



# Ancestors are demonic - is it true? Traversing Christian demonology and African traditional religion

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## Abstract

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, missionaries flocked to Central and Southern Africa to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Whilst interacting with the local African indigenous communities, and observing their culture and their way of life, the missionaries concluded that the indigenous people needed not only the Christian faith, but also to be civilised. The African way of life was regarded as backward, barbaric, and heathen. For this reason, the missionaries went out of their way not only to convert Africans to Christianity, but also to package Christianity in European culture, which was viewed as more advanced and acceptable than the African way of life. The arrival and work of missionaries in Africa flourished. Hence, even nowadays, Southern Africa is predominantly Christian. Unfortunately, the attitudes and teachings of missionaries regarding African traditional religion remain in Africans' minds, in particular. Many Africans, especially those who are educated and have converted to Christianity, still perceive some practices of African traditional religion as heathen and demonic. This research intends exploring this narrative, by mainly referring to the African practice of venerating ancestors as demonic. It intends, first, to set the record straight, by exploring demonology as well as Christian demonology and its origins; secondly, to evaluate the African traditional religion's understanding of ancestral veneration, and thirdly, to analyse Christian demonology and whether there are correlations between demonology and ancestral veneration. The research employs a literature review as a methodology for the study. This research concludes that ancestral veneration is not demonic; instead, it found that demonology is a foreign concept in traditional African religion. In addition, the research established that the words 'demon' or 'demonic' do not exist in African languages and world view.

**Keywords:** Ancestors, demonic, demonology, traversing, African traditional religion.

## Introduction

It is a common cause to refer to ancestral veneration as demonic, as it is assumed that African people worship the dead. This concept often arises from those in the Christian faith. This research aims to traverse the study of demonology and African traditional religion in establishing the facts on this narrative. It explores the two concepts 'demonology' and 'ancestral veneration' to identify whether this narrative is justified and factual in referring to ancestral veneration as demonic. Okeke *et al.* (2017:1) state that the narrative understudy is not surprising because, if two religious



systems exist in one community, there always tend to be socioreligious, ideological, physical, and even political conflicts. What led to this narrative began during the missionary period, as elaborated on by Igboin (2011:101), stating that missionaries had an attitude towards African traditional religion. This attitude led to criticisms that they came across to Africa as cultural imperialists who were unwilling to fairly evaluate and understand African cultures (Kaplan, 1986:166). Instead, the Christianity they shipped to Africa was intertwined with their European cultures. Western dress and etiquette were deemed acceptable, whereas everything African was viewed as inferior and in need of improvement. Omotoye (2011:25) further notes that Christian missionaries, instead of affording themselves time to study and understand the African traditional religion, described it in diminutive descriptions such as the high god of the primitive people, withdrawn god, polytheism, fetishism, idolatry, heathenism, paganism, animism, juju, mana, and ancestor worship. According to Adamo (2011:1), “[t]he theme of Christianity and its relationship with other religions is indeed a delicate issue and must be handled with care. At present, there is no excuse for avoiding it. It is a topic to be explored and carefully mapped out if the illusion is to dispel, suspicion removed, and conflict minimized”.

### **The era of missionary enterprise and legacy**

Porter (1997:368) argues that the missionary period came with cultural imperialism, which involved the development of the ‘self’ and ‘other’. This divide in the minds of the missionaries and the colonisers also codified differences in race, language, and history. This further perpetuated the notion that Western culture is dominant and superior to other cultures (Porter, 1997:368). In the nineteenth century, missionary work was expanded (Porter, 1997:369). Porter (1997:369) records the reflections of Harry Johnston about the work of missionaries in British Central Africa: “[Missionaries] strengthen our hold over the country, they spread the use of the English language, they induct the natives into the best kind of civilisation, and each mission station is an essay in colonisation”. Porter (1997:370) further records thoughts of other scholars such as Jean and John Comaroff who concluded that, in the early nineteenth century, the Wesleyan and Congregational missionaries were “agent[s], scribe[s] and moral alibi[s] for the colonising project”. It is apparent that the mission of missionaries was not only the Gospel. This research explores other factors behind the missionary work in Africa. Porter (1997:370) shares some points on this:

hinged upon the effort of a few men with loosely shared social origins, to impose an entire worldview upon their would-be subjects. The evangelists were not just the bearers of a vocal Protestant ideology, nor merely the media of modernity. They were also the human vehicles of a hegemonic worldview ... driven by a universalising ethos whose prime object was to engage the Africans in a web of symbolic and material transactions that would bind them ever more securely to the colonising culture.

Awolalu (1976:4) mentions that the early missionaries were subjective, and for them, nothing good could come from African traditional religion; hence, a lack of interest in understanding it. The cultural imperialism that came with the missionaries in Africa brought about superiority among them, and they taught Africans to, among other things, despise their cultural values, thereby destroying their psychological and cultural defences (Porter, 1997:371). Hence, feminist historians such as Margaret Strobel, whilst reflecting on the work of missionaries, states that “[g]ood intentions do not compensate for the destructive actions”. Porter (1997:367) refers to these as cultural imperialism. On the other hand, Lebeloane (2006:3) states that the main aim of



the missionaries was to 'Christianise' and civilise 'the heathen' indigenous Africans and non-European descendants. In addition, Awolalu (1976:3) records the thoughts of Edwin Smith, who heard that Emil Ludwig was a missionary in Africa and posed the following question: "How can the untutored Africans comprehend God? Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing." This question shows how many Europeans viewed Africans and their religion as inferior. According to Awolalu (1976:3), many Western scholars intended to portray Africa as a spiritual desert. For this reason, Mokhutso (2021:13) argues that African Indigenous Knowledge System has been found guilty without being afforded an opportunity to a fair trial.

Furthermore, Lebeloane (2006:4, citing Majeke, 1952) states that, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Cape Governor of the time, Sir George Grey, made subsidies available to the missionary institutions of learning to provide industrial training and elementary education "fitting the 'Bantu' youths in the new economy as labourers". This research aims to use the cultural and religious subjugation by the missionaries and doubt the intellect of Black people to foreground the argument that this research aims to use as a starting point. With the available literature, it can be argued that the missionaries operated, to a certain extent, as bullies who unashamedly imposed their culture on others. The only choice non-Europeans had was to be either Christian and European or African and heathen. This research does not in any way ignore the good the missionaries did in Africa. Not all missionaries were ignorant of the culture and religion of Africans. Awolalu (1976:3) mentions missionaries such as Andrew Lang, Archbishop N. Soderblom, Father Schmidt of Vienna, and many more who made it their business to study and understand African culture and world view.

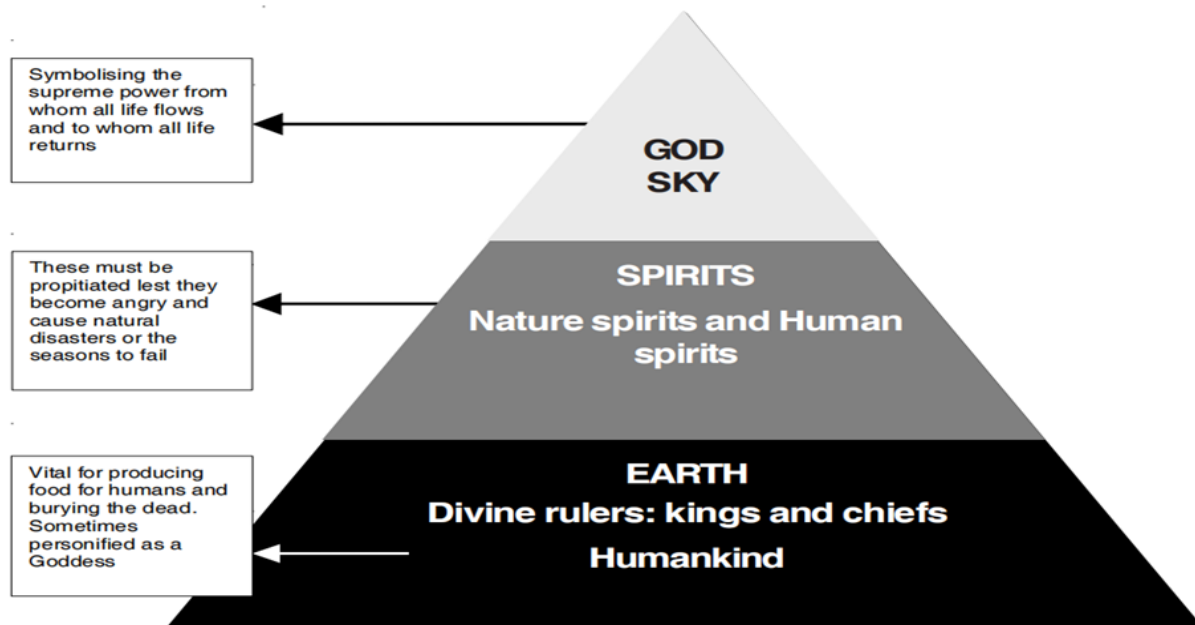
### **African cosmology**

According to Holbrook (2009:138), cosmology has its origins in myths that are simply told about how the world began. Mbiti (1975b:34) adds to this narrative, saying that African communities looked and observed the world around them, the stars, the moon, the sun, and meteorites, as well as the different kinds of animals. Their sad and happy experiences stimulated African views and ideas about the world and the universe. Hence, Viriri and Mungwini (2010:29) mention that African cosmology refers to African people's world view about the universe. According to Ajayi (2005:45), Africans believe that cosmology is determined by beliefs and practices bound to each other through relationships between human beings, ancestors, the living and the unborn, nature, and deities.

Mbiti (1975b:35) elaborates more on this, stating that, for Africans, the universe is divisible into two, namely the visible and the invisible parts of the universe. This division does not denote separation, but different aspects of the universe operate differently. Africans strive for a continuous and harmonious connection of these realms. Awolalu (1976:8) states that the material only has meaning in terms of the spiritual. The spiritual gives meaning and importance to visible material objects. The invisible part is the heavenly part of the universe; it is understood as a home to the stars, sun, moon, meteorites, sky, wind, and rain. The heavens are also the home of the Supreme Being (God), although there is no distinctive explanation as to where exactly God lives in heaven, but the understanding is that God lives in heaven. Hence, different African communities would mention that God dwells in the sky, in heaven, beyond the clouds, and so on (Mbiti, 1975b:36). Furthermore, Africans also believe that God does not live alone in heaven. The Supreme Being is said to live with beings whose roles are to oversee different departments of the

universe on behalf of the Supreme Being. However, it is critical to understand that these beings are not equal to God; they are God's servants or ministers. Awolalu (1976:8) refers to these heavenly beings as divinities, understood as representatives and servants of the Supreme Being (God). Alolo (2007:17) elaborates further on the spiritual world. It is critical to note that God is the Creator and controller of the divine force, energy, or power; the spirits have access to this power and can use it. There are also unique human beings such as medicine men or women, witches, priests, priestesses, and so on, who have partial knowledge of this power and who can manipulate it for selfish reasons or for good and bad reasons.

**Figure 1: ATR belief structures**



Source: (Alolo, 2007:18).

Ajayi (2005:45) further states that in African cosmology, there is a hierarchy topped by God or the Supreme Being. Second on that hierarchy are the deities, the ancestors, human beings who are still alive, animals, and plants. There is an emphasis on the interrelationship of the spiritual and physical human beings with God and nature (Ajayi, 2005:45). Beyers (2010:3) also mentions that the physical in African traditional religion refers to the physical world we see. The spiritual world refers to the invisible world, where God, the ancestors, spirits, and powers reside. Mbiti (1969:75) adds to this, saying that, in African cosmology, the spiritual world is densely populated with spiritual beings, spirits, and the living dead. Mbiti (1975a:8) goes on to say that these spirits in African cosmology are understood to be as numerous as swarming mosquitoes.

It should be noted that, in all these spheres (physical and spiritual) in African cosmology, the physical and the spiritual receive their energy of life from the same source, namely God (Supreme Being). Hence, according to Mbiti (1975a:4), Africans understand God as the Father and Creator



(Maker, Fashioner, Originator, Source). Mbiti (1969:29) notes that the nature of God expressed ontologically is God as an originator and sustainer of all things. Two attributes are essential for God in African cosmology, especially for the point this research seeks to make: God is transcendent and immanent (Mbiti, 1969:29). Mbiti (1970:12) mentions that these two attributes are paradoxically complementary. Different African tribes and clans understand the transcendence of God differently. However, this research seeks to communicate the transcendence of God in terms of God's supreme status concerning other beings, divinities, objects, and human institutions (Mbiti, 1970:15). Mbiti (1970:15) summarises this understanding as follows:

God is beyond human laws, regulations, taboos, prohibitions, customs, traditions, and judgement. Nobody can bring him to court, nobody can charge him with any offence, nobody can take revenge upon him, and nobody can harm him. He is altogether the transcendent Other...above human needs and requirements, such as hunger, sleep, rest, protection, and so on. His very nature requires nothing to sustain, nourish, or prosper his being.

Regarding the immanence of God, Africans believe that it is "bad" and "dangerous" (Mbiti, 1970:16). The immanence of God is believed to manifest in the form of a lion, hyena, python, lightning, storms, pools of water, and high wind. These animals are wild and dangerous like God's immanence retained in the bush. On the other hand, God's immanence indicates that God is involved in the creation, and this immanence speaks of a God who is close to everything. This explains how Africans worship and perform sacrifices, prayers, and invocations to God. Elders are thought to be "nearer" to God and can go to all places deemed dangerous and a dwelling of God (Mbiti, 1970:16).

The African community further emphasises the importance of both the community and the individual for the sake of the group (Ajayi, 2005:45). Furthermore, there is an emphasis on promoting harmony and balance, and on maintaining interdependence of all these said relationships. Nurnberger (2007:22, 23) elaborates on this as follows: socially, the most critical positive flow of dynamic power is the life force of the extended family, the clan, the chiefdom, and the kingdom. Life is community life; there is no other possible life. The protection and enhancement of life is a communal task. The harmony and balance in African cosmology are maintained by observing morals, which enhance life forces, by being in a close relationship between the Supreme Being, ancestors, and other extended family members (Magesa, 2002:52). Adamo (2011:3) explains that, in terms of the community, when there is estrangement between God and the spirit world, there is a need to pacify and recapture that lost relationship between God and humanity by means of sacrifices, rituals, and medicine.

### **African traditional religion**

Ikwaagwu (2007:16) submits that African traditional religion can never be said to have been started by a particular person. It is a religion as old as African people themselves. It is a religion started by Africans as a response and a coping mechanism to their own experiences in and of the world. Awolalu (1976:1) defines African traditional religion as indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the Africans. According to Awolalu (1976:1), traditional means the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of African people. This is an aboriginal religion handed down from generation to generation. Beyers (2010:3) argues that African religions differ; however, there are





similarities. This research focuses on this aspect. According to Mbiti (1975b:13), African traditional religion is a product of the thinking and experiences of our forefathers and mothers. For this reason, Ndemanu (2018:71) mentions that any attempt at studying African peoples and cultures that does not involve a meticulous examination of traditional African religions would be incomplete.

Mbiti (1975b:14) states that one cannot understand African heritage without the religious aspect. African people's way of life is influenced very strongly by their religion. It influences all African people's lives. It affects how one relates with relatives, neighbours, chief/king, headsmen, and nature, and how young people relate and communicate with the elders. It affects the names parents give to their young ones and how corpses are handled and buried. It influences the songs Africans sing, the ceremonies they hold, the rituals, and the proverbs (Mbiti, 1975b:15). Furthermore, according to Ikwaugwu (2007:16), the relationship between African people and nature fills them with a sense of mystery, awe, and wonder. They thus conclude that there is a God out there. Ikwaugwu (2007:16) elaborates further:

The awe of nature evident in the African experience of and relationship to hills, mountains, thick forests, big trees, rivers, rocks, deserts, and wild animals manifest the wonder of the Creator and dispose the Africans to arrive at the conclusion that God exists as the Being who is the Creator and – the origin and source of all things. In their different languages and cultures, Africans address this Being with different names according to their experience with and of him. The African affirmation of the existence of a Creator God through the observation of nature is not only humanistic, but essentially philosophical – philosophical in the sense that through 'wonder' (wonder of the nature and order of created things), they arrive at the conclusion of a Creator. This element of wonder, arising from the exercise of the human intellect, is an essential function of philosophy.

Ikwaugwu (2007:15) further posits that African traditional religion affects all aspects of African life such as marriage, birth, naming ceremony, initiation rite, illness, healing, and death. Ikwaugwu (2007:15) advances a strong connection between religion and culture in Africa that influences the laws and customs to which African people adhere. One key characteristic of African traditional religion is that it functions more on a communal than an individual basis. According to Awolalu (1976:1), despite modernity and how African communities have changed over the years, African traditional religion cannot remain intact, but it is not extinct. Ikwaugwu (2007:15) mentions a significant point about this religion, saying that it does not distinguish between the secular and the sacred; the two are viewed as one. The religious and non-religious, the spiritual and the material, all are understood to be interwoven. Turaki (1999:69) shares the following characteristics of African traditional religion, to be elaborated on at a later stage.

- Belief in the Supreme Being.
- Belief in spirits and divinities.
- The cult of ancestors.
- The use of magic, charms, and spiritual forces.

### **Belief in the Supreme Being**

Alolo (2007:18) states that, in Africa, God is referred to as the Supreme Being (Figure 1 attests to this) because he is the author of all life forms, including the spirit world. Adamo (2011:4) posits that Africans understand God as a Supreme Being because, for them, it means that God is the head of all things, even divinities and ancestors. Nurnberger (2007:32, 33) submits that the



Supreme Being, the supremacy of God in African thought, attests, among other things, to the importance of ancestors who act as mediators between God and humanity because the Supreme Being is too great and mysterious for human beings to understand.

In African religion, God is understood as the Creator of all things, the source of all life and creation. Beyers (2010:4) elucidates that, in Africa, God is understood as the Creator and Sustainer. There is less focus on God; instead, the focus is on the mediators. In the hierarchy of beings, both physical and spiritual, God is at the helm of it all. Hence, God is referred to as the Supreme Being; there is none other beyond, before, or after Him.

### **Belief in spirits and divinities**

African traditional religion understands that the spirit world coexists with the invisible world (Beyers, 2010:4). Everything is connected. In African traditional religion, there are three spheres of the spirit world: the spirit of the ancestors, the spirits of nature, and the deities (Beyers, 2010:4). Africans understand that the gods work hand in hand with God (Supreme Being) and possess God's characteristics. Africans understand ancestors to be superior to human beings, due to their state of being in the spirit world. They act as mediators between God and human beings and have a personal relationship with their next of kin, who, among other things, bestow gifts of good fortune and cause harm and misfortune to those who have neglected to acknowledge them (Beyers, 2010:4). According to Adamo (2011:4), spirits other than divinities are understood to be conceived anthropomorphically, as if they are abstracting beings. Mbiti (1970:232) posits that there are two kinds of spirits, the ones that were once human beings and those that belong to the spirit race. It is believed that God creates spirits as intermediaries between him and human beings (Mbiti, 1970:232). According to Mbiti (1975b:70), because God creates spirits, they are subordinate to, and depend on God. Spirits vary, as there are nature spirits, human spirits, sky spirits, earth spirits, and ancestral spirits (Mbiti, 1975b:70). As much as different parts of Africa believe that spirits are innumerable, it is believed that God is above them. He can keep them under control (Mbiti, 1975b:80). In the spirit world, there are also divinities that are believed to be created by God in the ontological category of spirits. Adamo (2011:4) mentions that, in African cosmology, they are second in the rank to the Supreme Being. Divinities are functionaries of, and act as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and human beings and the remainder of the universe. They do not have the power of their own, but they get it from the Supreme Being (Adamo, 2011:4). Their other role is to act as an orderly function of the universe.

### **Ancestors**

Adamo (2011:4) states that all Africans aspire to be an ancestor. Africans understand ancestors as good models for human behaviour, and their lives are viewed as educative to the living, as they have modelled a proper way to live one's life. Two aspects determine whether one will be an ancestor or not after death, namely one must pass through all the stages of life, inclusive of having children and getting married, in order to qualify as an ancestor, and one must die a natural death, not by accident, suicide, unclean diseases, or childbirth (Beyers, 2010:4). Ancestors are understood to be guides on the journey of life, and how to attain the fullness of life, including going through birth rites, puberty rites, adulthood, old age, and death. In all these stages or phases of life, rituals or rites should be performed to initiate one from one stage of life to the other (Beyers, 2010:5). Ancestors are understood to be guides on the journey of life solely because they themselves have walked this path of life and gained wisdom. Ignoring them is considered self-reliance and arrogance, which is un-African and leads to misfortunes and punishment (Beyers,



2010:5). The role of ancestors is to be mediators between God and human beings. They also function as social consciousness of society and guardians of traditions. They aim to ensure that all community members know and understand their place and function in the community (Beyers, 2010:5). Mbiti (1975a:8) posits that ancestors are the spirits of the grandfathers and the grandmothers, the spirits of deceased parents and other relatives, the spirits of deceased wives, husbands, or children. Ancestors are considered family members. Even though they have passed on, they remain members of the household. Hence, they are sometimes conversed with as though face to face (Mbiti, 1975a:9).

### **The use of magic, charms, and spiritual forces**

Wallace (2015:25) references the historical background of the term 'magic' from the Greek, *magike*, referring to the art craft of the ancient Medes and Persian priestly class:

In ancient Greek societies, a number of words were applied to distinguish between various forms of magic, with *goetia* signifying charms, sorcery or the invocation of demons, whilst *theourgia* was applied to high or benevolent magic that was conducted with the participation of the supernatural realm in human affairs. Ancient Greeks and Romans turned to such magical rites to achieve personal goals, for material gains and/or as a route for direct access to the gods. In the early Christian era, the binary division between *theurgical* (high) magic and *goetic* (low) magic was collapsed and the term 'magic' gradually became singularly associated with deviance, sorcery and witchcraft as found in *goetic* systems.

The use and practice of magic and charms lie at the root of the African world view, which is saturated with ambiguous spirits (Onongha, 2013:48). This African world view ranks God, the deities, and the ancestors above, a man in the middle, and natural forces such as witchcraft in the realm below (Uka, 1991:171). Onongha (2013:49) states that magic, charms, sorcery, or witchcraft is the ability to access and control these existing forces and employ them for their own benefits, either for good or for evil. This belief can be understood as a world view explanation for negative life experiences such as untimely death, infertility, conflict, and failure. For Africans, nothing simply happens; there is always a temptation to seek an explanation from the spiritual/metaphysical cause (Onongha, 2013:49). For this reason, divination plays a vital role in the life of Africans. Diviners assist in interpreting and solving mysteries related to the metaphysical world.

### **Colonialism and African traditional religion**

The reality is that, from its earliest history, Christianity has maintained a negative attitude towards other religious traditions such as African and Asian religions (Adamo, 2011:6). Bonsu (2016:113) shares that Western scholar were the first people to write about African traditional religion. Their writings, however, were born out of prejudice. They felt Africa was a 'dark continent' devoid of civilisation. Viriri and Mungwini (2010:28) state that the colonial relationship between Europe and Africa brought dehumanisation that led to the enslavement of African people. Africans were viewed as barbarians, morons, primitives, and sexual perverts (Viriri & Mungwini, 2010:28). Awolalu (1976:5) adds that missionaries referred to African traditional religion as primitive, savage, fetishism, juju, heathenism, paganism, animism, idolatry, and polytheism. Bonsu (2016:113) mentions that Western and African scholars still use these terms nowadays to





describe African traditional religion. Bonsu (2016:113) argues that African writers, who still use these terms, are being westernised.

Viriri and Mungwini (2010:28) further posit that “[s]uch philosophical prejudices against Africans have continued to be circulated and recycled by many other European scholars in this modern day without stopping to check the facts”. Viriri and Mungwini (2010:29) argue that colonisation was a process in which Europeans turned African minds into Western objects. That led to European-made Africa, which re-mapped, re-shaped, and re-named Africa according to their world view. Africa had to accept their towns, streets, and institutions to be named using foreign designations from Europe. This came with Africa having to accept its conquerors’ values and cultures. According to Viriri and Mungwini (2010:31), Africa was Europeanized and made devoid of its African identities by the imposition of European identity. Viriri and Mungwini (2010:34-35) argue that the present-day Africa is essentially European made, waiting to be ruled by Western philosophical thinking:

The denial of history to the Africans meant that there was in the African past, nothing of value, neither their customs nor their culture. By implication the African is being expected to take on their customs, the logic, and the language of the coloniser. This western thesis that the African had no history also implied that the African had no future of his own to look forward to and hence it was incumbent upon the generous and caring white-man to carve out a future for him thus perpetuating the myth of the African as the ‘white-man’s burden’.

Secondly, it should be noted that Christianity also played a part in corrupting African minds about their culture and identity, which Viriri and Mungwini (2010:36) call Africa’s European-made identities. In the hierarchy of humankind, Europeans were on top of the ladder, followed by Asians, Americans, and Africans at the bottom. It was believed that an African brain was smaller than that of a European. These narratives and others of skin colour, the colour of the eyes, and the type of hair led European Christian believers to struggle to comprehend that Africans were ancestors of Adam and Eve. Instead, missionaries linked Africans with Noah’s cursed son, Ham (Genesis 9:20). Mhiripiri (2002:395) concludes:

Religion was used to legitimise racism within the context of modernisation by citing the dubious notion of the Great Chain of Being, which placed one Man immediately beneath in the order of moral, spiritual, and intellectual importance. Within the category of man more contestations for positioning are found, with the white man claiming superiority and virtually denying an equal humanity for Africans.

Viriri and Mungwini (2010:38) further mention that some Christian teachings contained illustrations portraying the devil or Satan as black. The black colour became a symbol of sin, and in the process, Christian beliefs replaced African metaphysics. The Bible became a Bible ridden at the root of the colonial agenda (Viriri & Mungwini, 2010:38). Viriri and Mungwini (2010:38) argue that “it is this dualism that has continued to haunt Africa since her colonial encounter with Western modernity a period that marks the advent of one of Africa’s major postcolonial problems, that of self-identity”. For this reason, Mokhutso (2022:14) states that Black Africans are gasping for air, in order to survive the impact of colonialism and apartheid.



## Africa back to self

To illustrate the impact and erosion of the missionaries and colonists in Africa, this led to a movement among African leaders such as Kwame Nkruma, Kenneth Kaunda, Thabo Mbeki, and Steve Biko, Black Consciousness, Black Theology, liberation theology, and so on, with the aim to restore the African identity and resuscitate African culture, in response to Viriri and Mungwini's (2010:31) statement: "Africa was Europeanized, made to be devoid of its African identities by the imposition of a European identity." Kanu (2014:39) recalls the likes of Julius Nyerere, who developed *Ujamaa* socialism, a Swahili word meaning 'familyhood'. This socialism aimed at enhancing an attitude among Africans to care for others instead of the capitalist attitude of dominating others (Kanu, 2014:39). All these attempts were to resuscitate the African identity after the missionary and colonial disruption. Kanu (2014:39) further mentions that the slave trade, racism, and colonialism have affected the identity of Africans.

Jacobs (2000:55) referenced Mbeki, who also called for what was referred to as the African Renaissance, "the rebirth of an entire continent". In a speech he gave in Namibia in 1999, Mbeki mentioned many African leaders to whom he referred as African mentors who promoted that Africans as a people should go back to their culture.

Abdul Gamal Nasser of Egypt, Ben Belta of Algeria, Habib Bourgiba of Tunisia, Mohamed V of Morocco, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Modibo Keita of Mali, Patrice Lumumba of Congo, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nimmro of Zimbabwe, Eduardo Mondlane of Mozambique, Agostinho Neto of Angola, Sam NUjoma of Namibia, Seretse Khama and Ketumile Masire of Botswana, and Albert Luthuli, Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela of South Africa (Jacobs, 2000:56-57).

Maluleke (2008: n.p.), reflecting on Biko, posits that Black Christians should consider paying more attention to the following areas:

1. "get rid of the rotten foundation which many missionaries created when they came;
2. move away from focusing on "moral trivialities;
3. revise destructive concepts of sin and stop making people find fault with themselves;
4. try being true to Jesus' radical ministry;
5. try and resolve a situation in which, while [B]lacks sing *mea culpa*, [W]hites are singing *tua culpa*;
6. deal with the contradiction of a well-meaning God who allows people to suffer continuously under an obviously immoral system;
7. redefine the message of the Bible ... to make it relevant to the struggling masses;
8. revisit the biblical notion that all authority is divinely instituted;
9. make the Bible relevant to [B]lack people to keep them going on their long journey to freedom;
10. deal with the spiritual poverty of [B]lack people;
11. adapt Christianity to local culture;
12. stop the use of Christianity as "the ideal religion for the maintenance of the subjugation of people."

Maluleke (2008:np) further quotes Biko reflecting on his views about Christianity:



Christianity is a “cold, cruel religion” whose early proponents preached “a theology of existence of hell, scaring our fathers and mothers with stories about burning in eternal flames and gnashing of teeth and grinding of bone. This cold, cruel religion was strange to us, but our forefathers were sufficiently scared of the unknown impending danger to believe that it was worth a try. Down went our cultural values!

All these were attempts to respond to a wounded Africa that needed to restore its identity and culture.

### **Demonology and Biblical demonology**

Postiglione (2020:7) gives a background about demons. The term ‘demon’ is derived from the Greek word *δαίμων*. In the ancient Greek culture, this word had a neutral connotation and referred to various super-human entities, good or evil. Philpott (1973:74) submits that neither the Old nor the New Testament gives a precise origin of demons. Leahy (1975:78) attests to the argument that demonology is not only a phenomenon in Christian theology, but that demon worship was also an established phenomenon among the Greeks and Romans during New Testament times. Pope (1993:11) states that the Graeco-Roman demonology emanated from the belief in spirits, some of which were understood to be hostile to human beings. These spirits were believed to reside in the fields and streams. They could also come in spirit or human form or both or as personifications of perceived evils or lust or anger (Pope, 1993:11). During the Hellenistic period (331 BCE), Graeco-Roman demonology changed the beliefs in *daemones* to be associated with natural disasters, superstitions, and unpalatable morality. Demons were understood to take on an avenging role, punishing, and executing people who had done wrong (Pope, 1993:14). Demons were then understood as the Graeco-Roman gods and borrowed from Mesopotamian demonology (Glaser-Hill, 2019:23).

There is a different understanding of the origins of demons, what they are, and how they operate within the Greek, Jewish and Islamic traditions (Glaser-Hille, 2019:19). According to Greek mythology, the unintelligible aspects of nature referred to the gods outside the range of humanity. In Europe, these figures are referred to as sorcerer, anthropomorphic, bird-headed figures found in the cave of Lascaux (France). In North America, this refers to entities believed to ruin the perfection of creation, introducing death into it. It seems that different parts of the world understand the nature and operation of demons differently. For example, in Northern America, they believe that demons scramble against the perfect natural balance, whereas, in Ancient Egypt, they understood demons to possess animals. A similar understanding is found in Islamic, Chinese, and Zoroastrian mythologies (Postiglione, 2020:10). On the other hand, early Judaism understood Satan as an adversary and demons as his evil minions (Glaser-Hille, 2019:22).

Unger (1952:59) posits that the word ‘demon’ (*daimon, damonion*) was introduced in the Bible through the Septuagint as a translation of *shedhim*. The word ‘*Shedh*’ (*‘Shedhim*’) is used in Deuteronomy 32:17 and in Psalm 106:37 to refer to “devils” in the Authorised Version, and “demons” in the Revised Version. The word ‘*shedhim*’ derives from the root ‘*shudh*’ “to rule or to be lord”, like the Arabic word ‘*sala*’. Hebrews viewed idolatrous images as visible symbols of invisible demons (Unger, 1952:59). Furthermore, pre-Christianity, the Rabbinic and Talmudic demonology is said to have influenced Christian demonology (Glaser-Hille, 2019:24-25). In the Talmud, demons were referred to as “evil spirits” or “injurers” and are understood as a natural



part of the cosmos. During this time, there was an understanding that the only persons who could interact with demons were Rabbinic experts, well-versed in the Torah (Glaser-Hille, 2019:25).

Demons were thus understood as invisible spirits behind the gods, and as idolatrous images. The earliest Christians understood demons as having the power to bring illness, as enemies of Jesus, and as adversaries to an eternal life of salvation. Demons aim to ruin not only the physical bodies, but also the soul (Glaser-Hille, 2019:22). As argued by Apostolides and Dreyer (2008:1026), Satan and demons are recorded for the first time in Isaiah 14:12-20 and Ezekiel 28:11-19, when talking about the origins of Satan. Apostolides and Dreyer (2008:1026) further submit that the Greek Orthodox belief is that Satan is a being created by God as an angel. It is believed that, due to being almost perfect, Satan and other angels decided to oppose God. The devil and demons aim to destroy all that is good (Apostolides & Dreyer, 2008:1026). Postiglione (2020:7) posits that Christians are the first to use the term 'demon' in a negative sense. In Christian understanding, demons refer to spirits occupying the realm of the earth between heaven and hell (Glaser-Hille, 2019:19). Philpott (1973:78) adds that, in Christian demonology, there is one devil and many demons whose number is unclear. Glaser-Hille (2019:19) also mentions that, despite playing a prominent role in Christian thought, practice, and daily life, demons were not strictly Christian inventions.

Leahy (1975:57) further argues that, in the New Testament, demons are identified as agents of apostasy whose chief mandate is to corrupt the Christian church. For Christians, the term 'demon' refers to unintelligible and untrustworthy pagan deities. Postiglione (2020:11) also posits that the fallen angels play a crucial role in biblical demonology. Unger (1952:15) elucidates that the biblical view on demons and Satan is that Satan is presented as a king with a kingdom, as recorded in Matthew 12:26, and it is said that a portion of that consists of demons (Matthew 12:24). In 561, in the first council of Braga, and, in 553, in the second council of Constantinople, Christian theologians wrestled with the topic of demons. As much as demons were understood to have power over human beings, being a believer in Jesus Christ enabled one to exorcise demons, as recorded in Matthew 15:21-28; 17:14-21; Mark 7:24-30; 9:14-29, and Luke 9:37-49 (Glaser-Hille, 2019:22). To demonstrate how prominent demonology was in New Testament times, Leahy (1975:78) states that the word 'demon' is used eleven times by Matthew, thirteen times by Mark, twenty-two times by Luke, and once in Acts. All the Gospels agree regarding the presentation and exposure of demonic activities. Physical manifestations of demon possession in the New Testament included hypochondria, insanity, epilepsy, frenzy, impediment of speech, dumbness, deafness, and blindness (Leahy, 1975:79). The New Testament writers could distinguish between a standard illness and a demon possession, as in Matthew 9:32, 12:22, 17:15-18; Mark 9:17, and Luke 9:39.

During New Testament times, demon possession was noticed through acts such as tormenting and raving demoniacs being frequently introduced. According to the teachings of the New Testament, a believer in Christ cannot be possessed by demons, because the Holy Spirit and evil cannot coexist (Leahy, 1975:95). The overall teaching of the New Testament is that Christ has authority over Satan and demons (Leahy, 1975:97). This study and interest in demons sparked interest in many Christian scholars who wrote about this. Justin Martyr (c. 100-c. 165) taught that demons came into being through the union of angels and human women, and that their offspring then drove human beings away from God. Tertullian (c. 155-c. 240) posits that demons brought physical weakness and other natural disasters. The understanding is that demons cause division between humanity and God. The cause of disasters, pain, and illness is their way of causing



human beings to doubt God's goodness in their lives (Glaser-Hille, 2019:24). Origen (c. 185-c. 253) further wrote that human beings, angels, and demons are equal and were all created from the same material. Augustine (354-430) argued that demons, like angels, had superior knowledge. Early Christian believers had several encounters with demons and performed exorcisms, as recorded in Matthew 15:21-28, 17:14-21; Mark 7:24-30, 9:14-29, and Luke 9:37-49 (Glaser-Hille, 2019:24). Leahy (1975:110-111) speaks of the demonology of Luther, who believed that there were demons infesting woods, water, swamps, and deserted places and that demons were constantly trying to distract human beings' lives but disrupted by angels (Leahy, 1975:111). John Calvin also believed in the existence of demons; he differed with Luther regarding exorcism at baptism. Instead, he encouraged putting on the full armour of God, including prayer and being as important (Leahy, 1975:114).

Proctor (2017:51) highlights that the earliest followers of Jesus believed in demons, also called unclean spirits. There are 48 references to demonic possessions recorded in the New Testament. All synoptic Gospels use the terms 'unclean spirit', 'demon', and 'evil demon' (Proctor, 2017:51). It is interesting to note that demons are not only mentioned in the gospels but are also recorded of Jesus Christ performing exorcisms. The book of Acts records many Christians performing exorcisms (Proctor, 2017:90).

Pope (1993:28) mentions that Rabbinic demonology believed that demons could cause physical harm, were opposed to God, and were associated with illness and seduction. They were believed to also interfere with Jewish religious practices and could extinguish the Sabbath lamb. The study of demons flourished during the Middle Ages (Glaser-Hille, 2019:29). In the twelfth century, Aristotelian thought reintroduced the interest in demons. The Fourth Lateran Council proclaimed that the fallen angels were demons, and that their leader was the Devil (Glaser-Hille, 2019:32). Leahy (1975:64) notes that the phenomenon of demons is not prominent in the Old Testament writings; however, texts such as Leviticus 19:31, 20:6; Deuteronomy 18:9-12, and Isaiah 8:19, 19:3 mention familiar spirits. There is mention of those who had familiar spirits, or satyr in Isaiah 13:21 and 34:14, a Hebrew word meaning 'a hairy creature', translated as a demon in the Septuagint. Leahy (1975:65) references several texts such as Deuteronomy 32:17 and Psalm 106:37. The Septuagint uses the word 'demons' instead. According to Leahy (1975:69), the Old Testament teaches the demonic activities associated with the heathen nations. Egypt and Babylon texts such as Exodus 7:12, 22, 8:7, 18, 19 attest to this. Apostolides and Dreyer (2008:1026) quote Saint Anthony explaining how Satan and the demons are "envious of us Christians, they leave nothing undone to hinder us from entering Heaven: they do not want us to mount to the place from which they have fallen".

## **Discussion**

### **The contradistinction between Christian demonology and African ancestral veneration**

As highlighted earlier, there is a contrast between a Christian understanding of demonology and African ancestral veneration. Oesterley (1906:442) highlights fourteen characteristics that summarise the New Testament demonology:

- Demons are under a head, Satan; they form a kingdom.
- They are incorporeal and generally, although not necessarily invisible.
- They inhabit places which they prefer to others.
- They tend to live in groups.





- They have names and are sometimes identified with their victims and, at other times, differentiated from them. They cause mental and physical diseases in men, women, and children.
- They can pass in and out of human beings and even animals.
- More than one can take possession of a human being simultaneously.
- Christ made it one of his chief aims to overthrow this kingdom and set his own in its place.
- Christ cast out demons through his name or by his word.
- Christ could delegate this power which was regarded as something new.
- Christ never treats the possessed as wilful sinners, which strongly contrasts with his words with the scribes and Pharisees.
- Only on the rarest occasions does Christ come into direct contact with the possessed.
- Demons recognise Christ's divine and human natures.
- At Christ's second coming, the members of Satan's kingdom are condemned to eternal fire.

Africans understand ancestors to be the closest link between the spirit world and human beings (Mbiti, 1969:83). They are understood to be a link; they are said to be bilingual; they speak the language of human beings with whom they have recently lived and the language of the spirits and God, with whom, after death, relevant rituals have become a part. Because of their close relationship with their family, they continue to be in contact with them. They are interested in their day-to-day activities (Mbiti, 1969:83). Bogopa (2010:1) posits that Africans believe in mortal life and can influence the lives of those who are living. They are capable of blessing and cursing. According to Onongha (2013:51), ancestors are understood to be guardians and benefactors of their surviving relations. Their crucial role is to be intermediaries between humanity and God; they have the privilege of having full access to communicating channels with God directly, and direct communication with the living through dreams and visions. Their role is that of parents; they confer benefits and exercise benevolence when related adequately (Mekoa, 2019:00103). Africans believe that ancestors offer blessings such as good health, children's victory in war, and growth in livestock (Mekoa, 2019:00103). They can also punish their loved ones with drought, earthquakes, and so on, if they are not paid attention to or their relatives do not follow good moral codes.

Another point to note is that ancestors are not eternal; their existence depends on being remembered by their relatives. If forgotten, they cease to exist, unlike demons (Nurnberger, 2007:25). Lastly, it should be noted that not everybody can be an ancestor; instead, ancestors are people who have lived extraordinary lives. Hence, their other role is to promote the good among the living and keep watch over human beings' morals (Morgan & Okyere-Manu, 2020:13).

### **Setting the record straight – Contrast**

Demons are evil and are foot soldiers of the devil. According to biblical demonology, the target group for a demonic attack are Christian believers, to possess them and turn them away from their faith in Christ (Leahy, 1975:47). They intend to possess and destroy human beings and God's kingdom. Harper (1970:32) declares that, according to the New Testament, demons are not souls of the dead but fallen angels who were evicted from heaven with their commander Satan. This is a Christian understanding. As much as Judaism and Islam believe in demons, their understanding still differs from that of the Christian faith. Makhmoor (2017:2) states that, in Islam, demons are called *Jinn*, which, according to the Koran (55:15), were created by Allah: "And He



created the jinn from a smokeless flame of fire". After disobeying God, he was expelled from heaven, became an enemy of humankind, and is working against them (Makhmoor, 2017:2). Makhmoor (2017:2) also elaborates on the *Jinn's* activities.

*Jinn* also have ability to enter the human body or the mind that is called *Jinn* possession. It mostly occurs when some wrong (e.g., urinating or pouring hot water on them or hitting or killing) has been done by man unintentionally, which *Jinn* take as done intentionally, and for which they take revenge and punish humans.

On the other hand, African epistemology understands that the ancestor's role is to do good and to ensure that the living does so, too. Mbiti (1970:232) posits that ancestors have the power to punish human beings for preventing them from upsetting the "balance of nature" through immorality of any kind. Mbiti (1969:83) again mentions that ancestors are the closest link between man and the spiritual world. Therefore, the concept of demonology is found in both Christianity and other religions other than in African traditional religion.

This research attempted to demonstrate that demonology is a foreign concept in African traditional religion. Indeed, Africans do believe that evil spirits can cause harm to humanity; however, their understanding is totally different from that of demons. Africans believe that some spirits can be mischievous and cause misfortunes, illness, and even death. These are spirits commonly used by witches, sorcerers, or bad magicians (Mbiti, 1975b:80). Mbiti (1975b:81) declares that spirits are an integral part of the religious heritage of Africa. People are deeply aware of the spirit world, and this awareness affects their outlook and life experiences for better or for worse.

### **Ancestors are not demons or evil**

In African understanding, ancestors are understood to be human beings who have recently passed on, lived through all the stages of life, and a good life, too. Such people are believed to have transitioned and are now the living dead or ancestors. They are viewed as elders within the family, ensuring that all live and adhere to good moral values. Mekoa (2019:0099) elaborates on how Africans understand morality, a distinction between right and wrong; a determination of what should or should not be done. Ancestors such as parents have a decisive moral role in their loved ones (Mekoa, 2019:00103). Mekoa (2019:00102) refers to them as spiritual superintendents of family affairs who continue to bear the titles of father or mother. Like human fathers or mothers, they continue with their roles of blessing their loved ones for doing good and punishing them for doing wrong. They simultaneously become a channel through which their relatives can be in contact with God or the Supreme Being. Therefore, ancestors cannot be equated to demons, but rather spiritual guides to Africans. Mekoa (2019:00100) concludes that, in traditional African religious practices, morality, like worship, is an inseparable part of the ancestral cult.

### **Ancestors are not strange and evil spirits**

The reading of Christian demonology defines demons as fallen angels who rebelled against God. Their origin is unknown. Demons work under Satan to destroy God's children and distract them from their relationship with God. On the other hand, ancestors are known to their relatives, who, in their lifetime, lived with them. During different rituals where ancestors are venerated, they are called by their names. Nurnberger (2007:25) highlights that ancestor depends on the recognition of their offspring for their continued authority and belonging. If forgotten or no longer respected as superiors, they are lost. Even when ancestors communicate with their different relatives, other ways of communication appear through dreams, and their loved ones remember their voices and



faces. Therefore, ancestors cannot be demons, who, according to Christian demonology, are evil and strange spirits. Ancestral veneration is a continued relationship with loved ones who have now assumed new roles as seniors and spiritual beings. Their new role grants them a new way to communicate with their loved ones through rituals, visions, and dreams, not face to face as it used to be. Mashau and Ngcobo (2016:37) elaborate on this relationship, stating that they are part of social gatherings such as the birth of a child, giving names, circumcision, marriage, funerals, and so on. The relationship is maintained through rituals that bring the physical and spiritual worlds together. Apostolides and Dreyer (2008:1021) argue that the Western perception of evil is often projected onto non-Western cultures, resulting in ethnocentrism, which is the point this research has established.

### **Ancestors are human beings who have transitioned**

In the African world view, to be an ancestor, a person must go through all life stages such as birth, puberty, and adulthood. Mashau and Ngcobo (2016:39) explain that old age, having children, and living a good life are requirements to assume the status of an ancestor. Mashau and Ngcobo (2016:38) also mention that certain rituals, performed during funerals, help the deceased transition from the communion of the living to a communion of the spirit world. Furthermore, after one or six months, there is a ritual ceremony called *umbuyiso/ubuyisa* (Zulu words for bringing the deceased home). One must marry, have children, and live a long, morally upright life. Upon death, all the necessary rituals should be performed for the deceased to transition into the spirit world. On the other hand, God created demons and Satan. The opposite is the African understanding of ancestors.

### **African languages for the word 'demon'**

The words 'demon' and 'Satan' are recognised in the Greek, Jewish, and Islamic contexts, not in the African context. Words for Satan or demon are found in African languages as direct translations from other languages. Satan (*Satane*) and demon (*letimone*) would be a translation from the traditions mentioned earlier. This attests to the fact that the use of the word 'demon' referring to ancestral veneration still reflects similar bullying tactics employed by missionaries towards non-European cultures and religions. The Zulus and the Xhosas use the word *ifufunyane/Amafufunyane*. Mdleleni (1990:6) defines *ifufunyane/amafufunyana* as a form of possession by a spirit that is not deemed acting in its own accord but sent by a sorcerer. It is believed that this spirit is a spirit of the deceased whose families did not perform the ritual of *ukubuyisa* to integrate their spirit with other ancestral spirits. Therefore, the spirit of the deceased wanders and possesses innocent victims. When one is possessed by this spirit, one behaves like a mentally disturbed person (Mdleleni, 1990:7). Therefore, other people refer to *ifufunyane/amafufunyana* as demons. Apparently, this is not the correct use of the word. Mdleleni (1990:9) speaks of two kinds of *amafufunyana*, the speaking *amafufunyana* and the silent *amafufunyana*. The speaking *amafufunyana* would lay dormant after possessing a person. However, after a certain period, a person would experience persistent headaches, stomach cramps, and limbs feeling heavy. The possessed person would typically behave normally, but have an enormous appetite and a craving for unusual food, especially white bread. If their cravings are not met, they become irritable. Secondly, the second group of *amafufunyana* would usually trigger violent outbursts and confrontations with bystanders. People with this spirit become intense and wild, displaying animal-like behaviour. The last kind of *amafufunyana* pushes the possessed person to throw him-/herself on the ground and pass out in the process. After passing



out, strange voices would speak, with different people's voices and languages. Strangely enough, it is said that some of the voices may use languages not known to the possessed. As a rule, the voices would identify themselves, explain who sent them, their reasons, the length of time they are going to occupy the possessed, and threaten anyone who may have intentions of exorcising them. When the possessed gain consciousness, they would usually not have any recollection of what had transpired (Mdeleleni, 1990:10). The second group of *amafufunyana* are milder and less reactive than the previous group, unless provoked. They present with symptoms such as quietness, stomach cramps, social withdrawal, and loss of appetite (Mdeleleni, 1990:10). It is evident that the use of *ifufunyane/amafufunyana* is misplaced in referring to demons. Demons are not an African construct, and this confusion should be understood by both Africans and Christians alike.

## Conclusion

This research attempted to demonstrate the notion that demonology is a foreign concept in Africa and that it can never be equated to ancestral veneration. The research concludes that the argument that ancestral veneration is demonic, is misplaced. Demonology is a Greek, Christian and Islamic construct, not African. This research submits that to refer to ancestral veneration as demonic imposes the Greek, Christian or Islamic epistemologies.

The research argued that African traditional religion is a religion on its own, with its own beliefs and practices. Christianity and other religions should refrain from using their bullying tactics that were initially applied by missionaries and colonisers to understand the African people's world view. This research posited that ancestors play a considerable role in the lives of Africans, in grounding them in their beliefs as African people, in giving them hope and unity, and in always seeking the best for the entire group. The research submitted that Africans should aspire to know their culture as a people, irrespective of their religious affiliation. The research aligned with the views of Kanu (2014:34) in that, if a being does not have an identity, then everything would be everything, giving birth to one thing since nothing can be differentiated from the other. Kanu (2014:35) argues that Africa risks being a nameless actor on the world stage if it does not deliberately know itself.

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