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***Umbuyiso* Ceremony among the Ndebele in Zimbabwe: Practising a Traditional Ritual in a Westernised Context**

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Abstract

This study explored *Umbuyiso* (a ceremony meaning bringing back home the spirit of the dead) as practised among Ndebele people in the westernised communities of Matabeleland in Zimbabwe. The concern about this traditional ceremony was that it has been greatly affected by the advent of Christianity in Zimbabwe. Through an interview and document analysis of academic articles, cultural books, the Bible, Zimbabwean Constitution, and newspapers; the study interrogated fundamental beliefs that underpin behaviour regarding this ceremony rather than focusing on procedures without understanding their rationale. In this regard, the

study employed the qualitative methodological approach, which is effective in analysing texts to gain insights into meanings, themes and trends. The study further reflected on some of the Western challenges encountered in the conduct of the traditional ceremony. Hence, the study was informed by Afrocentric theory which advocates a valuable world view and a spur to cultural activism by Africans. Understanding African traditional religion rituals and their impact empowers college students' engagements on cultural and religious discussions. While people's beliefs should be respected, the article concluded that it is impossible for them to remain static due to inevitable and powerful forces of change.

Keywords: *Umbuyiso; African Traditional Religion; Ancestral Spirit; Christianity; Syncretism*

INTRODUCTION

Zimbabwe is a multi-religious country that mainly consists of four major religions. These religions are African traditional religion, Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Within some of these religions, multi-faith denominations have emerged. In this study, the thrust is on African traditional religion and Christianity as both are found among Ndebele communities in Zimbabwe. Ndebele people are predominantly located in Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South of the country. Beyond the western parts of the country, Ndebele people are also present in the Midlands districts sharing boundaries with some of the Matabeleland districts. In these regions and districts, Ndebele traditional religion and Christianity have been prevalently practised for several years. According to Nyathi (2015), African traditional spirituality has its roots in ancient times, predating modern religions like Christianity and Islam, which came into being around two thousand years ago. This citation implies that African traditional spirituality dates back to the origins of humankind. Despite the fact that its origins dates back to the pre-historic period, it is now clashing with Christian beliefs, which are relatively recent, given the years it emerged. Regardless of the current prevailing challenges experienced in westernised environments as the case is in Matabeleland regions and Midlands districts, advocates of African philosophical beliefs continue to defend and further their traditional religion as it has a bearing on their livelihood as Africans. Against this background, this inquiry aimed to explore the challenges associated with the practice of the *Umbuyiso* ceremony in a westernised African Ndebele context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The continuous efforts to further African philosophical beliefs through African traditional spirituality, are grounded in Afrocentric theory, which strongly believes that the African world view should positively reflect traditional values (Early 2023). In this respect, the Afrocentric approach uses indigenous knowledge which is a set of traditional beliefs that is regarded as primitive and superstitious by Western education and Christianity legacy (Isaac 2015). This negative attitude of westernisation has also frustrated Africans in pursuing their traditional beliefs and ritual practices. Key within these traditional practices are cultural and religious values like *Umbuyiso*, which is considered a critical ritual in this study as it reconnects the spirit of the dead with his family members. According to Harrell (2022), Sankofa's Theory and Practice, emphasises power of "reconnection" to one's own bodies, minds, and hearts, to others, community, culture, the natural world and Spirit. In the African traditional religion context, the reconnection process occurs through the performance of *Umbuyiso* ritual which is an entirely Ndebele traditional religious activity. Afrocentric theory was therefore, found to be relevant, as it provides a more nuanced understanding of African rituals in their contexts, and ensuring more accurate and respectful representations, and thereby enabling a deeper understanding of their significance and meaning.

In perpetuating the essence behind the bringing back home the spirit of the dead, Chisanyu in The Sunday Mail comment (2016) argues that, "When the spirit of the dead is brought back home, the spirit mediums possessed by the dead are able to give solutions to problems in a family, community or nation". Apparent in this statement is that the belief in this ritual is fundamental since the bringing back the spirit of the dead is a solution not only to the family issues, but also to problems in the communities and nation at large. Further deduced from the concept '*Umbuyiso*' is that it is perceived as being at the core of the continuity of African spirituality making it fundamental. It is on this basis that this study was undertaken in order to focus on the reflections on '*Umbuyiso*' and challenges associated with the practice of this traditional ritual in a westernised African context.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Umbuyiso maintains its vernacular orthography as it does not have an equivalent word in English. Thus, it is problematic to define it without

contextualising its meaning which is expressed in several words. The importance of a language in articulating cultural issues that have to do with the use of language, is expressed by Nyathi (2015) in *The Herald* who asserts that “Language expresses a people’s culture of which it is a repository, including beliefs, world views and cosmologies.” According to Ndebele tradition which falls within African traditional religion, *Umbuyiso* is defined as a ritual of bringing back the spirit (idlozi) of the deceased to his home so that it brings fortune and protection to the family and community as a whole. In concurrence, Jiyane et al. (2012) view the ritual as a traditional act aimed at fetching the spirit of the deceased or ancestor and taking it home, where it will rest while ushering ancestral protection to the family. Of importance to note about this ritual is that it is a solemn ceremony characterised by activities done as authorised in Ndebele religious tradition.

The ancestral spirit in Ndebele is the second key concept that is of vital importance in this study in issues related to *Umbuyiso* in particular and in African traditional religion generally. Ancestral spirit is a concept coined from two words ‘ancestor’ and ‘spirit’. The term ancestor, as a separate phenomenon, is the soul of a dead person that uncoupled itself from the body which is the material component (Nyathi 2015). According to Jiyane (2012), ancestor is the spirit of a deceased person, especially an elder who is venerated in the belief that he continues to influence the welfare of the living. This definition however, uses the word ‘spirit’ as a synonym to define ancestor. This is an indication that the two are inseparable and can be used interchangeably. Furthermore, Jiyane (2012) refers to spirit in this context as the non-physical part of a person comprising emotions and character believed to survive after the death of the body. It is interesting to observe from the highlighted definitions is that ‘ancestor’ as a soul separates itself from the material component while the spirit is a non-physical element that is considered as remaining after the dead body. Hence, the coinage of the concept ‘ancestral spirit’ which is the product of the two, bearing more or less the common meanings as reflected above.

Another critical concept associated with *Umbuyiso* traditional ritual is a Ndebele word, *usedlulile* (has passed on), a verb used in the recent past tense form. The term ‘*sedlulile*’ is used when someone dies among Ndebele people or communities. According to Nyathi (2015), in *The Herald*, “This is not a reference to the body, for it has not gone anywhere. Instead, this is a reference to the spirit which has exited the material world and gone to the spiritual realm”. Another Ndebele term synonymously used with *sedlulile* is *sehambile* (has gone). In Ndebele cultural language,

what has gone is the spirit that would have departed from the dead body as it leaves the physical world destined to the spiritual sacred realm. Deduced from these synonyms is that, from an African traditional religion perspective, they refer to a divorce between the material body and the spiritual element. That is, in this separation, the spirit goes to the unknown spiritual world where it is perceived to join earlier-gone spirits in the same lineage. Also crucial to the concept of *sedlulile* is that it is expressed euphemistically, showing respect to the deceased rather than stating that the person has died.

The fourth key concept is still an Ndebele one, *woza ekhaya* (come home). This concept is in a phrase form that calls somebody who has been away to come home. Thus, according to Nyathi (2015) in *The Herald*, when addressing one who was not with you, you say, *woza lapha* which is not exactly the same as *woza ekhaya*. In the context of this study, the phrase “come home” relates to bringing the dead home. However, this ritual does not refer to the corpse but to the spirit. According to the African traditional religion, the spirit is believed to have been wandering elsewhere in the wilderness before it is summoned home where it would rest in peace. In the same view, Mbiti (1969) articulates that, when somebody dies, his soul wanders in the bush until necessary and appropriate burial rites are done by close relatives. When the spirit is brought back home in response to the ritual call *woza ekhaya*, in the Ndebele traditional families, it would be expected to provide ancestral protection and guidance to the family. It is also worth mentioning this ritual of bringing back the dead home is only invoked if it is the spirit of an important member of the family, such as the head of the household (Lane 2014). Hence, this Xhosa practice also obtains in Ndebele communities as both are original Nguni people of South Africa.

THE RATIONALE BEHIND UMBUYISO CEREMONY

This is an important aspect of the study that cannot be taken for granted in academic spheres. In expressing the significance of observing the Ndebele *Umbuyiso* ceremony, Nyathi (2015) asserts that, “Sadly, many people researching on Africans have concentrated on cultural practices of procedures at the expense of fundamental beliefs that inform behaviour.” Implicit in this citation is that studies ought to focus on the underlying causes of the cultural practices as they assist in understanding reality. In this context, the grasp of the root causes of observed cultural practices yields a complete perception of the ritual which is indispensable in

Ndebele traditional religious life. Thus, through this exposure, college and university students will be equipped with the knowhow that will make them interrogate and explain African traditional spirituality in academic spheres from an informed and objective position. Reflecting on the significance of the bringing back the dead spirit home, Nyathi (2015), vividly expresses that, “African tradition spirituality pervaded all aspects of human life, it was omnipresent.” In relation to the highlighted significance, Amponsah (2010:597) posits that, “The essential part of culture seems to be an appreciation of values with reference to life conditions.” In view of these quotations, culturists and university students would recognise and appreciate that African cultural activities are not conducted without justification or reason. They are perceived as prevailing practices because they are believed to be inherent in people’s lives.

The main rationale of African cultural practices hinges on the sacred relationship between the living and the ancestral spirit. According to Lane (2014), ancestral spirits have a special relationship with the living, as they bring both fortune and protection to their families at large. This relationship is also expressed by Lubbe (2008:12) who states that, “Families depend on ancestors for help, prosperity and protection especially during difficult times.” In concurrence, Vhukani (2020) posits that, “the belief that the dead continue to live on after death is because they are responsible for protecting their descendants from harm, witchcraft and other human calamities.” Notably, these observations suggest that spirit mediums possessed by the dead are regarded as providing solutions within the family and the community at large. It is further traditionally held that the departed are consulted by the living because they are said to bring family blessings such as employment opportunities, bumper harvests and guidance to descendants in life. However, the risk of not awakening and moving the spirit of the dead back home is expressed by Chisanyu (2016) in *The Sunday Mail*, who argues that, “If the spirit of a dead person has not been awakened to watch over the family, it brings forth problems. This disturbs even those in government because there arises a battle between the living and the dead.” In the same vein, Vhukani (2020) asserts that “This vengeance, will come in different forms including mysterious deaths, bad luck, and family troubles.” Some of the misfortunes that may befall the families include unusual deaths, daughters struggling to get married, failing to bear children, inability to secure jobs and struggling to succeed in life despite being highly educated. In a way, the spirit of the dead individual rises as an avenging spirit through family members as a form of punishment for having been let to wander in

confusion in the afterlife. Therefore, deduced is that bringing back home the spirit of the dead is an inevitable ritual practised generally in the African traditional communities and families in particular.

REFLECTIONS ON UMBUYISO

Umbuyiso is an Ndebele traditional ceremony performed after the death of the father or household. “After the mourning period is over, a ritual called Ukubuyisa may also be invoked if the person who has passed away is an important member of the family, such as the head of the household.” (Lane 2014). In this situation, what is brought home is the spirit (idlozi) of the dead and not the physical corpse. In the same vein, Chisanyu in *The Herald* categorically states that, “The dead also want the sacred rituals of bringing their spirits back into their families so that they can unite with their ancestors.” However, this unification of the spirit and the living is conducted through African traditional ceremonies like *Umbuyiso* in Ndebele and Kurova guva in Shona. The belief is that it is during these ceremonies that the dead person in the form of the spirit is awakened and moved back home to look after the family.

The aforementioned remarks indicate that *Umbuyiso* is not one-sided where the spirit is evoked by the living only but the dead also wait for the sacred ritual of bringing back their spirits to be performed so that they can unite with family members. The study also found it significant to reflect on what is traditionally viewed as the consequences if the ritual is not performed accordingly or not at all in African traditional communities. “If the spirit of the dead person has not been awakened to watch over the family, it brings forth problems. This disturbs even those in government because there arises a battle between the living and the dead” (Chisanyu 2016). In a related observation, Longboat (2002:16) stresses that, “It is believed that if rituals weren’t performed accordingly, the spirit of the deceased would be angry, unhappy or even confused and linger around the places where it was disconnected from the body.” A point that can be deduced from these comments is that there will not be any tranquillity in the family or community as long as the spirit is not appeased through *Umbuyiso* ceremony in Ndebele traditional homes. These people further believe that when the ritual is not done, it makes the spirits of the dead roam about and eventually rise as avenging spirits through some of the family members. From an African traditional religious perspective, the rising of the avenging spirit signifies rebellious behaviour caused by the delay or failure to bring it back home. Misfortunes caused by the

appearance of the avenging spirits include unusual illnesses and deaths, miscarriages, daughters struggling to get married or bear children and family members failing to succeed in life despite being educated. It is the fear of such unbearable life misfortunes that forces the bereaved families, in one way or the other, to appease their ancestral spirits through 'Umbuyiso.' This is because not summoning them back continues to threaten the existence of African spirituality among Ndebele people of Matabeleland and some Midlands' districts in Zimbabwe.

Umbuyiso, as a paramount phenomenon in the African tradition religion, adheres to a particular procedure and is considered conducive to the cultural practice as it lies at the heart of the continuity of African spirituality. The bringing back the dead ceremony traditionally takes place particularly after a period of rainy season. In affirming this position, Mavhu (2013) reveals that, when tears have been cleansed by a season of rain, preparations are done to welcome home the soul of their loved one. The understanding in Ndebele communities is that it is a taboo to celebrate the ritual on crop harvested before the passing on of the deceased. Hence, *Umbuyiso* is traditionally celebrated in consideration of the time of the person's passing and the season of the year in order to avoid its wrong timing regarding the usual ritual period. In addition, African tradition religion is of the view that, the ceremony should be delayed if there is drought in that particular year because a lot of grain would be needed for ceremonial beer brewing and mealie meal for feeding the multitudes expected to attend the occasion. However, if there is no drought or any form of other delays, after a year, the *Umbuyiso* ceremony is expected to take place to bring the spirit of the deceased back home to care for the family (Mzala 2024). In other words, a year later is the adequate period of tears to have been dried up or cleansed.

It is also critical to mention that the African sacredness of this ceremony necessitates that it takes place in the evening. In other words, the African religious belief is that ancestral spirits are traditionally associated with the cover of darkness. The ritual is officiated by a chosen close relative of the family. In the company of the close relatives, elders of community and the headman, umlisa standing for the chief induna, the spiritual officer drags a black he-goat to the grave. Coincidentally, the he-goat is black, the colour that is associated with ancestral spirits and confirming their functioning under the cover of darkness. According to Nyathi (2015), it is at the grave that consecrated beer is poured on the back of the goat by the spiritual officer from one of the relatives. If the goat shakes off the poured beer, the women around automatically ululate in

appreciation of the awakened spirit of the deceased to affirm that the spirit has accepted to be brought back home (idlozi livumile ukubuyiswa ekhaya). As beer is being simultaneously poured on the back of the goat, the spiritual spokesperson would be calling the spirit of the departed ancestor by mentioning his name to come home and re-unite with his family. Nyathi (2015), reveals how the spirit is called the bringing back home by saying:

Pathisa, sithi wox' ekhaya uze gcina uswapo lwakho.

The statement is translated to say, Pathisa, we say come home to take care of your progeny. From the grave, the party then joins in singing Izinyanya song (internal injury) as it is led home with the spirit in the goat. At home, the goat would be killed for the summoned spirit to secretly feed on it and drink consecrated beer hidden for it. Bhebe (1993), witnessed one of the interviewees singing and dramatising how the spirit of the dead was brought home from the grave in the kraal site during 'Umbuyiso' ceremony.

Below is the song titled, Wox' Ekhaya (Come Home) as it was sung by the enthusiastic interviewee, Matshobana Nhliziyo (pseudonym):

- Okhalelayo:** *Dlozi wox' ekhaya ebantwaneni*
Solo: *Spirit, come home to your children*
Abavumayo: *Zhiya wo...wo...balezinyalo, balezinyalo-nje balezinyalo*
Chorus: *Zhiya wo...wo... they have internal injuries, they have internal*
Okhalelayo: *Khulu wox' ekhaya ebantwaneni*
Solo: *Grandfather, come home to the children*
Abavumayo: *Zhiya wo...wo...balezinyalo, balazinyalo-nje balazinyalo*
Chorus: *Zhiya wo...wo...they have internal injuries, they have internal*
Okhalelayo: *Baba wox' ekhaya ebantwaneni*
Solo: *Father, come home to the children*
Abavumayo: *Zhiya wo...wo... balezinyalo, balezinyalo-nje balezinyalo*
Chorus: *Zhiya wo...wo... they have internal injuries, they have internal*

Apparent from the above, izinyanya (internal injuries) traditional religious song is that, as the departed soul is being brought home to ultimately join the family, he is addressed as idlozi (spirit), ubabamkhulu (grandfather) and ubaba (father). Of importance is that, in the song, there are variations in addressing the deceased. The deceased is perceived as a spirit of the entire family, the grandfather of his grandchildren and the father of his

direct children. In these variations everyone is taken care of, which confirms that the spirit is for the whole family and not discriminatory. According to Bhebe (1993), the chorus expresses the sentiments articulated in the solo and stresses that the departed soul should come home and unite with the family members who are suffering from *izinyalo* (internal injuries) due to his absence. Implied in the chorus is that these internal injuries are misfortunes encountered by the family before the ancestral spirit is brought home to look after the family.

The singing of Umbuyiso song continues until the party arrives home with the spirit in a black goat which is later slaughtered. According to Nyathi (2015), “The same goat was slaughtered and its meat placed at the back of one hut, *umsamo* which is regarded as sacred. It is where consecrated beer and meat are placed overnight” The traditional religious belief regarding this ritual is that the sacrificed meat and beer are left at *umsamo* and secretly consumed by the spirit in the middle of the night when everybody is asleep. The following day is then characterised by the invited multitudes from the community who take part in the dances in celebrating the ancestral spirit who would have been finally brought home. The ancestral spirit maybe ultimately installed in a black bull regarded as *ubabamkhulu* (grandfather). Evidence confirming that traditionally, the bull is revered and respected as an ancestral spirit and therefore exempted from being treated like other animals for ploughing and dipping. The bringing back home of the departed spirit is then followed by the division and distribution of the property of the deceased which basically involve only close family relatives.

UMBUYISO AND ENCOUNTERED CHALLENGES

The traditional practice of Umbuyiso in Ndebele communities has been greatly affected by the advent of western Christianity which emerged after the conquest and colonisation of African states, including the Ndebele state under Chief Lobengula at that time. In expressing how Umbuyiso has been affected, Nyathi (2015) states that “Umbuyiso is losing value due to various world views”. That is, the European colonisers or conquerors introduced new world views from Western society to gradually replace the African traditional perceptions. According to Nyathi (2015), a system of education was introduced with its own perceptions of the world and cosmos embracing the physical and spiritual elements. In this context, formal education system had a negative impact on African cultural and education practices as it was intended to undermine Africanism while

furthering the interests of Western society. As such, the African culture was finally lost as expressed by Nkomazana and Setume (2016), who argue that, through formal education and Christian religion which were opposed to African culture, many Africans have lost their African identities. This is because the concerned Africans view the African way of life as inferior or even primitive. Furthermore, Ofori-Attah (2006 cited in Pinto 2019), asserts that African identity and individuality were, under-rated leading to a new crop of Africans who adopted European ways of thinking and ultimately rejected the traditional way of living. This was damaging since Westernism as the system of education entirely disregarded the African long-life education and brought in ways of life that are typical of Western Europe.

The way colonisers undervalued and ultimately destroyed African traditional education is worrisome. This system had adequately sustained the livelihood of its citizens before the introduction of formal education by Europeans. In expressing what African traditional education and its progressiveness entail, Baguma and Aheisibwe (2012: 24) state that it is “a way of teaching and learning in Africa which is based on indigenous knowledge accumulated by Africans over centuries in response to their different physical, agricultural, ecological, political and socio-cultural changes.” Of importance to note about African tradition is that it is relevant and useful to the learners, community and nation. What was critical in the process of traditional education was the acquisition of knowledge, values, attitudes and long-life skills by individuals so that they fit in the Ndebele traditional society. In reference to skills acquired by boys in Ndebele traditional education, Ndlovu, Ndlovu and Ncube (1995: 83) reveal that,

Amajaba ayefundiswa ukugamula, ukubiya, ukusenga, ukwakha, ukuthena izifuyo lokuzelapha nxa zigula

(Boys were taught how to cut down trees, to fence fields, milk, build, castrate animals and treat those that are ill).

The acquired skills demonstrate beyond doubt that the boys were useful members of their families and community at large in the Ndebele traditional society. This reflection on African traditional education aims to highlight that, despite finally being replaced by formal education, it remained sustainable, even though it had challenges of its particular epoch. Therefore, the intention of damaging completely its cultural and educational practices by the European settlers impacts negatively. This violation of African identity, which deserves recognition of its culture like other races, is strongly condemned. Thus, Sibani (2018) contends that, to

avoid cultural extension, there is an urgent necessity for cultural revival in Africa due to erroneous impression of Western indoctrination. Deduced from this statement is that the aspect of culture is inherent in people's lives, and people without culture are a folk without identity.

Prior to the arrival of Western culture in Matabeleland regions and in some parts of the Midlands districts, Ndebele cultural religion was rich and strong but was subsequently weakened by the spread of Christianity and education which came along with religious and social changes in these areas. Thus, the advent of Christianity is another challenge encountered by African tradition religion in Ndebele traditional communities in particular and African societies at large. Umbuyiso ceremony has lost its value due to Christian influence and its teaching. Yet, it is traditionally believed to lie at the core of the continuity of African spirituality. The recognition of continuity of life after death among the Idoma community is expressed by Anizoba and Johnson (2021) who submit that, before the advent of Christianity, the Idoma people had a strong faith that life continues after the death of a real corpse. The highlighted strong belief pertaining to the continuity of the spirit after death also applies among Ndebele people who regard the ritual as 'Umbuyiso' ceremony. The calling back home of the departed soul to re-unite with his family is meant to provide prosperity and protection during unbearable times. However, this is no longer obtainable as reflected by Sibani (2018: 66) who vividly states that, "In the contemporary era, the culture of African people has been greatly eroded due to Western culture influence." In other words, this erosion of African traditional practices is their replacement by Christianity which perceives the African religious belief of life after death as satanic. Concerning the negative attitude towards African tradition religion as conveyed by some Christian songs, Nyathi (2015) reveals that, "One of the songs in the Salvation Army songs in the IsiNdebele hymn book reads:

Lahl' idlozi lahl' inyoka (Get rid of the ancestor, get rid of the snake)

Lahl' amanyala wonke (Get rid of all the rubbish)

Woza kuMsimbisi manje (Come to the Saviour now)"

"The words implored Salvationists to discard beliefs in the living or active dead, to get rid of all manner of evil and come to the Saviour." (Nyathi, 2015). This portion of the Christian song implies that the spiritual ancestor is likened to a snake that must be gotten rid of. The song further refers to the ancestral spirit as rubbish that must be destroyed as it is considered useless. The song finally calls the people, Africans in particular, to come to the Saviour soon for salvation. Deduced from this Christian song is that it is contrary to the Ndebele Umbuyiso characterised by the ritual song,

Woz' Ekhaya (Come Home) which calls the spirit of the dead back home to join his family so as to provide guidance, prosperity and protection during misfortunes. Also, what is advocated by Salvation Army Christians in their song is certainly contrary to the African tradition religious practices as the active dead are found within the core of African spiritualism. Therefore, in the African tradition religion context, "Death is not the end but is the beginning of immortal spiritual life (Nyathi 2015). In this regard therefore, 'Umbuyiso' ceremony is inevitable in African tradition religion since it is strongly believed to re-unite the spirit of the deceased with the family.

THE BIBLICAL PERCEPTION OF CONSULTATION OF THE DEAD

The unfolding study has shown that Ndebele people's lives are anchored on African tradition religion practice of consulting the dead. Vhukani (2020) asserts that the fundamental reason for the consultation of the dead is that people believe that the deceased remain a component of the family. As a result, they remain active in the life of the living. The reason for the existence of the dead after death hinges on ancestor's responsibility for taking care and protecting the family and descendants from misfortunes, unusual illness and calamities. On the contrary, consulting the dead is not God's idea because from a Biblical perspective, "The dead know nothing" (Ecclesiastes 7 verse 9). In fact, "God expressly forbids speaking to and consulting the dead (Deuteronomy 18 verses 9-11). Its rejection in the Bible is further endorsed in Leviticus (20 verse 27) which reads, "To speak with the spirit of the dead is prohibited and the punishment for such practices was death." The consequence of death upon consulting the dead is not only frightening but confirms the complete rejection of the practice by the Biblical teachings. This rejection also concurs with the Christian Salvation Army song which supports getting rid of idlozi (spirit) which is likened to a snake and coming to the Saviour who is God for salvation. Therefore, according to the Bible teaching, people can only be saved from death by doing away with consultation of the dead as it is ungodly and forbidden.

The Christian teaching, which source is the Bible, is that there is one living God who should be worshipped. The presence of this living God is substantiated in Hebrews (7 verse 25 cited in Vhukani 2020), which says, Only Christ continues after death because he lives forever to intercede for humanity. In this context, consulting the dead is contrary to Biblical

teaching. Although it is authentic and undisputed that there is existence after death for both believers and non-believers, there is no connection between the living and the dead. Thus, confirming that the Bible teaching that the ‘dead know nothing as hinted above. However, “Those who die in Christ will be in the presence of God. They will live on with God eternally” (Luke 23 verses 43; Philippians 1 verses 21-23). “On the other hand, non-believers will be separated from God waiting for their final judgment.” (Luke 16 verses 22-26 cited in Vhukani 2020). Furthermore, Job (7 verse 7-10 cited in Vhukani 2020) says, “he who goes down to the grave does not return. He will never come back to his house again.” While both the Bible teaching and African tradition religion agree that there is living after death, they differ in that African religion believes that the dead exist in the form of *idlozi* (ancestral spirit) which is later brought back home through Umbuyiso ritual ceremony. On the contrary, Christianity is emphatic on the dead know nothing. As a result, it vehemently argues that whoever is buried in the grave will never come back to his house again. This is a total rejection of the Ndebele traditional religious Umbuyiso ceremony. Instead, before the death of Jesus Christ, the goat was used by the high priests to atone Israelites’ sins before sending it into the wilderness and not to bring back home the spirit of the dead. This confirms the Christian missionaries’ negative attitude towards African religious beliefs and practices in particular. The Christian missionaries therefore, called for the eradication of Umbuyiso practices, believing they were demonic and contrary to the ideals of Christian teaching and spirituality (Amanze 1998). According to Biblical teaching, death is ultimate and nobody returns to life in spiritual form or otherwise. In reiterating the Christianity position pertaining to the dead, Vhukani (2020) asserts that Christians must be aware that consulting the dead is one of the tools Satan uses to fight their faith. These strong Christian beliefs lead some Africans to practise Christianity openly during the day, while secretly reverting to African religious practices under the cover of darkness.

EMERGENCE OF SYNCRETISM

The sharp contrast that eventually emerged was due to differences between the African tradition religion adherents and Christians as they pursued divergent beliefs. According to Isaac (2015), Western missionaries perceived that African religious beliefs and practices were inferior, and recommended that Africans should accept Christianity and renounce their traditional religion. On the contrary, Nyathi (2015), in appreciation of

African religious practices, remarks that, “African traditional spirituality pervaded all aspects of humanism; it was omnipresent”. This affirms that the acceptance of Christianity amongst the Africans, despite their unwavering belief in African traditional religion, did not occur without resistance. Consequently, their resistance across African territories led to the rise of the process which later came to be described as religious syncretism that still exists till today. The term syncretism refers to a mixture of rituals, practices and doctrines (Umoh 2013). In a related definition, Isaac (2015) regards the term syncretism as the concept loosely used to elaborate on the formalisation of African traditional beliefs and practices with Christianity. The implication of these definitions is that syncretism is the synthesis of various religious beliefs and continues to be a contested phenomenon in religious spheres. While arguing that it is a contentious concept, Van de veer (2005) comments that, regardless of the fact that historians and theologians have for some time recognised that syncretism is a characteristic of all religions, the idea has not been easily accommodated in theological spheres. Of importance to observe regarding syncretism is that it emerged as a product of the differences between African tradition religion and Western Christianity. Therefore, adherents of African tradition religion could not sacrifice their fundamental beliefs in order to be wholly accommodated by Christianity which vehemently considers African beliefs as satanic. Those adherents of African tradition religion who accepted some elements of Christianity while retaining their own practices considered to be indispensable, ultimately adopted a syncretic religion which incorporates elements from both religions.

CONCLUSION

The study explored Umbuyiso ceremony among the Ndebele people in Zimbabwe. It specifically reflected on issues hinging on African religious practices of rituals and challenges encountered in a Westernised cultural environment. It is apparent in this study that formal education and Christianity were highlighted as the challenges faced in the perception and administration of Umbuyiso ceremony among the Ndebele people. Revealed in the study is that beliefs involving African tradition religion and Christianity are in sharp contrast in their perception of the state of the dead. The African traditional belief affirms that there is life after death in the form of the ancestral spirit that should be brought back home to unite with the family. Christianity, on the contrary, totally rejects the African religious belief, stating that the dead knows nothing again as whoever is

buried in the grave will never in whatever form come to the house again. However, despite their clashing world views, African and Christian religions admit that there is life after death. They, however, differ in their beliefs about whether or not there is a connection between the dead and the living. Hence, the emergence of syncretism which is regarded as a mixture of rituals, practices and doctrines from traditional religion and Christianity. In other words, its formation was as a result as of an attempt to incorporate elements from both religions.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to expose educators, university and college students to contentious religious issues, equipping them to critically engage with and properly understand such matters from informed and scholarly perspectives. Despite the diverse and sometimes controversial religious world views involved, this study asserts that Umbuyiso ritual ceremony cannot remain static as a purely cultural and/or religious practice amid the inevitable powerful forces of change. As these changes unfold, it is imperative to document and analyse how such rituals adapt or resist, reflecting broader negotiations of identity and belief in a westernised environment. Future research should focus on the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity to appreciate the evolving religious landscapes within Zimbabwe and similar contexts in other countries.

Recommendations

It is indispensable at this stage for the study to put forward some recommendations pertaining to Umbuyiso in an African tradition religion context.

- Umbuyiso as an Ndebele cultural practice should be accorded the religious recognition and respect it deserves in African traditional circles. This is because it is strongly believed to be a ritual that unites the departed soul of the dead with the family to provide prosperity and protection from misfortunes and calamities which may persist if the spirit is not brought back home.
- In deliberation of debatable religious practices, culturists, academics and Christians should take cognisance of the nation's diverse cultural, religious and traditional values which should be respected and safeguarded because people are entitled to the religion of their choice as enshrined in the Zimbabwean Constitution (2013).
- Proponents of various religions accept that religions should not be static but rather transform in tandem with the prevailing socio-

economic and political processes of a particular epoch. Hence, for the Ndebele Umbuyiso ceremony ritual to remain meaningful and realistic in a Westernised environment, it should respond to the prevailing forces at play as it does not exist in isolation.

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