Religions of South Africa

David Chidester

Routledge Revivals

Religions of South Africa

First published in 1992, this title explores the religious diversity of South Africa, organizing it into a single coherent narrative and providing the first comparative study and introduction to the topic. David Chidester emphasizes the fact that the complex distinctive character of South African religious life has taken shape with a particular economic, social and political context, and pays special attention to the creativity of people who have suffered under conquest, colonialism and apartheid.

With an overview of African traditional religion, Christian missions, and African innovations during the nineteenth century, this reissue will be of great value to students of religious studies, South African history, anthropology, sociology, and political studies.

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Erratum
Page 163, line 7, "then under British rule," should read: "through the British government."

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To Careena

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Preface

This book is an introduction to the history of religions in South Africa. It summarizes and interprets the history of the many religions that have occupied the one geographical region that came to be called South Africa. While it is a work of comparative religion, I also see this book as a place where anthropologists, historians, theologians – and anyone who cares about human beings, for that matter – can meet and think about the nature of religion in this particular place. Religion has allowed people to experiment in different ways of being human. Not only humanizing, however, religion has also been implicated in forces of dehumanization in South Africa. Religion has been entangled with economic, social, and political relations of power that have privileged some, but have excluded many from a fully human empowerment. The religions of South Africa, therefore, must be considered within a general history of South Africa. Religion must be allowed to appear within a history of the relations of domination, resistance, and recovery that have made being human in this particular place meaningful. By placing comparative religion within the general history of South Africa, I hope this book has collected important resources for thinking once again about what it means to be human, not only in South Africa, but also in the world.

An introduction to the religions of South Africa might take the form of a simple inventory of religious traditions. For example, 1980 census figures suggested that out of a total population of roughly 30 million people in South Africa 76.6 per cent were affiliated with some form of Christianity. As an inherently plural category, Christianity was divided among many different denominations. African independent or indigenous churches, organized in as many as 4,000 denominations, accounted for over 20 per cent of the total population and over 30 per cent of the black population in South Africa. Dutch Reformed churches, sometimes called Afrikaans-speaking churches, accounted for 15.9 per cent, the largest being the Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerk with about 13.9 per cent of the total population. English-speaking Protestant churches accounted for 23 per cent of the total

population. The largest English-speaking churches were Methodist (8.5 per cent) and Anglican (6.5 per cent), but other Protestant churches included Lutherans (3.4 per cent), Presbyterians (2.0 per cent), United Congregationalists (1.6 per cent), and Baptists (1.0 per cent). Finally, the Roman Catholic Church had a following of 9.5 per cent of the total population of South Africa. Along with smaller denominations, such as Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and various Pentecostal groups, an inventory of these churches would necessarily suggest the rich variety of Christianity in South Africa.

In addition to Christianity, however, other 'world religions' in South Africa accounted for 4.5 per cent of the total population. In the 1980s, South Africa was home for religious traditions – Hindus (519,380), Muslims (328,440), Jews (125,000), Confucians (16,040), and Buddhists (10,780) – that in many cases had formed strong, local religious communities in a country ruled by a government that professed to be Christian. In conflict and accommodation, those religious traditions at the very least presented a vital religious pluralism in South Africa. Finally, there were people who adhered to beliefs and practices of a traditional or ancestral African religion. Unfortunately, those who practiced some form of African religion were excluded from the 1980 census. They were only included among the nearly 6 million people whose religious affiliation was identified as 'other or none.' Nevertheless, African religion continued to provide vital religious resources, often in new, unexpected ways, for many people in South Africa.

An inventory of the religions of South Africa might proceed to survey the beliefs, practices, and institutions of these various religious traditions. While such a survey might be useful, it would not capture the most important features of the religions of South Africa. The complex, distinctive character of South African religious life has taken shape within a particular economic, social, and political history. Instead of an inventory, therefore, I propose a history of religions that is set within the general history of South Africa. While attentive to religious difference, I have tried to locate the history of religions in South Africa in the context of a single, coherent narrative of the region's history. Certainly, the general history of South Africa has been told in many different ways. In this book, I propose a retelling of South African history that will expose and explore its most significant religious dimensions. Before beginning, let me briefly outline that story as I have chosen to tell it in this book.

I start with what the census has omitted, the practice of traditional or ancestral African religion. Since precolonial history remains largely a matter of conjecture, the history of African religion must be imaginatively reconstructed. I have suggested that African religion can be imagined in terms of three spheres: the homestead, the chiefdom, and the disciplines of sacred

specialists. The homestead was the basic unit of economic production and social reproduction, while the chiefdom was a larger political order that encompassed homesteads. Between homesteads and chiefdoms, sacred specialists – healers, diviners, and ritual experts – offered professionalized religious services to both. During the nineteenth century, however, all three of these spheres of African religion were fundamentally altered under the pressures of colonial encroachment, military conquest, and the advance of capitalism. The history of African religion, therefore, is a story of both persistence and change. Chapter One introduces the history of African religion.

Nineteenth-century colonialism, conquest, and commerce were intertwined with an aggressive Christian mission to southern Africa. Christian involvement in the region can be traced back to the visits of the Portuguese explorer Bartholomew Dias in 1488. A more permanent Christian presence began with the establishment of a refreshment station by the Dutch East India Company at the Cape in 1652 and the Company rule over the Cape Colony until 1795. Christian missions, however, were undertaken on a large scale only after the British took control of the Cape Colony in 1804. While Christian missionaries proclaimed a gospel of sin and salvation, they also advanced certain colonial and commercial interests. As a result, they have often been viewed as agents in the nineteenth-century conquest of southern Africa. But the history of the missions was also a history of creative African appropriations of Christian religious resources. Certainly, African responses were varied. Initially, prior to the destruction of independent political, social, and economic life, most people simply ignored the missions. At the same time, however, African religious innovators during the nineteenth century drew upon the new, symbolic, cultural resources of the missions to forge both religious resistance and accommodation to a changing world. Chapter Two surveys Christian missions and innovative African responses during the nineteenth century.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, as Christian churches turned from frontier missions to church-building, South Africa underwent the most rapid period of Christian conversion in its history. Christian conversion in South Africa coincided with the nearly complete conquest of African societies, the expansion of colonial administration, the emergence of a modern state, and the advance of industrial capitalism. In particular, Africans were increasingly incorporated into new economic relations of power that followed the mineral revolution in South Africa. The discovery of diamonds in 1867 and gold in 1886 marked the beginning of an expanding, industrial capitalism that came to dominate South African society. In this historical context, particularly under the government of the Union of South Africa formed in 1910, Protestant churches tended to provide religious legitimation

for the extensive capital accumulation in gold mining and other industry. As a result, Protestant churches, controlled by white, middle-class, male leadership, became entangled in the racial, class, and gender relations of industrial capitalism in South Africa. With particular attention to those relations, therefore, Chapter Three examines Protestant churches in the first half of the twentieth century.

During this same period, however, new churches emerged in South Africa under black leadership. Often called African indigenous or independent churches, these new religious movements began forming at roughly the same time that large numbers of black South Africans were turning to Christianity. Although several different types might be identified, independent churches are perhaps best understood in the historical context of their formation. In the new urban centers of the 1890s, independent churches emerged to assert black equality with whites in matters of religious leadership. Often called 'Ethiopian' churches, these new churches tended to be founded by educated black Christians who were increasingly excluded from economic, social, and political opportunity. During the 1920s and 1930s, however, new religious movements emerged that focused on the loss of land, economic deprivation, and endemic poverty reinforced by South African legislation. While a few millenarian movements promised a sudden, apocalyptic recovery of the land, other movements, such as the Israelites, Nazarites, and the Zion Christian Church, provided alternative land bases for their followers. By the 1960s, however, the Zion Christian Church, as well as many other 'Zionist,' 'Apostolic,' or 'Pentecostal' churches, had begun a period of rapid expansion that continued into the 1990s. Concentrating primarily on religious healing, these churches provided small enclaves of spiritual purity in a defiling and dehumanizing world. With special attention to the history of their formation, therefore, Chapter Four provides an overview of independent churches in South Africa.

South African history has been dominated by a series of Protestant establishments. The Cape Colony under the Dutch East India Company (1652–1795) prohibited any other religion at the Cape besides the Dutch Reformed Church until it permitted Lutherans to worship in public in 1778. This denial of religious pluralism was lifted during the brief reign of the Batavian Republic (1803–6), and religious pluralism was permitted in principle under the British rule that began in 1806. Nevertheless, the Cape Colony continued to provide financial support to ministers and churches until 1875. Likewise, the Colony of Natal was closely aligned with the Anglican and Methodist Churches. In the Transvaal and Orange Free State, Dutch Reformed churches received support from the governments of the Boer Republics. Close alignments between church and state continued in the Union of South Africa, particularly between the Dutch Reformed Church and

the National Party government that came to power in 1948. In spite of this history of Protestant establishments, however, Roman Catholics, Muslims, Hindus, and Jews built religious communities in South Africa. Conflict and accommodation with dominant Protestant establishments was an important facet of their histories. Focusing on the unique positions of Catholics, Muslims, Hindus, and Jews in South Africa, Chapter Five explores important dimensions of religious pluralism.

Religion has been drawn upon to justify various economic, social, and political projects throughout South African history. But the National Party government that came to power in 1948 was particularly adamant that its policies were consistent with Christianity. The National Party legitimated its political power, capital accumulation, and programs for social engineering in the specifically ethnic, racial, and religious terms of a Christian Afrikaner nationalism. Although attributed with a divine origin, Afrikaner nationalism was a historical product of ethnic mobilization that assumed different forms at different points in South African history. Adopting the racialist slogan of apartheid, the National Party government embarked upon a program of legislating racial and ethnic separations in South Africa. In many respects, that program continued earlier policies of racial discrimination. Under National Party rule, however, racial discrimination, domination, and exclusion were invested with an aggressive religious legitimation by both the state and the Dutch Reformed Church. Chapter Six examines the dynamics, as well as some of the unexpected consequences, of that history of religious legitimation in twentieth-century South Africa.

Religion was invoked in attempts to legitimate political, social, and economic domination; but it was also drawn into struggles for liberation from domination. In particular, the ambivalent role of Christianity became a prominent feature of South African religious history in the twentieth century. Black Christians initiated new ways of reappropriating, subverting, or inverting the very Christian symbols that were used to legitimate their oppression. In the work of liberation, religious resources were drawn into the formation of a new African nationalism. Like Afrikaner nationalism, African nationalism had a religious character, particularly as it was formulated by the Youth League of the African National Congress in the 1940s. Unlike Afrikaner nationalism, however, African nationalists frequently proclaimed a liberation from the divisive categories of race and ethnicity that had proven to be so oppressive and ultimately dehumanizing in South Africa. Although supported by developments in African theology, black theology, and liberation theology, that African nationalism promised a liberation in a new, non-racial, democratic, and just South Africa that seemed in itself like a promise of religious and political redemption. Chapter Seven charts the history of

religion, politics, and struggles for liberation within African nationalist movements during the twentieth century.

This book was written during a moment in South African history that seemed to call for cautious optimism. Early 1990 saw political organizations unbanned, prisoners freed, and even a 'New South Africa' promising to be born. While this book provides grounds for both optimism and caution, both hope and despair, I see it primarily as a work of historical recovery and revisioning. As the Afrikaner nationalist Paul Kruger and the African nationalist Anton Lembede both insisted, 'One who wants to create the future must not forget the past.' In creating a future, however, we will need new ways to remember the past. I hope this book provides an opportunity for remembering and rethinking the many experiments, denials, and recoveries of humanity that have been at the heart of the history of religions in South Africa.
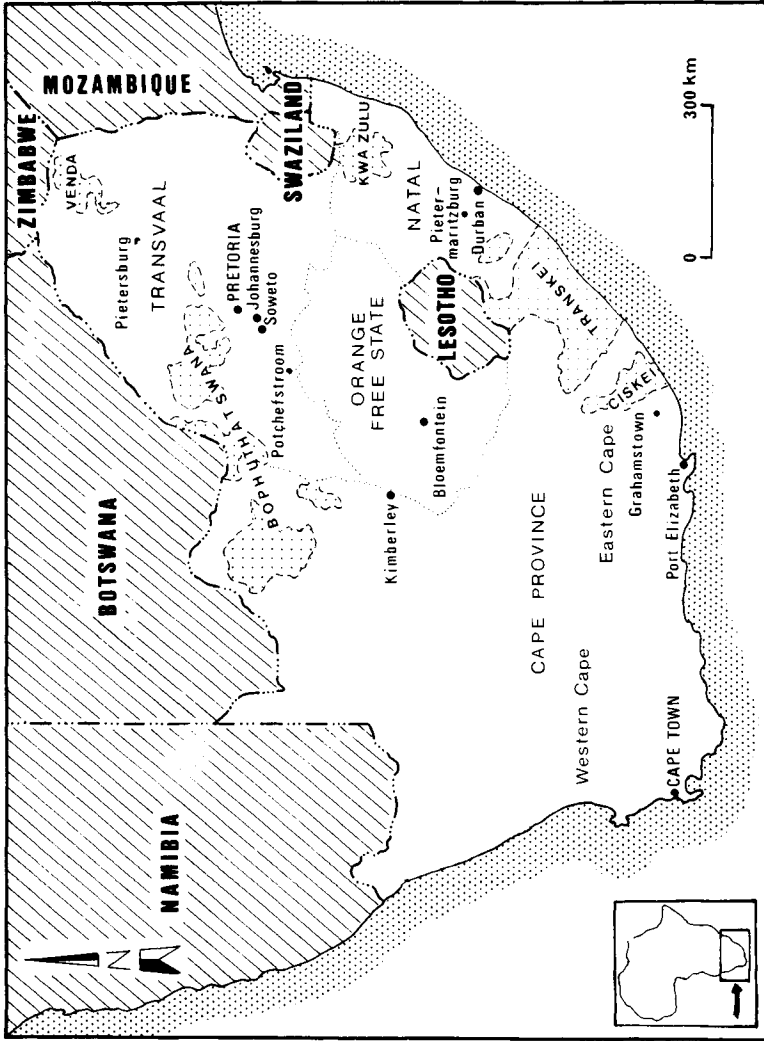
South Africa

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1   African religion

Religious beliefs and practices of the indigenous inhabitants of southern Africa have usually been called traditional African religion. These terms, however, require some clarification. First, the term 'traditional' has often implied something timeless and unchanging, as if it were a closed set of beliefs, practices, and social customs handed down from the past. Such an implication is misleading. Although achieving a certain degree of continuity with the past, a religious tradition necessarily changes in different historical situations and circumstances. Therefore, the term 'tradition' might better be understood, not as something handed down, but as something taken up, as an open set of cultural resources and strategies that can be mobilized in working out the meaning and power of a human world. Like any religion, traditional African religion has generated persistent, yet also always changing ways of being human in the world. The term 'tradition,' therefore, should not be used to obscure the dynamic, changing, and even inventive processes of religion in Africa (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Spiegel and Boonzaier, 1988).

Second, the term 'African,' referring to a geographical location, raises questions about the relation between the general and the particular in the study of African religion. Is there a general 'African' religion that can be discerned amidst the observable differences in the beliefs, practices, and social institutions of particular historical groupings in Africa? Differences among historical groupings have been distorted and reified by the notion of 'tribalism,' which has treated African political groupings as if they were permanent 'tribal,' 'ethnic,' or 'racial' groups. Conventionally, the classification of these groupings has been based on political alignments that emerged in the midst of nineteenth-century colonial history, but were frozen in the 'retribalization' of African societies under colonial rule during the nineteenth century and under apartheid domination in the twentieth century (Southall, 1970; Mafeje, 1971; Saul, 1979; Hall, 1984; Vail, 1989).

Unfortunately, academic classifications of people in southern Africa have

reinforced the notion of 'tribalism.' Academic classifications have been based on three basic distinctions that have been much more fluid than they might suggest. Scholars have made the following distinctions: (1) a basic distinction between Khoisan and Bantu-speakers; (2) a division of people speaking Bantu languages into Nguni, Sotho–Tswana, Tsonga, and Venda groupings; and (3) the further differentiation of Nguni-speakers (Cape Nguni, Zulu, and Swazi) and Sotho–Tswana-speakers (Southern Sotho, Northern Sotho, and Western Sotho or Tswana). Arguably, these distinctions have been invented or imagined. Even the one-time government ethnographer N. J. van Warmelo insisted that these classifications were 'fictions' (1974: 60). As historians Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore have noted, they have been 'flags of convenience' for historians and anthropologists (1970: 125). But these classifications of people have also been hard, potent fictions for those who have maneuvered within the apartheid ideology of separate ethnic groups or have suffered from the consequences of apartheid domination. In any case, all of the people designated by these classifications basically underwent a similar, although not uniform, historical experience as their precapitalist social worlds were to one degree or another incorporated into a capitalist economic and political system in South Africa.

The basic distinction between Khoisan and Bantu has been made primarily on linguistic grounds. But scholars in the past tried to correlate differences in language with differences in basic physical characteristics or cultural traits. Khoisan has referred to a cultural complex comprised of Khoikhoi (formerly called Hottentots) and San (formerly called Bushmen) who occupied the Cape region. Khoikhoi lived by herding and the San by hunting and gathering, but all Khoisan were displaced, incorporated, or exterminated by the encroachment of European settlement in southern Africa beginning in the seventeenth century (Elphick, 1985; Marks, 1972). Khoisan religion will only be outlined briefly here.

Khoisan religion seems to have posited a supreme god – Tsui//Goab – who presided over the collective life of the community. This good god was worshiped through regular rituals for making rain or celebrating a harvest. In opposition to the good god of life was an evil god, //Gaunab. This evil god was an independent, superhuman agent that brought illness, misfortune, and death. Khoisan myth, therefore, assumed the form of a cosmic dualism in which good and evil gods operated in the universe. While Tsui//Goab protected Khoisan communities, the ancestor–hero, Heitsi-Eibib influenced the good fortune of individuals. Khoisan myth and legend recorded many tales of the adventures of this cultural hero, particularly relating the stories of the numerous times that Heitsi-Eibib died and came back to life. The graves of Heitsi-Eibib, scattered throughout the region, were represented by piles of stones, or cairns, by pathways or river crossings, at which individuals

could stop and add stones for good luck whenever they passed. In the superhuman persons of gods and the ancestor–hero, therefore, Khoisan religion developed mythic resources for understanding the conflicts of individual and social life (Hahn, 1881; Bleek and Lloyd, 1911; Schapera, 1930; Carstens, 1975; Barnard, 1988).

Probably the most important Khoisan ritual practice was the medicine dance. This ritual dance was celebrated for healing, fertility, and the spiritual power that could be achieved through altered states of consciousness in trance (Marshall, 1962; 1969). This form of shamanism through which spiritual knowledge and power could be gained in trance states seems to have been particularly important in the religion of San hunters and gatherers. Archaic rock art found throughout southern Africa has been interpreted as evidence of San shamanism, representing symbols of ecstatic dancing, trance visions, and images of power associated with sacred animal forms (Lewis-Williams, 1980; 1981).

The term 'Bantu' was originally a linguistic classification proposed in the nineteenth century by the philologist W. H. I. Bleek. But it developed into a conventional term applied to all black southern Africans. Evidence of Iron Age settlements based on herding and agriculture has contradicted the European 'myth of the vacant land' which suggested that 'Bantu' groups had been recent immigrants to the region (Marks, 1980; Maylam, 1986: 2–19). Precolonial history, however, has remained largely a matter of conjecture. Any attempt to reconstruct precolonial African religion, therefore, must also remain conjectural. Nevertheless, certain elements of African religious worlds can be assumed to have had a fairly long history, even though their form and content certainly changed under the pressures of colonialism during the nineteenth century.

In very general terms, the traditional or ancestral religion of Bantu-speaking people in southern Africa can be inventoried. Despite widespread, general beliefs in a high god, African religious beliefs and practices concentrated on the role of ancestors – the 'living dead' – as superhuman persons active in bestowing blessings, as well as occasionally bringing misfortune to their descendants. Every homestead head was a priest in performing the domestic rituals – rituals of thanksgiving, rituals for healing – that invoked the deceased, yet spiritually present and active relatives of the homestead. Besides rites of thanksgiving and healing, another set of rituals – rites of passage, marking the major life-cycle transitions of birth, initiation, marriage, and death – were also important in the religious life of the homestead, as well as in the larger network of social relations. On a larger social scale, rites of power were performed to reinforce the political order and power of a chiefdom, through rituals of rainmaking, fertility, or strengthening the power of chiefs and armies. Sacred specialists, particularly diviners, also

played important roles in African religion, offering their professional ser-
vices to individuals, homestead heads, and chiefs. Finally, a symbolism of
evil in terms of witchcraft and sorcery was a highly developed and persistent
feature of religion. Although many particular, regional differences in beliefs
and practices have been observed, the elements of this basic inventory
provide a general outline of traditional African religion (Eiselen and
Schapera, 1934; Hammond-Tooke, 1974b).

This simple inventory of basic elements of African religion, however, is
inadequate because it does not begin to suggest how these elements were
related to each other. Did these elements fit together in a coherent system?
One way of organizing religious elements into a system has been to regard
African religion as a set of symbolic maps. For example, Cape Nguni religion
orchestrated its various elements in terms of a symbolic, cognitive, or mental
map that opposed the domestic sphere of the homestead with the wild,
uncontrollable, and potentially dangerous region of the natural world beyond.
Within the centered space of the homestead, the ancestors and ancestor spirits
maintained order, bestowed blessings, and protected the family from evil.
Beyond the boundaries of that centered world, however, the wild forest
region held evil spirits, demons, and witch familiars that threatened to
unsettle the domestic order anchored in the homestead.

Between domestic order and wild chaos, however, a middle region was
associated with the rivers in which spirits also lingered, especially the 'River
People,' who were ambivalent, sometimes beneficial, sometimes harmful, in
their interactions with human beings. In this symbolic map, therefore, relig-
ious actors could be located. Ritual elders built up the homestead by invoking
the ancestors. Witches and sorcerers performed evil acts by contacting
familiar spirits of the forest. In between the homestead and the forest, diviners
contacted ancestors, fought witches, but also conversed with the spiritual
forces associated with the river (Hammond-Tooke, 1975).

With some variation, a similar symbolic map, opposing the domestic,
ancestral sphere of the homestead to the wild, dangerous, and uncontrollable
periphery outside, could be drawn for Sotho–Tswana tradition (Comaroff,
1980; 1981; 1985: 54–60). In simple outline, these maps suggest the
meaningful ways in which elements of traditional African religion might
have been coordinated into a relatively coherent, systematic worldview.
While these maps are helpful, however, they need to be supplemented by a
further analysis of the power relations involved in the ongoing creation
of religious worlds. By paying attention to power relations, it might be
possible to outline three basic domains of power that operated in traditional
African religion – the homestead, the chiefdom, and the disciplines of sacred
specialists.

The homestead was a symbol of the world, a central arena in which the

symbolic relations of persons and place were negotiated. The home was the nexus of symbolic and social relations among the living and between the living and deceased relatives of the household who continued to live as ancestors or ancestor spirits. It was a place for being human. Although a human person was characterized by a moral or spiritual character, symbolized as a person's shadow (*isithunzi, sereti*), a person was also regarded as a human person as a result of interpersonal relations, relations among the living, as well as relations between the living and the dead (Du Toit, 1960). As a center of power relations, however, the homestead was supported by religious beliefs and practices that reinforced unequal, hierarchical relations between males and females, adults and children, and the older and younger members of the homestead. The oldest, adult, male member of the homestead performed the role of ritual elder, but he also had an interest in the labor power and reproductive power of his subordinates in the homestead. Invoking the jural authority of the ancestors, ritual elders implicated ancestor religion in those relations of power that controlled the homestead, the basic unit of production in economic and social life.

The chiefdom represented a larger sphere of political authority that encompassed homesteads. But often that authority extended only to a chief's claim to being the wealthiest homestead head among a coalition of homesteads. Nevertheless, religious beliefs and practices associated with a chiefdom were also implicated in power relations, especially when chiefs sometimes held a centralized power to distribute land and cattle to subjects. On this larger social scale, the chief stood at the apex of power relations that were simultaneously religious and political, responsible not only for political authority, legal administration, or military defence, but also for the ritual strengthening of the land. In the nineteenth century, the rise of powerful states, such as the Zulu, Swazi, or Pedi kingdoms, was invested with the emergence of royal ideologies that distinguished between 'aristocratic' and common chiefdoms in a new kind of political order, but also subjugated or excluded chiefdoms on the periphery (Guy, 1979; Bonner, 1983; Delius, 1983). The power relations of political authority, therefore, involved religion in a different range of symbolic, social projects than the ancestor religion anchored in a single homestead.

Between homestead and chiefdom, however, sacred specialists offered their services to both. While the ritual work of the homestead head was involved in familial relations and the religion of the chief was involved in communal, political relations, the sacred specialist pursued professional relations with clients that could be drawn from either sphere. In this respect, diviners in particular held a marginal position in which they claimed access to spiritual power that could heal, protect, and strengthen either the homestead or the chiefdom; but that power belonged to neither domain because it

was achieved through the specialized, privileged initiation and discipline of the sacred specialist.

In an important sense, therefore, attention to power relations allows traditional African religion to appear as different spheres of interest that might even be regarded as three different religions. Those three African religions represented the different religious interests of homestead heads, chiefs, and those specialists who exercised sacred knowledge and techniques in ways that were made available to both homestead and chiefdom but belonged to neither. Although all three spheres were conversant with similar symbols, myths, and rituals, these different domains of African religion, or different religions, each advanced different symbolic and material interests in the power relations of social life.

MYTH

At the highest degree of abstraction, the existence of a high god overarched all the diverse religious interests in traditional African religion. The high god in African religion was an ultimate divinity beyond time, space, or human control. In general, however, no prayer, worship, or sacrifice was directed toward the high god (Nürnberger, 1975). Terms for the high god varied – *umDali* or *uQamatha* (Xhosa), *Umvelinqangi* or *Unkulunkulu* (Zulu), *Modimo* (Sotho–Tswana), or *Raluvhimba* (Venda) – but in most cases these god names referred to a remote, transcendent power beyond human understanding (Hodgson, 1982; Wanger, 1923–6; Setiloane, 1976; Schutte, 1978). Usually, there was no direct connection between the high god and ancestral spirits. However, Sotho–Tswana ancestors (*badimo*) might have been understood as mediators between human beings and the high god, *Modimo* (Mönnig, 1967: 57; Willoughby, 1928: 206–7) ; while the Zulu *Unkulunkulu* ('the great, great one') or *Umvelinqangi* ('the first to emerge') was perhaps identified as the first ancestor (Callaway, 1868–70: 47). Since ancestors had priority of place in ritual, the high god was not an object of ritual attention but a mythic reference point for explaining the origin of the human world (Smith, 1961).

Creation myths accounted for human origins in three basic ways. First, human beings emerged in the beginning from a hole in the ground. This emergence myth has been recorded among the Mpondo (Alberti, 1968: 13), among the southern Sotho (Casalis, 1861: 240), and among Tswana informants who could point to a particular hole in a rock at Lowe, near Mochudi, from which the original ancestors emerged, leaving their footprints in the rock at the beginning of the world. Venda and Tsonga traditions also recorded this creation myth of emergence from a hole in the ground (Stayt, 1931: 236; Junod, 1927: II: 349). Second, human beings originated from a bed of reeds,

breaking off from that original source of life. This myth of origins from a bed of reeds also had a wide distribution throughout southern Africa, with accounts collected in Zulu, Swazi, Xhosa, Tsonga, and southern Sotho traditions (Callaway, 1868–70: 2; Kuper, 1947: 191; Brownlee, 1916: 116; Junod, 1927: II: 348; Ashton, 1952: 10). Third, human beings were fashioned in the beginning through the work of the high god. In this myth, attributed particularly to northern Sotho tradition, the high god Kgobe created the world, while his son, Kgobeane, created humans like a potter molding a vessel from clay (Mönnig 1967: 46).

Another widespread origin myth accounted for the origin of death in a primordial breakdown in communication between the spiritual world and the human world. In this myth, the high god sent a message of immortality to human beings, a message carried by the chameleon. The chameleon, however, was slow, stopping along the way, so that the message of life was delayed. Displeased, the high god sent a second message, a message of death, carried by the swifter lizard, who quickly and directly reached the human world with the message that human beings would have to die. In this myth, death entered the world through a breakdown in communication between humans and the spiritual realm represented by the high god. As a result, human beings had to die, but communication could be restored with the spiritual dimension of the world through the medium of ancestors and ancestor spirits who continued to live after death (Callaway, 1868–70: 3–4; Abrahamsson, 1951; Zahan, 1979: 36–52).

In addition to providing explanations for human origins, however, myth was also a medium for working out a particular understanding of the social and political conditions of the present world. Myth was a type of cultural work, a discourse for making sense out of the present in terms of a primordial past. For example, a Zulu creation myth related in the 1850s described how the high god Unkulunkulu brought human beings into the world. In the beginning, Unkulunkulu created males and females, but he also produced black and white human beings and assigned them to different spheres. According to this myth, Unkulunkulu said: 'The white men may live in the midst of the water, in the sea. He gave them clothing'; but 'the black people shall live within this land.' Anticipating conflicts to come, Unkulunkulu said, 'the white men shall carry guns'; but 'the [black] men shall carry spears.' Obviously, this myth was a creative improvisation on observable oppositions in the nineteenth-century Zulu world. Certain oppositions in that world – white/black, sea/land, guns/spears – were clarified, but they were also transcended by placing all those oppositions under the supreme authority of Unkulunkulu. In this creation story, therefore, myth was a medium for a particular kind of cultural work that not only explained the conflicts of the

present world, but also validated black entitlement to the land in terms of the ultimate authority of the high god (Bleek, 1952: 3–4).

A similar nineteenth-century Zulu creation myth, however, explained black subordination to white domination. According to this account, black people emerged from the bed of reeds in the beginning and went out to fend for themselves in the world. White people also emerged, but they remained longer in the bed of reeds, learning wisdom, recording laws, and acquiring the technology of writing, wagons, ploughs, and guns. When they finally emerged with this knowledge and power, therefore, they were easily able to dominate the black people. However, this myth implied, if black people would submit and learn, they also could gain access to the knowledge and power that white people had gained in the original creation (Callaway, 1868–70: 76–80). Obviously, neither of these myths could be described as ancient or primordial. They might have improvised on older mythic themes, but these myths were specifically located in the cultural disruptions and conflicts of colonial southern Africa. In different ways, therefore, myth was a type of cultural work engaged in trying to make sense out of the new power relations and social conditions of the colonial world.

During the nineteenth century, the fundamental social condition addressed in myth was the expanded scale of economic and political interactions. Arguably, the increased scale of social interaction caused by population movements, expanding trade, new labor relations, and military conflict increased the mythic importance of supernatural beings that were of a correspondingly larger scale. Superhuman powers had to be everywhere, rather than anchored in a specific homestead, chiefdom, or region of the country. In southern Africa, Christian and Muslim missionaries introduced precisely such a mythic solution to the increased scale and complexity of social relations by proclaiming transcendent supreme beings who presided over the entire world. But African high gods also seem to have expanded to assume similar positions in response to a changing social, economic, and political environment. Not only under the influence of Christian missions, therefore, but also in response to a changing world, African understandings of a high god seem to have expanded in scope and significance during the nineteenth century (Horton, 1971; 1975; Hexham, 1981; Etherington, 1987: 88–9).

African religious worldviews were populated by other spirits besides high gods and ancestors. Cape Nguni traditions included river spirits, the 'people of the river,' who were sometimes harmful, but could be appeased by offerings. The river people also played an important role in the initiation of diviners (Hunter, 1936: 263; De Jager and Gitywa, 1963: 110). Zulu tradition included a nature goddess – Nomkhubulwana, 'Princess of Heaven' – who was honored by young, unmarried women through seasonal rituals

(Gluckman, 1963: 112–18; Berglund, 1976: 64–74). Sotho–Tswana tradition included certain 'demigods' – Lôwê, Tintibane, Matsieng, and Thobêga – to whom offerings were occasionally made (Willoughby, 1932: 36–40; Brown 1926: 101). These spirits were associated with the wild, the forest, or the river, positioned beyond the relatively stable domestic domain. The most important representatives of the spirit world, however, clearly were the ancestors, or ancestor spirits, who provided the focus for the domestic rituals of the homestead.

ANCESTOR RITUAL

In simplest terms, ancestors were regarded as relatives who had died, yet continued to show an interest in their surviving descendants. Ancestors could be relatives in either the male or female line of descent, but male ancestors tended to play the dominant role in Nguni and Sotho–Tswana ancestor religion, while both paternal and maternal ancestors featured in Tsonga and Venda ritual. Ancestors were most frequently referred to in religious discourse and ritual in the plural. When an individual ancestor spirit was singled out for special attention, it was usually because that paternal or maternal relative had been discerned as the cause of some illness, misfortune, or affliction, chastising his or her surviving descendants for some neglect or breach of the moral order. That communicating ancestor spirit, therefore, had to be addressed through ritual in order to reestablish harmony between the living and the dead.

An example of such an ancestral ritual can be briefly outlined (Kuckertz, 1983: 124–31). At a Xhosa-speaking homestead in the eastern Cape, relatives gathered for an ancestral ritual in response to the illness suffered by a young woman in the household. A diviner, a sacred specialist expert in communicating with the ancestors, had been consulted by the homestead head to determine the cause of the young woman's illness. Since the cause was determined to have been an ancestral spirit, a lineage ritual was arranged to restore harmonious communication between the homestead and the ancestors. The ritual was designed to honor, appease, and communicate with the ancestors, as well as to restore the afflicted young woman to health.

The ritual drama began at the cattle enclosure. A cow had been selected for sacrifice. The animal was thrown to the ground, consecrated, and then speared by the second eldest man in the lineage group. The bellowing of the sacrificial animal was crucial to the ritual, because that cry opened up communication with the ancestors. The animal's cry carried the words of the ritual elder, as he stood next to the afflicted woman at the entrance to the cattle enclosure and invoked the ancestors, calling on them to intercede on behalf of the young woman of his household. Although in this case the cry

of the sacrificial animal invoked the ancestors, in other cases the same ritual effect could be accomplished through an offering of beer, shared by the participants and poured out in the cattle enclosure for the ancestors. In either case, the offering of sacrificial animal or beer was a means of establishing communication with the ancestors and the ancestor spirit responsible for causing the particular misfortune that was being addressed in the ancestral ritual.

After the invocation of the ancestors, the focus of ritual action moved to the main house of the homestead. The house was not merely a home for the living, but also a sacred place inhabited by the dead, a domestic space in which the ancestors resided or visited. The round, thatched house was kept dark and cool for the ancestors' comfort. Certain places in the house – the back, the hearth, and the thatch over the single door – were especially identified as places charged with the presence of the ancestors. As the ancestral ritual moved into the main house, the ritual elder, the young woman, and all the women of the lineage gathered inside. A piece of fat from the slaughtered animal was placed by the ritual elder on the fire to be wholly consumed for the ancestors. Then a small piece of meat was placed on the fire as an individual offering to the communicating ancestor spirit. While the meat burned, silence was observed in the house.

As the sacrificial animal was being skinned, prepared, and cooked by the men at the cattle enclosure, a special muscle from below the armpit of the animal's right foreleg was extracted and brought to the main house. This meat, referred to as the *intsonyama*, was used in a ritual of healing. The ritual elder cut a long thin strip and roasted it on the fire, the smoke filling and consecrating the house and the people inside. In the midst of this smoke, and in the presence of the ancestor spirit, the ritual elder offered the roasted *intsonyama* to the young woman. Receiving the meat on the back of her hands, she sucked it and then threw it away toward the back of the house, signifying that she was discarding her sickness or misfortune. She then received a second piece. Holding the meat on the back of her right hand, motionless, the young woman was vigorously criticized and ridiculed for the disrespect she had shown to the living and the dead. Finally, the ritual elder instructed the young woman to eat. As she ate the *intsonyama*, the people in the house began to cheer, congratulating the young woman for having 'eaten the ancestor.' In a spirit of celebration, the ritual elder, the young woman, and the people in the house went outside to return to the cattle enclosure. There the remaining portions of the *intsonyama* and the meat of the sacrificial animal were shared in a festive communal meal. At that meal, no other food or beer was served. The meat of the sacrificial animal was eaten, the ritual concluding with the burning of its bones.

However, as noted, the entire ritual could have been performed with beer