


An exploration of *ubungoma* through the calling and God's indwelling in the Prophet Jeremiah

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Dates:

Received: 19 July 2023
Accepted: 06 Nov. 2023
Published: 23 Apr. 2024

How to cite this article:

Khuzwayo, S., 2024, 'An exploration of *ubungoma* through the calling and God's indwelling in the Prophet Jeremiah', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45(1), a2941. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v45i1.2941>

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This article employs interpretive phenomenological analysis to explore the African practice of *ubungoma* [divination] through the Prophet Jeremiah's calling and God's indwelling on him in relation to the growing number of professing Christians experiencing an ancestral calling within Southern Africa. The aim is to highlight previously unnoticed features on the work of the Spirit in two religious traditions illuminating our understanding of God's presence beyond religions. Three areas of focus will be the calling of both isangoma and prophets, various mediums and their functions, and the indwelling or inscription of God or Spirit in either isangoma or a prophet. The findings of this analysis have shown that whether one uses inculturation, enculturation or decolonisation as a tool, each one of them has a framework that can aid in understanding this phenomenon. This will aid discern calls to the ministry and Christian vocation while informing current discourses on Christian polity and practice.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article explores the intersection of African Traditional Religions with Christianity and encourages the re-reading of scriptures to empower African interpretations.

Keywords: *ubungom*; divination; ancestral veneration; Amadlozi, *amathongo*; ancestral calling; prophecy; Jeremiah.

Introduction

Mbiti (1969), over five decades ago, lamented that 'with a few exceptions, African systems of divination have not been carefully studied, though diviners and divination are found in almost every community' (Mbiti 1969:177). It is unfortunate that scholars across a variety of disciplines continue to rely on the works of foreign anthropologists, medical and social sciences to understand the phenomenon of *ubungoma*. Not only is this research not carried out by people embedded within African cultures, but it also continues to, and they continue to perpetuate a heavy bias towards Western Christianity in dealing with matters of African spiritualities. I contend, however, that the current generation stands at the perfect cross-roads for the documentation of African spiritualities and cultural phenomena to move beyond our predecessors who were too consumed with political and ideological liberation struggles that have gifted us the basic tenets of freedom. Now the work of surfacing and describing African cultural realities and experiences has become urgent. This article will define *ubungoma* and explore the possibilities for a person to simultaneously experience a calling to *ubungoma* and to Christian ministry and ministerial vocation.

I write from a perspective of umZulu and therefore my engagements with the issue of divination will be strongly biased towards isiZulu culture; however, many of the concepts are similar with other peoples of Southern Africa. I approach the study as an interpretive phenomenological analysis because it provides the methodological apparatus to examine constructs without theoretical presuppositions or assumptions as to their causes or consequences (Beck 2021). Criticism is often laid out that many theologians approach African spiritualities with the aim of just proving their own dominant Western Christian ends. Key to phenomenological analysis is a quest to understand people's lived experiences and how they make sense of it in the context of their personal and social worlds (Alase 2017). Paul Tillich as cited by John Pobee and Donald F. Dreisbach provides an adequate description for me:

The test of a phenomenological description is that the picture given by it is convincing, that it can be seen by anyone who is willing to look in the same direction, that the description illuminates other related ideas,

1. I write the article as an observer and an engaged participant. As such, the use of the first person is a desire to contextualise and invoke my personal and corporate experiences of the phenomenon under discussion. I am a Zulu speaking person, who is also an ordained Methodist minister. Some of the insights and perspectives I share have been shaped by cultural experiences and insights on Southern African cultures.

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and that it makes the reality which these ideas are supposed to reflect understandable. Phenomenology is a way of pointing to phenomena as they 'give themselves', without interference of negative or positive prejudices and explanations. (Dreisbach 1980:524; Pobe 1987:33)

I will qualify the need for a study of *ubungoma* to be juxtaposed with the biblical narratives – not as an apologist but as a base from that which people know and move to a space of recognition of the independence of the one. The use of Jeremiah is to outline the disingenuous 'truth claims' made and unquestioned in scripture of a God who speaks audibly and the effect such claims have on the hearers as opposed to the claims made in other religions.

The interpretative exploration hopes to unravel notions of God's – The Supreme Being – calling and vocation embedded in both African people's experiences of Christianity and cultural rituals. Ultimately, the analysis is aimed to help individuals and churches to authentically engage with the phenomenon of *ubungoma* in a manner that frees it from historical biases. The article also provides some practical tools for an open discussion that may inform theology and church polity.

Variations of *ubungoma*

There are many types of *ubungoma* and forms of spirits that are commonly used. In this article, I will use *ubungoma* as an umbrella term for divining and *ukubhula* for divination. Zuesse is helpful in classifying divination as a phenomenon and uses two major groupings: 'Possession' and 'Wisdom'. He defines the possession group as characterised by 'the use of mediums, the reading of omens, and the movements of sacred animals or objects' (Zuesse 1975:159).

Wisdom divination is defined as (Zuesse 1975):

[T]he spirits, the gods, and human personality as well are all subordinated to a profounder cosmic order. One seeks a dispassionate distance from all things, a spiritual objectivity, which transcends the whole in reducing all perceptual reality to impersonal elemental components. (p. 160)

Other forms of divination exist beyond the ones Zuesse mentions and he acknowledges them as part or a mixture of the phenomenon he has outlined. According to Zuesse (1975) insight or intuitive divination is considered as:

[T]he specialists claim the ability to determine intuitively, and without explicit 'possession' or the application of esoteric sciences, the identity and problems of the clients who come to them, and in the same heightened, spiritually alert state, to discover the cause of the troubles. (p. 162)

There is a subgrouping of possession divination which I believe is important for our engagement here: a possession 'directly by the Supreme Being, whose instructions are directly comprehensible and are not further mediated by sage-priests' (Zuesse 1975:161). This form of divination seems to be no different from the possession that occurred with Near-Eastern prophets, including Jewish prophets. We

will return to this concept when I discuss Jeremiah as a possible arch-type of this possession.

Of interest to us in Southern Africa, Zuesse notes that 'it appears likely that a Jewish and/or Muslim influence is evident here, in some cases at least. An ancient Jewish presence in the area has been suggested by many scholars to explain the unusual culture of the Lemba or Remba people of Rhodesia and South Africa'. It is sad that for some anthropologists the study of primitive cultures could not exist outside of the belief that all people were descendants of the biblical ancestors and therefore many primitive religions of Africa had to be defined using that ancestry.

In his book, *Savage Systems*, Chidester (1996:142) tackles how Christianity produced itself as Western hegemony in three movements around the definition of the African spiritualities insightfully deals with this perception. He categorises these movements as the (1) absence or denial of religion, (2) genealogical developments and (3) morphological developments. As a case in point, in morphological developments, there is 'discovered' similarity in forms and patterns between native religions and ancient primordial religious types, that is, finding similar forms to Semitic religions.

So, these African people were either degenerate Jews or linked to some form of Islam (the enemy of the West) and this enabled the many horrors that Western colonisers performed on Africans. Interestingly – for these anthropologists – 'superstition' was linked to Catholicism; Catholics were, for the reformed, superstitious in their worship of Mary and the idols they called icons. Among the people guilty of this atrocious classification of amaZulu is the Rev Callaway (1884) whose works also defined divination among amaZulu as 'due to possession by ancestral spirits'. Chidester puts a lot of blame on the works and interpretation of Callaway's encounters with amaZulu not only on gullibility but on the intentional perpetuation of the Western annexation of the lands.

However, one looks at this, there is a strong belief among amaZulu that diviners, while they function through a calling from their ancestors, their main aim is to transmit messages from the Supreme Being, *uMvelinqangi* to the living. Zuesse (1975) affirms this by saying:

[B]ut the life that then fills the bones is integrated into a universal classification, one that embraces the entire cosmos, and which some diviners speak of as the 'Word' of God. (p. 165)

In the accompanying note, Zuesse (1975) says:

But the *Bula*, the Word, is not generally looked on as being the utterances of the ancestor gods. The bones are, in a certain sense, superior to the gods whose intentions they disclose. The *Bula* is the revelation of an impersonal power, independent of the gods. The diviners appeal directly to *Tilo*, the 'impersonal' High God. (p. 165)

In his conclusion, Zuesse (1975) emphasises this point:

In many cases, divination in African cultures amounts to a direct cult to the Supreme Being which has been ignored by the Western researchers. One hopes that this neglect will not continue. (p. 179)

Possession in isiZulu is by the spirit of the ancestor who narrates the messages from the Supreme Being for the wellbeing of the living. There are different types of spirits that exist and influence humanity. *Amathongo* are the ancestral spirits that everybody has. They are called *amathongo* because they appear to the person *ebuthongweni* (in sleep) through dreams and visions. *Amadlozi* are the possession spirits which overcome a person and guide them in a particular way. These are called *amadlozi* because 'bakubamba ngesidlozana' (they forcefully take a hold of you). The general confusion here is that this word *amadlozi* is now used as though every person has *amadlozi* whereas in reality every person has *amathongo*. A person who dances and ends up dancing uncontrollably which is a trance state is often said *uvukwe amadlingosi*. *Amadlingosi* means those who eat through smoke; when there is a celebration in the homestead, a portion of the food is placed in the main hut which functions as a sanctuary, as an offering for the ancestors. The ancestors no longer can eat physically so they eat through smell. When meat is braided, the smoke (*usi*) goes up and they are said to eat through that, hence *amadlingosi*. So, when a person dances and gets into a trance, the belief is that it is no longer just the individual dancing, but the ancestors get excited by the dance, and they start dancing through the individual who is then said *usevukwe amadlingosi!* Other more technical terms for ancestral spirits include *umndawo*, which is the female ancestor spirits, *umndiki* the male ancestor spirits, *amanono* are those who died very young or very old and considered clean and purest and *isithunywa* which is the spirit of those who died as *amakholwa* [believers], mainly Christian.

These movements and variants in understanding and dealing with spirits are not unique to amaZulu but are also found in other areas of Africa. Agyarko (2005) defines them in Ghanaian spirituality in this way:

The Akan has two terms for divination, namely *abisa* and *nsamankom*. The former is an act of formal consultation from a priest or priestess or – medicine man for knowledge of the past or present or the future. The latter is the spontaneous utterances from, usually, the ordinary person, who claims to be possessed by the – spirit of the dead, who has a message to be given to the living human beings. The difference between the two is that, whereas the *abisa* is a formal request made to a professional religious person, *nsamankom* is usually unsolicited spontaneous utterances from a person – possessed by the – spirit of a dead person. Strictly speaking, *nsamankom* is not an act of necromancy but is more akin to it by its context than the *abisa* which fits divination as well. (p. 78)

Clearly underlying the whole divination enterprise is the belief in the existence and role played by ancestors. John

O'Donoghue (2010) in his book, *Divine Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*, says:

The dead are not distant or absent. They are alongside us. When we lose someone to death, we lose their physical image and presence, they slip out of visible form into invisible presence. This alteration of form is the reason we cannot see the dead. But because we cannot see them does not mean that they are not there. Transfigured into eternal form, the dead cannot reverse the journey and even for one second re-enter their old form to linger with us a while. Though they cannot reappear, they continue to be near us and part of the healing of grief is the refinement of our hearts whereby we come to sense their loving nearness. When we ourselves enter the eternal world and come to see our lives on earth in full view, we may be surprised at the immense assistance and support with which our departed loved ones have accompanied every moment of our lives. In their new, transfigured presence their compassion, understanding and love take on a divine depth, enabling them to become secret angels guiding and sheltering the unfolding of our destiny. (p. 223)

Another element of ancestors that often has people confused is to think that ancestors are only those who have lived well. This is a notion that one encounters in the works of African Theologians such as Pobee (1979):

Not all the dead are ancestors. To qualify to be an ancestor one must have lived to a ripe old age and in an exemplary manner and done much to enhance the standing and prestige of the family, clan or tribe. By virtue of being the part of the clan gone ahead to the house of God, they are believed to be powerful in the sense that they maintain the course of life here and now and influence it for good or ill. They give children to the living; they give good harvest, they provide the sanctions for the moral life of the nation and accordingly punish, exonerate or reward the living as the case may be. (p. 46)

It is also important to note that Pobee also says: 'ancestors are members in the household of God and ancestors receive their authority from God' (Pobee 1979:46). This point will be important when we discuss the issue of mediums and mediation. Bediako (2000:30) affirms Pobee's claim that ancestors are those who have lived exemplary lives and from whom the community derived some benefit.

I disagree with Pobee and Bediako in their defining ancestors as those who have lived well. amaZulu believes that when a person passes away and has not lived an exemplary life or has left several issues unresolved, that person may not be allowed to enter the realm of ancestors. Also, as defined above, the *amanono* spirits are of those who have lived to a ripe age or those of innocent children even those who were unborn (miscarried). This argument by Pobee and Bediako, therefore, does not hold because there have been many stories of people who have experienced members of their family who died not ever owning even a chicken but suddenly appearing in dreams asking that rituals be performed on their behalf so that they can be allowed to enter the ancestry family.

When these rituals are not performed on the deceased's behalf, that person's spirit begins to wander, and they become a troublesome wandering spirit – a ghost. Generally, these wandering spirits can attach themselves to any living person as the *idlozi* spirit would, except here – this would be a non-familial spirit; this is referred to as an evil spirit and requires exorcism. There are people who have learnt the art of harnessing these spirits and often frequent graveyards in search of these spirits because such spirits can be manipulated to perform evil acts. The other forms of spirits are what is called *izilwane* (animal spirits). These are spirits of certain animals which are also manipulated to perform evil for their owners. Practices such as *ukuthwala*, which is performed by people who want to gain power over others for political gain or other influences, riches and even sex appeal use these spirits. These are what is deemed as witchcraft and unacceptable in the community.

With these genealogies and caveats on divination among the amaZulu people, we can now juxtapose the phenomenon with Jeremiah's calling.

Ubungoma and Jewish prophets through the calling of the Prophet Jeremiah

In this section, I would like to explore how a diviner (isangoma or prophet) is selected and their identity moulded by their calling. This will hopefully illustrate that family lineage, contact with the Supreme Being and nurturing are critical in the calling. The prophet Jeremiah's calling is recorded in Jeremiah 1:4–10 & 17–19, with very little information on the life of Jeremiah. There are excerpts of Jeremiah's imprisonment, false accusations and imprisonment, exile and other hardships. Jeremiah tried to reject this calling based on his age.

Jeremiah is from Anathoth, which is three miles north of Jerusalem, coming from a priestly family previously displaced by King Solomon for prophecies against his reign. Brueggemann (2007) outlines the importance of Jeremiah's family background:

The importance ... is that this family of priests ... had long been opposed to the ostentatious self-indulgence of the Davidic house in its trajectory of economic-military autonomy on which Solomon had set it. (p. 30)

God begins by coming to Jeremiah and has a message for him which will shape the person that Jeremiah is and the layout of the whole book. God's message to Jeremiah is central to our understanding of his call and vocation and the events that unfold across the prophetic era.

André looks at the callings of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Hezekial as examples, which emphasise that the manner in which the prophet's consciousness is aroused during the calling. Prophets are chosen and in their seeking to respond to the call they go through moments of ecstasy that André (1982:190)

defines as 'an intensive experience which totally engages the individual, a psychical state characterised by the fact that the person is much less open to outward stimuli than in a normal state'. To explore the features of Jeremiah's call, I implore Guest's (1988) reflections and interweave them with concepts of identity facilitation and divination commonly shared among amaZulu.

'I formed you' (Jeremiah 1:5). In a world where science argues about when does life begin for a person; scripture long declared that there is not a person made of whom God did not already know. 'Before I formed you' has that ring of Psalm 139:14–15. The idea here is clear that there is not a person who is born accidentally or without the firm knowledge of God. This is no different from the African understanding that each life is sacred and began even before a person was born. amaZulu believes that 'Umuntu uzalwa efumbethe'; a child is born with clenched fists, which is understood as we hold our future and message in our being already. It then becomes an issue of communal nurture that people are then enabled to rise to the big vision that they arrived carrying.

'I knew you' (Jeremiah 1:5). The magic in this knowing from God is that God not only knows our journeys but becomes a part of the journey. Hear what God says to Jeremiah in verse 19: 'They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you'. This assurance is important enough for God to repeat it to Jeremiah in 1:19 and 15:20. This assurance says: 'Don't be afraid of the message you carry because God is with you always'. God gives Jeremiah this assurance in relation to the mission before him and not just for his own sake. Jeremiah's fear was that he was only a youth! Being youthful, both in scripture and in Africa is not frowned upon nor does it relegate the messenger to being a youth 'unionists', representing only the interests of young people. Youth representation is also to present a youthful mind in all aspects of life and a view that is often energetic, creative and unhindered by the nostalgia of history. The notion of ancestors being only the aged is therefore uncharacteristic for amaZulu.

'I consecrated you' (Jeremiah 1:5). Jeremiah was formed, known and then set apart for something sacred by God, even though he was a youth who could not speak. God 'touches' Jeremiah's mouth (cf. Is 6:7; Dn 10:16). This was no soft or comforting touch, the verb used can also mean 'strike' (e.g. Job 19:21) or harm (e.g. Ps 105:15). One gets a similar sense in Job 1:11 when God sends forth God's hand and strikes the house where Job's children were gathered and leaving all of them dead. One's imagination therefore goes back to the definition of the *idlozi* spirit which grabs a hold of its agent and takes possession of their way and wellbeing. If you have ever touched hot coal; you will know when Isaiah says an angel touched his lips with hot coal – it burnt.

'I appointed you a prophet to the nations' (Jeremiah 1:5). It becomes clear in the book's progression that the message is

not only difficult but unwelcome. Although Jeremiah is promised God's presence and support, the message and what is to happen to Israel will also involve him.

Four (pluck up, pull down, destroy, overthrow) of the six verbs used in Jeremiah's mission have negative connotations. This emphasis on negative connotations shows that Jeremiah's message is indeed difficult but there is a flicker of hope.

As one traverses the book of Jeremiah it becomes clear that often God speaks through the Prophet and the struggle is also in the things that the Prophet would have chosen to not engage had he had the option. Even his state of mind becomes questionable at times.

The book of Jeremiah has the following passage (29:26f.):

YHWH has made you priest instead of Jehoiada the priest, to have charge in the house of YHWH over every madman who prophesies, to put him in the stocks and collar. Now why have you not rebuked Jeremiah of Anathoth who is prophesying to you?

Extracted from its context the passage seems to hint that Jeremiah was mad. But these verses are part of a letter, which a certain Shemaiah sent to a priest in Jerusalem. In its turn, the letter is part of an oracle, which Jeremiah was ordered to deliver to Shemaiah and the message is a curse on Shemaiah's apostasy. Thus, we can presume that Shemaiah bracketed all the prophets he disliked together under the same designation. (André 1982:194).

Having looked at Jeremiah as an archetype Prophet, I now turn my attention to the rest of the Bible for a more comprehensive look at how divination is portrayed.

Engaging biblical passages and tradition on forms of prophecy and divination

The Bible is a collection that should be approached with an understanding that it contains the ideologies of the people for whom the scriptures were initially intended; therefore, any use must be moderated by extensive exegesis and proper application to the new context. Mosala (1950 [1989]) cautions in this way:

The insistence on the Bible as the Word of God must be seen for what it is; an ideological manoeuvre whereby ruling-class interests evident in the Bible are converted into a faith that transcends social, political, racial, sexual and economic divisions. In this way the Bible becomes an ahistorical interclassist document. (p. 18)

We have outlined the various types of prophecies and divination methods, and we now turn to look at what some passages deal with. There are major and minor prophets in scripture whose methods came to be accepted as people who heard the voice of God speak to them. We understand that this was not because they saw or heard the actual audible voice of God but through forms of inspiration. There is

therefore a similar pattern in how Near-Eastern and African prophets 'heard' the voice that gave them directions. Najman in looking at the second temple period speaks to these traditions that believe in the mediation of God's message. 'Comparison with exilic and pre-exilic traditions suggests that the prophet's communication with God was increasingly likely to be conceived, not as direct, but as angelically mediated' (Najman 2000:315).

The Bible mentions several practices that it is opposed to and of which God disapproves. Exodus 22:18; Leviticus 19:32, 20:6, 27; Deuteronomy 18:10–11; 1 Samuel 28:3; Jeremiah 27:9–10 clearly forbid diviners, sorcerers and contacting the dead. These were practices common to Near-Eastern religions, and we shall see that Israel opted for just the casting of lots.

Hurowitz's (1997) review of Frederick Cryer's 'Divination in Ancient Israel and its near Eastern Environment' says:

[H]e [Cryer] claims that divination was far more prevalent and influential in ancient Israel than a superficial perusal of the Bible or scholarly literature would indicate. Divination was performed at major national occasions such as when going out to war, allocating land, and choosing a king. It outlived prophecy and was practised in the Second Temple period and even later, despite the clear biblical ban on it. (p. 416)

This view is in keeping with the argument in this article that sufficient attention has not been paid to the biblical text and assessment of some activities using an African epistemological lens. Western theology has sought to present scriptural analysis as being only adequate if viewed from the hegemonic Western lens. I seek to argue that a lot more can be learnt by stepping away from that hegemony and allow other context to be influenced and influence directly what the biblical text purports to articulate.

So how are we to define these prohibitions and bans that the Bible has of these divination exercise? The sense one gets is that they were meant to deter people from believing that there was any other source of power except for the one true God. If this be the context, then, the dialogue on the issue of *ubungoma* needs to wrestle with the issue of spiritual power used by diviners, where does it derive from?

I wish to confine myself to two concepts that scripture alludes to and are useful for our discussion: those that deal with the relevance of ancestors as mediums and necromancy. There are passages that speak to how those who have died no longer have relations with the living. Psalm 115:17 speaks of how the dead do not praise the Lord for they have gone down into silence. Psalm 146:3–4 warns against putting one's trust in another person because those people's plans perish when they die. Ecclesiastes 9:5–6 speaks of the dead no longer having any reward on earth and no share in what is done under the sun. These passages are among those that are used by people who often interpret African ancestral veneration as ancestral worship. The claim is that those who have died no longer live in any way that can allow them to interact with

those who are still living. This criticism is often never weighed against the understanding that if a person dies, is that the end of their lives or life continues thus death is just a rite of passage into another sphere of life. If that be the case, a move into another sphere, what proof have we got that there is no relation between these life experiences? How does one also balance scriptures like the Transfiguration – the appearance of Moses and Elijah to Jesus? If there is no interaction, what significance does this hold? The issue of ancestor veneration requires its own focus, and the scope of this article is limited but it must be noted I strongly believe it is hypocritical for the critics who call it ancestor worship because they have never given themselves time to study it beyond a Westernised lens. The very Western lens whose adherents' graves are strewn with fresh flowers and have shrines at sites where their departed died and have special services dedicated to saints and other memorials for the dead. Why have all these for those who no longer have a share among the living?

The other set of scriptures then deal with practices of mediums. A medium can be defined as (Lindblom 1973):

[A] person who, because he is conscious of having been specially chosen and called, feels forced to perform actions and proclaim ideas which, in a mental state of intense inspiration or real ecstasy, have been indicated to him in the form of divine revelation. (p. 46)

This is the understanding that defines *ubungoma*: a person gets filled with the spirit and the spirit takes over their life and controls their behaviour and actions. *Isangoma* goes through a period of training and preparation for the work that is set before them. This process is not easy or fun but a big struggle in the life of the initiate. The spirit seizes them, and they start speaking in the voice of the person; a man may speak like a woman or with a voice of an older man. A woman may speak in a voice of an older woman or a man. These types of episodes are often confused and defined as some psychological disorder.

An argument is made that a similar process is experienced by the Prophet Jeremiah as alluded to above. The same thing happens in the work of Jeremiah. Many scholars present Jeremiah as an embodiment of God – in other words – God indwells in Jeremiah and works through him directly.

There are times when Jeremiah speaks that the reader is left uncertain of who is speaking; is it Jeremiah or is it the Word of God? Jeremiah 8 is a famous passage that often confuses people; is it God or Jeremiah that is speaking; Jeremiah 8:22:

Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?

Holt quotes, Terence Fretheim who interpreted Jeremiah 8:18–23 (NRSV 8:18–9:1) as the prophet mirroring the mourning of God: 'The people not only hear the prophet as spokesman of God but they also see the lamentation of God embodied in the person of the prophet' (Holt 2017:193).

An overview of calling cannot be complete without dealing with who God is and by which spirit is all this power ordered. Our image of who God is, is made even more complex by the fact that we need to ask which God is God? Is it the God of the Jewish Bible, the God of the Western Theologians who brought the Christian faith to African shores or is it the God of our African ancestors called *Modimo*, *uMvelinqangi* or *Qamata*? Is there a difference in who God is and does it matter? My thesis is that the God of Africa and the God of the Bible are similar in many ways that I am unable to deal with in this article but I simply to state that God is different from the God of the Westerners who brought Christian faith to Africa.

Idowu, Mbiti (1969:74) and Kato agree that God in African thought, like Oludumare in Yoruba culture and Onyame in Akan culture, is the same as the Christian God. Idowu and Mbiti also contend that in African Traditional Religion, the people not only know but also worship a Supreme Being (Agyarko 2005:53).

In terms of how God communicates, the Old Testament mentions the use of lots to determine the will of God; there are several passages that speak of the use of an ephod which contains the Urim and Thummim

The Urim and Thummim can be defined as (Houtman 1990):

An object by which God's purpose with men was made visible or audible to the priest, either by revealing future events in the form of one or more pictures or by announcing it by means of a heavenly messenger, who manifests himself in it? (p. 230)

Houtman (1990) goes on to say:

'How can the UT function as a medium of divine revelation?' The answer is as follows: by bearing the oracular means before the Lord. So, it is brought by the high priest within the range of action of the Holy One. So it is 'charged' afresh again and again with divine power. (p. 231)

These instruments and the instance of the disciples searching for a replacement of Judas, the Iscariot recorded in Acts show that the will of God was often sought through means of lots or objects through which God communicated.

In pursuit of the relation between the biblical understanding of prophecy and *ubungoma*, we need to also wrestle with the source of the power that comes from the spirit. The understanding of the role of the Spirit within Christianity has been a subject of much discussion from the Spirit being present to ultimately being understood as the third person of the Trinity. One element that interests us here though is how the great schism of 1054 between the Catholic and Orthodox church revolved around the process of the Spirit. Long before then, the Filioque controversy had been developing in the life of the Church. The Church in her articulation of the Faith through the Creeds, had to contend with an argument of whether the Spirit who is by now considered divine proceeded from the Father or from both the Father and the

Son. Luke Timothy Johnson (2007) says the testimony of the Scriptures speaks to 'double procession' of the Spirit:

The testimony of the New Testament to the Spirit is richly ambiguous, and a considerable amount of evidence can be amassed in favour of the position that the Son as much as the Father is the origin of the Spirit. (p. 229)

The Filioque clause therefore became one of the things that split the church notably (Johnson 2007):

From that time forward, the filioque has been a chief complaint of the Orthodox against the Catholics, not only because they think it wrong, but because it shows the insensitivity and arrogance of the West. (p. 230)

The Filioque clause becomes interesting in our study because in it lies the very argument of which spirit guides those with ancestral callings. This is twofold, those who hold the more cultural view believe the spirit of ancestors derives directly from the Supreme Being through the ancestors to the called individual. Those who have an *isithunywa* spirit believe that the spirit works through Christ and Christianity because the called individual is overcome by the spirit of a Christian believer. It must be noted in African Traditional Religion, the divinity of the spirit is not expressed as it had to be within Christianity. The benevolence or malevolence nature of the spirit is seen in the acts that the possessed person performs, and this is where one is said to have a healthy spirit or a witch.

The other aspect that we learn of the Filioque controversy is what I believe the Western church continues to practice; the insensitive arrogance that the Orthodox church accused them. The Western Missionary enterprise has not been honest in her endeavour to spread the gospel. There has been a superiority complex which was never part of the Christian journey. The West has sought to proclaim Christianity as a complete system of religion that required the convert to leave everything of their past behind and convert to this religion which was coupled with Western civilisation and failed to note the development of the faith through the centuries. It was Paul in preaching in Athens as proclaimed in Acts 17:22–31, who encountered an altar with the inscription 'To an unknown God' and went on to define that 'unknown god' in terms of the Christian God. It was the Church in clarifying her identity that defined Christ as Divine through the Nicea Council and the Arian Controversy and after that, the Holy Spirit as Divine hence the formation of the Trinity God. It was the Church which received and assimilated the celebration of the god of fertility Esteri and the god of light and baptised them into the celebrations of Easter and Christmas. It is hypocritical that when it comes to Africa, the gospel is proclaimed as having nothing to glean from Africa but just for Africa to receive it as a complete system.

On arguing the above point, Methodist theologian Wainwright (1980) puts it this way:

Although an Ancestor-Christology would have its dangers for the Christian faith, and although also it would entail some

modification of the different African conceptions of the ancestors, yet the reason should not be sufficient to prevent African theologians, qualified by psychology and culture to sense exactly what an ancestor is for Africans, from exploring its possibilities. It is well known that the christological titles used in the New Testament (Christ, Lord, Saviour, Son of God, Son of Man) came from previous multiple backgrounds charged with associations not entirely appropriate to Jesus without transformation; and no one would pretend the Greek concepts of *ousia*, *hypostasis* and *physis* were immediately and unambiguously suited to Christian doctrine. Both in the New Testament and in the Church of the Fathers, old terms and concepts had to be impregnated with Christian content; and this was done only through decades, and indeed centuries, of exploration and controversy. Without abandoning either the New Testament or the great doctrinal achievements of the patristic Church, may not something like that be allowed to happen in Africa? (p. 384)

The role of mediums in African spirituality and Christianity

In this section I will deal with hierarchy in communication lines, how the Supreme Being uses mediums in many religious traditions and spend some time on angels and saints as mediums as well. A young man wanting to marry would communicate this to his older brothers or his mother who will then communicate with the father as the head of the household. Being the head of the household, the father also acts as the 'priest' of the household. He would then communicate this wish to the ancestors in the great hut of the family and then the process of the young man's request may begin. In the same way, communication with the Supreme Being is never direct; the head of the household, clan or tribe communicate through the respective ancestors. Kabasele (1991) puts it this way:

The African universe, especially the Bantu, as we have repeatedly observed, is a hierarchized universe: all beings share in the life of the Supreme Being on different levels according to their nature ...The Supreme Being, the world of Spirits, and the world of human beings are distinct, while compenetrating. And it is their distinction that requires a mediation for contact among the three degrees. (p. 123)

The role of mediums is not unique to African spiritualities. I will highlight a biblical example, tools used in the Bible for such consultations, the Church's adoption of the Pharisaic belief in the existence of angels and how that has over the years influenced the Church's acknowledgement of a realm of the Communion of Saints as proclaimed in the Creeds and in the *Te Deum*.

King Saul consulted a medium, and this is a passage often used to speak against such a practice, but Argyako (2005) portrays an alternative interpretation of Saul's encounter:

Whereas some theologians (O'Donovan 1992:231) see it as an act of necromancy, Dickson (1984:70) flatly differs from such understanding. Rather, he sees it as more like the ancestral cult of the Old Testament. The classic example usually cited is Saul's encounter with the witch of Endor whom he asked to call up the prophet Samuel from death. This example is used to contend

that Deuteronomy chapter 18 categorically condemns necromancy. Moreover, it is explained that it is not the efficacy of the necromancy that is being dismissed. Rather, it is the morality of it according to the moral standards of Christianity. (p. 79)

The argument here is that it is precisely because Saul had fallen out of favour with the Lord that the Lord would not speak to him nor respond to his approaches. Enquiring after the Lord's will is not only confined to Saul though, how did other prophets do it?

In reading the Bible beginning with the Old Testament, one encounters the angels as mediums between God and humanity and this role takes different forms and arguably within Judaism sects was accorded different recognition. Najman (2000) defines angels as 'of beings who are creatures, like us, but who are closer to the divine than we, bringing the heavenly into our earthly lives' (p. 313). Najman (2000) seeks to show that:

Previous studies have established that some early Christian traditions emphasize that angels acted as mediators in the revelation of the Torah, while some rabbinic traditions emphasize the immediacy of the Sinai event, and evidence has been adduced of a polemical debate between Christians and Jews on this matter. (p. 313)

The other element about angels in Hebrew literature is that their being and what they did developed through the ages and with influences of the religions with which the Hebrews came into contact. Barton (1912) says:

In the earlier time the various angels and demons in which the Hebrews believed were not sufficiently personal to bear individual names ... A great change is traceable in the literature of the second century B.C. and the centuries which followed. (p. 156)

Interestingly where one would always read the New Testament and believe one of the differences between the Pharisees and the Sadducees is that the Sadducees do not believe in the resurrection and the angels. We base this on Acts 23:8 'for the Sadducees say there is no resurrection, nor angels, nor spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge them all'. Viviano and Taylor (1992) in their brief article on the matter pose a different translation and argue that the Sadducees did in fact believe in the resurrection and angels. Their translation is:

[T]he Sadducees say that there is no resurrection either as an angel (i.e. in the form of an angel) or as a spirit (i.e. in the form of a spirit) but the Pharisees acknowledge them both. (p. 498)

Viviano and Taylor (1992) then assert:

Not only does this not force the text; it gives it a much easier meaning, and one which is consistent with our knowledge of ideas about what follows death that were current in Palestine in the first century of our era. (p. 498)

This then illustrates that there has indeed been a shift caused by Hellenistic and other influences.

The other element within Christianity that speaks to mediums is Saints. Wainwright (1980) says:

The saints are those who, by the gift of the Spirit at work in their lives, have reached such an outstanding degree of conformity to Jesus Christ that the divine kingdom is considered to have come conspicuously close in their persons, and they themselves are considered to be already particularly near to God in anticipation of final salvation. (p. 109)

Wainwright (1980) continues, 'and by over-reaction the Protestant churches have allowed their awareness of the saints to wither'. I particularly like his assessment of the aspects of Protestantism which have lost elements that the African Church would revere and hold dear.

Wainwright then mentions four areas that the church would need to contend with in her understanding of the issue of saints and these are important for our own wrestling with the issue of mediums within the Christian faith. These are: Firstly, the veneration of the saints. Secondly, the prayers of the saints – where they are directly asked to mediate. Thirdly, the liturgies that propose the saints to us as examples of holy living. Finally, the communion with saints which is confessed in liturgies and hymns of the church (Wainwright 1980:109–111).

So, there have been Angels, Saints and then how does the person of Jesus Christ, feature in all this? Chief among these passages becomes John 14:6 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'. This text is often supported with the likes of 1 Timothy 2:5 'and there is one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus'. The letter to Hebrews then introduces another confusing element, Christ as the high priest. Does this mean the mediation done by Christ as priest ceased with him and all priests after him can no longer perform this function? If this be the case what then do we do of the Church's understanding of the Persona Christi definition of priesthood? The fact that priests continued to exist in the church after Christ means there is an element of mediation that priests continue to play in the lives of the believers. The Church's practice clearly has been mixed and this begs the further question, why cannot it continue within Africa?

A necessity of spiritual dialogue

I will highlight areas that necessitate future exploration and dialogue. Many words and phrases have been coined to illustrate how important a dialogue between African and Christian spiritualities, be it inculturation, enculturation or decolonisation, whichever concept one uses, it comes with a particular framework as a guide.

The importance of this dialogue between Christianity and the African spiritualities cannot be over-emphasised. In fact, that it has not been happening in earnest is an indictment on the churches that have perpetuated the Westernised mentality of the missionaries. Bahemuka (1989) cites Pope Paul VI's Ecclesiam Suam saying:

We must establish a dialogue with African cultures – after all, it was God Himself who opened the dialogue with mankind ... for

God loved the world so much as to give His only begotten Son ... nothing but fervent and unselfish love, can motivate our dialogue. (p. 7)

Abimbola (2006) also noticed the imbalances found in the discussions between these self-imposed 'people of God' in Africa and the indigenous peoples of the land and he argues as follows:

The dialogues that the Christian missions have staged so far have been half-hearted and insincere. To start with, the dialogues have been held only with Islam and Judaism for the most part. Sometimes, these dialogues have included the Buddhists and the Hindu religions and some other religions of the Far East. When they included African indigenous religion at all, Christian evangelists often represent them by masquerading as scholars or practitioners of so-called African Traditional Religion (ATR). (p. 17)

The discussion on inculturation must therefore be honest and unpatronising as Waliggo (1986) argues:

The permanence of Christianity will stand or fall on the question whether it has become truly African: Whether Africans have made Christian ideas part of their own thinking, whether Africans feel that the Christian vision of life fulfils their own needs, whether the Christian worldview has become part of truly African aspirations. (p. 12)

It is at this point that one sees that the West has often been patronising to Africa in that for centuries when Christianity made its way around the world, it was always ready to adapt. Christianity baptised the pagan celebration of the sun god into its celebration of the birth of Christ through Christmas, the pagan rituals of the god of fertility Esteri into the celebration of Easter. How is it possible that when it comes to Africa it must now be received as a complete religious system that requires no adaptation save for some clanging drums and whistles as part of African worship – the hypocrisy is astounding to say the least.

I strongly believe in what John Wesley noted in his articles of beliefs about adaptability of rituals and ceremonies. Essential to Methodist Articles of Religion, Wesley advocates that rites and ceremonies of churches should not be repugnant to the Word of God, that is where dialogue becomes important (Bratcher 2018):

It is not necessary that rites and ceremonies should in all places be the same, or exactly alike; for they have been always different and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times, and men's manners, so that nothing be ordained against God's Word. Whosoever, through his private judgment, willingly and purposely doth openly break the rites and ceremonies of the church to which he belongs, which are not repugnant to the Word of God, and are ordained and approved by common authority, ought to be rebuked openly, that others may fear to do the like, as one that offendeth against the common order of the church, and woundeth the consciences of weak brethren. Every particular church may ordain, change or abolish rites and ceremonies, so that all things may be done to edification. (n.p.)

The calls for such an engagement go deeper than what I think Wesley could have imagined by his rites and ceremonies because those rites and ceremonies speak to the very heart of being an African Christian. In addressing this, the Southern Cross (2010) highlights that need for:

Identifying key components of the local culture and religion, and comparing them to Gospel values, where there is a clear correspondence between them, and where necessary, making the appropriate change. There may be a change of both (faith and culture), producing a new way of expressing Christianity, one which better resonates with the African experience. "African Ancestors Beliefs and the Catholic Communion of Saints". (n.p.)

There have been many projects that have sought to give credence to this exercise and for there to make progress, the Church will need to be gracious in receiving criticism and humble in acknowledging its hubris character. African Religion will also have to be humble and acknowledge that not all that is African is sacred and there are elements that need to be cleansed or discarded clearly but all this can only happen if practitioners of all these systems are willing to engage.

Conclusion

Ubungoma and the prophetic calling of Israel share a number of common characteristics such as the calling is spiritual and often rooted in the work of the Supreme Being. There are elements of possession where the spirit indwells and guides the called person with the task that the Supreme Being sets before them. There are a variety of gifts that the Spirit bestows upon those who are called and equips them to do various activities for the wellbeing of the community. There are also spirits that can be manipulated for greed and selfish desires of the person who controls them, and these are not for the benefit of the community. The chosen person bears gifts that come from within their lineage either the family of priests as was the case with Jeremiah or the ancestors as the case within the Traditional Religion. These gifts are then nurtured and developed as per guidance from God and it is never for the individual but for the wellbeing of the community. The Bible contains passages that are opposed to certain practices that in some instances can be confused with what happens within the traditional practices; it is these practices that the engagements will need to happen through honest Bible study and realignment of our practices. The historical development of the Church's dogma and praxis reveals that the Church has often learnt and transformed the cultures it encountered and a similar exercise needs to happen within Africa and that will encourage the gospel to be an authentic and transformative force in Africa.

Acknowledgements

This article was first presented to the Methodist Church of Southern Africa Central District 32nd Local Preachers Association Convention 2021 at Jabavu, South Africa under

the theme “Re-imagining God in Prophetic Preaching”. The author is grateful for the invitation from Mr. N. Lawu (Secretary) and the Rev. Tsosane (President) to present this article as a tool for the ongoing conversations for those experiencing a call to serve God in various ministries.

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contribution

S.K. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

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