to have taken place, did not. Therefore, ritual brings to the fore the relationship between present reality and an ideal perfect world (Smith 1987:109).

It is clear that Smith comes from a society which no longer sacrifices. He is unable to explain the power and meaning of sacrifice to an insider. The key is that there is some collective process which effects some kind of communal transformation. It is here that Burkert's theory of sacrificial ritual processes as social affirmation and community building, offer clarity. It does this by means of a transformative ritual process between death and life which is able to offer a more satisfactory explanation. Smith's theory has no place for the sacred—leaving in its place meaningless and random actions of their own, appropriately to be interpreted by an individual, I propose, from a (Western) culture who does not participate in religious ritual nor appreciate community. More crucially even, he is unable to comprehend in his theory the transformative potential of the scapegoating ritual as expressed by Girard. So, in our context, one tends to accept Burkert's main thesis as modified by Girard.

Pedi Traditional Ritual: A Case in Point

I conducted fieldwork in the Northern province among a community located at a place called Ga-Dikgale. The group consisted of elderly participants. The majority of these participants was either semi- or completely literate. Worth mentioning is the fact that one member, David Moloisi, participated in the First World War and was able to recall

the places that he visited when in the army. The research was on how Pedi Christians appropriate the Epistle to the Hebrews. Respondents pointed out that *mabele*¹⁷ used to be thrown into the grave and an animal was slaughtered. Death was not understood to be the final end of life but the beginning of life. This might sound ironic or contradictory. It was this contradiction, they claimed, that had to be maintained to explain the Pedi cosmological structure. When death strikes in the family, a beast is slaughtered. The beast has to face the west to indicate the place of the dead. The east is seen as the place of the living. This binary opposition must always be maintained. Before the animal is slaughtered, the head of the family or clan has to 'speak' to it in a poetic manner. The animal is praised by the praise names of the deceased. Some of the oldest and most powerful ancestors and ancestresses are evoked to welcome a newcomer among them. At the same time, the deceased is informed about the long journey about to be undertake to the world of the *living timeless*¹⁸.

Then the animal's throat is struck. When blood flows, bowls are brought. The first bowl holds the blood which is going to be used during the funeral ritual. The second bowl contains the blood to be used to evoke the *Ba-dimo* at a place called *lehwana*. The skin of the animal is put around the dead person. The respondents viewed this practice as an indication of respect. The fact that the animal's skin is placed around the dead person suggests a change of roles with the slaughtered animal. This is then, following Burkert, being reconstructed, thus implying that death and sacrifice are essential for new life.

Toward Ritual Cleansing

The establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa has begun a ritual process. The commission facilitates a public ritual designed to bring about reconciliation and reparation (rather like a sacrifice) for the wrongs of the past. Victims of killing and suffering met with the commissioners to reveal their stories. This does not imply that perpetrators are left alone in this process. They are either subpoenaed or come before the commission voluntarily. This is a complex process that confronts all. The Church in general supports the principle and practice of this commission. It is seen as a vehicle of therapy intended to heal the victims. It is taken for granted that traditional healers support the whole course. Is this enough? Perhaps more is needed.

A public ritual, which brings together Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism, together with African traditional religions, would be a ritual cleansing on a national scale. Such a ritual cleansing would require the shedding of blood in sacrifice, as Bur-

¹⁷ Sotho for seeds.

¹⁸ This word is preferred by John Mbiti (1989). The Pedi refer to the ancestors and ancestresses as *Badimo*.

kert, Girard (scapegoat theory) and the Pedi responses indicate. Without this shedding of blood, there can be no new life, no reparation, no forgiveness and no new culture.

Gerd Bauman's view of ritual as implicating 'Others' is instructive in this regard. He argues that public rituals directed to an outsider are accompanied by the making of statements about the definition and redefinition of outsider and insider. When these rituals are performed, the messages are transmitted to both the inner and outer groups (Bauman 1992:98). This is done so that even outsiders who only participate as on-lookers, may participate in the performed rituals.

For South Africa, President Mandela's inauguration on May 10 1994 was a good example of a public ritual. This public ritual was witnessed by millions of South Africans and people from across the globe. A Christian archbishop, a Jewish rabbi, a Hindu priest, an Islamic *imam* and a traditional *imbongi*¹⁹, together with choirs singing the anthems from two diametrically opposed constituencies, combined in a ritual performance which negotiated meaning and reciprocally included one another. All participated in a number of ways, either as by-standers, spectators (via the medium of television), invited guests or close witnesses. All shared in the negotiation of meaning and redefined a common meaningcomplex in which all could participate equally. This was facilitated by the public ritual at a particular time and place with particular beneficiaries. Countless traditional presentations and dances were performed and broadcast on that day. Various opinions were aired, from right wing to left wing. Even those who opposed the idea of democratic elections in South Africa, watched and contextually redefined this public ritual performance. This ritual itself offered an opportunity to negotiate meaning and community with 'Others'. A brief moment of healing, reconciliation and stability was experienced by all South Africans.

In this context, a question which faces most Christian scholars is whether it is possible for traditional African Christians to synthesise both Christ and traditional ritual activities? It is important for Christianity to begin to understand traditional African views and practices. It is a fact that some of the Christian institutions have begun this process of enculturation. Both traditional African religion and African Christianities—together with other religions in Africa—have much to offer on the issue of creating community and of reconstructing reality which does not exclude the o/Other.

As Burkert noted, ritual creates and affirms social interaction (1983:24). It is indeed true that ritual practices do not only provide the opportunity for participants to partake in the same activities. Ritual also create and affirm a close interaction among them. It is from these practices that new community is born for the sake of the concord and co-operation beyond an evil commonly shared.

Most of South African Christian denominations have ritual practices which include activities related to birth (baptism), church unity (holy communion), marriage

¹⁹ Zulu traditional praise-poet.

and death. These practices occur within particular communities with a wide variety of elements but also common elements.

The question is: What if these practices are transformed and related to traditional African practices to effect change and comprehensive well-being? From this question, the theology of *ubuntu*²⁰ could emerge in Christian context. The theology of *ubuntu* could enhance Christ as the surrogate victim (the *Sedimo-Christ*) who, through his death and blood foster genuine social interaction within South African communities. This could foster community between Christians and traditional African religion.

It would be within such a theology that the *Sedimo-Christ* would sacrifice himself (cf. Hebrews 9:11 & 12) and thereby transform death into life-affirming enjoyment, not only for those who profess his name, but the entire South African people. This then calls for the *Sedimo-Christ* who is not confined within certain boundaries but transforms boundaries to achieve genuine *ubuntu* among *abantu*. The African sacrificial paradigm with its ritual cleansing framework, not only looks at the dangers of those who profess to be Christian or from another religion, but is whole in a sense that it rescues the community from the power of intraspecific aggression. In this case, the *mvana* (*Sedimo-Christ*) which is slaughtered, binds every community regardless of the fact that that person is *Ikholwa*²¹, Muslim, Hindu, Jew etc. This *Sedimo-Christ* offers one a place to fit in and still maintains one's previous practices. The *Sedimo-Christ* is in touch with the traditional language and values of the local people. This paradigm pushes for the knowledge that is locally mapped. Kwame Bediako's argument on the need to regard what he calls 'implicit' theologies in a serious light, is right in this regard. He poses this question: 'How is it that we hear in our own languages the wonders of *Modimo*?' (Bediako 1995:59) As he mentions,

The ability to hear one's own language and to express in one's responses to the message which one receives must lie at the heart of all authentic religious encounters with the divine realm. Language itself becomes, then, not merely a social or a psychological phenomenon but a theological one as well (Bediako 1995:59).

Bediako states inevitable facts. Local people should be listened to and valued. It is time for 'explicit' readers to keep quiet and listen to voices and sounds from below. African voices have been ignored in Africa by other Africans for far too long. The same is even more true for South Africa. It is time for the South African Churches to enter into a meaningful dialogue with traditional religious practices. It should begin to define

²⁰ Humanness which incorporates and ensures comprehensive well-being and development of both the individual member of the community and the community itself.

²¹ Zulu for fanatic believer.

how it is going to integrate rituals like *umkhosi wohlanga*²², *umkhosi wamabutho*²³, etc. into its own rituals.

It is well-known that most congregants place a certain amount of value on these practices. A meaningful and effective dialogue should take place concerning them. This would be possible only when there is a sense of mutual value and respect. It is important to respect the traditional African world views and thought patterns and treat them as 'an equal partner'. One should avoid superimposition. It would not benefit one to pick and choose what one considers to be good about a particular cultural pattern and discard what one considers to be 'problematic' and 'indigestible'. Important is to come to terms with what others hold as central to their own lives.

In addition, a cultural pattern needs to be treated in a holistic sense. Such a treatment does not imply that a cultural pattern is free of flaws or is completely perfect. In the light of the UN Fact Sheet No.23 on Human Rights (Harmful Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children), practices which mutilate, enslave, or exploit women for example, should be done away with. Recent feminist debates attack African traditional religions and ways of life for being oppressive towards African women. Indeed, there is need for some traditional African practices to be transformed in the light of recent African developmental models.

Conclusion

It is time for South African modern culture, including the legislature but also the various South African Christianities and other religions, to begin to seek models of healing which would impact beyond the TRC truth process. Important as it was to bring the past out in the open, this process cannot effectively facilitate reconciliation and cleansing from African traditional perspective. More importantly, it is the people from this stratum in society—which constitutes the majority of South Africans—which have been at the sharp end of apartheid's atrocities in our country.

Healing is a complex and comprehensive phenomenon. Traditional African rituals could be used by both the South African Churches/ religions and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission under the leadership of Desmond Tutu to bring about a comprehensive, meaningful, truthful and powerful healing paradigm and *kgwerano*²⁴ for the South African context. Reconciliation in a form of *ukubuyisa*²⁵ and *ukugezwa*²⁶ will determine these genuine *kgwerano*. The bleeding graves of the victims of violence, rape

²² Traditional Zulu reed festival.

²³ Zulu traditional festival of warfare.

²⁴ Pedi for intimate fellowship.

²⁵ This literally means 'to bring back'.

²⁶ To be ritually cleansed.

and crime should challenge us to speed up this process of healing which does not exclude but include, especially the living victims and the families of the bereaved and wronged.

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