

The Significance of Ancestors as a Cultural Component in M. Mbambo's *Amakroza* (1992)

Z. Mtumane

University of Johannesburg

zmtumane@uj.ac.za

Abstract

This article examines the significance of ancestors which is illustrated as a cultural component in Mncedi Mbambo's novel entitled *Amakroza* (1992). It will be shown how the novel reflects the deceased as deities among amaXhosa, and the belief that they dwell in the spiritual world as spiritual beings. It will also be reflected in the study how the departed are believed to be caring for, punish and are visited and spoken to by the living. The rituals of sending off, bringing back and *imbeleko*, as they are associated with ancestors, will be part of the discussion. Of further importance in the novel is the idea that both males and females are regarded as valuable ancestors alike, and how the patriarchal society is challenged by having a woman officiating a ritual in the presence of men. The significance of fasting and the shedding of blood, as related to conducting a ritual, will also be alluded to. All these points will be discussed as they are illustrated in the narrative discussed in this study. The research framework will be included briefly after the introductory section of this article. Before the actual discussion of these aspects, the concept of culture will be defined as part of the introductory section. Finally, concluding remarks will be included where the summary, evaluation and recommendations are made.

Introduction

While Mbambo presents the significance of ancestors in the novel discussed in the article, so far no analysis has been conducted investigating this aspect of the narrative. The belief in ancestors is a significant part of the traditional amaXhosa religious culture. However, with the ushering in of western and Christian values, this element of religion seems to be gradually fading away. This scenario tends to deprive the younger and future generations of amaXhosa this component of the faith of their forefathers. This article then aims at revealing how Mbambo presents this cultural belief in the novel being studied. The practical application of this faith will also be illustrated in the study, as it is advanced by the conducting of an important ritual in the story.

Although culture is a complex concept that is not easy to define, some scholars have attempted to clarify the term. These scholars include Goodenough, who, as cited by Kaschula and Antonissen (1995:15) defines culture as:

the particular knowledge and beliefs that members of a community have which enables them to operate in a manner acceptable to a group and in any role that the group finds acceptable.

Makofane and Sepota (2006:22) also view culture as:

a way of life that groups hold in common. Culture is an organizing concept that helps people understand how groups come together and create communities around aspects such as languages, symbols, foods, religion and belief systems.

Rooney (1999:459) describes culture as “shared beliefs and values of a group; the beliefs, customs, practices, and social behaviour of a particular nation or people”. According to Haralambos and Holborn (1995:3), the culture of a society is “the way of life of its members; the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation”.

In the words of Lindsey (1997:53), culture

... involves the total way of life of a given society. It includes both material aspects, such as buildings and books, as well as non-material aspects such as religion and roles. Our culture defines which behaviour patterns are considered appropriate. Indeed, culture encompasses all that we have developed and acquired as human beings, with each generation transmitting essential cultural elements of the next generation through socialization.

Herskovits (1949:17) views culture as the man-made part of the environment. It can then be concluded that culture is invented by human beings. It is not from a supernatural world.

The foregoing definitions help in demarcating the discussion in the article. Only concepts relevant to ancestors as a component of the culture of the amaXhosa will form a major part of this study. Concepts that seem to be common in the above definitions are that culture entails the “knowledge”, “ideas”, “beliefs”, “religion”, “customs”, “way of life”, “language”, “symbols”, “foods”, “habits”, “common behaviour”, “norms and traditions”, among others. While all these concepts refer to culture, for purposes of this discussion, “belief”, “religion” and “way of life” are most preferred. Culture is shared by a group of people who embrace common aspects of life. It is transmitted from generation to generation. Because of this scenario, culture tends to be followed by a group of people for a long time. This discourse will then reveal and discuss the belief in

ancestors as a constituent part of the cultural of the amaXhosa that is articulated in Mbambo's *Amakroza*.

It is for the fact that the belief in ancestors is an element of the culture of amaXhosa that this way of life is discussed as a cultural component of this nation, as it is articulated in the narrative studied in this article.

Research Framework

The discourse in this article is grounded on a Marxist framework. The Marxist framework is a theory that is used to analyse literature as part of society. It views literature and art as social practices (Davis & Schleifer, 1989:370). It is true that there other theories that are employed in the analysis of literature, such as feminism, psychoanalysis and onomastics. However, as the belief in ancestors and practices associated with ancestors are part of the social and cultural life of amaXhosa, Marxism is a befitting theory to base the discussion in this article on.

Ancestors

Among the traditional amaXhosa, the deceased are regarded as deities and are considered living in a spiritual world. This belief stems from the idea that the departed are generally considered as closer to God than the living. Mbiti (1990:155) supports this idea of living in a spiritual world as he avers: "... as soon as a person is physically dead he arrives there in his spirit form". Mtumane (1992:18) explains the adverb "there" in this assertion as referring to "the next world". It is this next world that is considered to be the spiritual world.

The belief in ancestors and their living in a spiritual world are further confirmed by Hodgson (1982:26) as follows:

Traditionally, Xhosa-speaking people believed in the existence of ancestors. These were spirits of the dead members of the lineage who were the focus of religious activity in their daily lives. The ancestors were thought to be present in and around the homestead, but they were also believed to be living in a spirit world, either below the ground or water.

Although, in the above citation, Hodgson uses the past tense when referring to the belief in ancestors, this faith is still continuing even today among many traditional amaXhosa. Even some modernised people still do adhere to this belief.

What should be noted is that Hodgson locates the spirit world “below the ground or water”. The idea of living in water is also confirmed by Mtumane (2000:15) when he reveals that Burns-Ncamashe had a “hut on the banks of the river” which “was used to seek fortunes from ancestral spirits which are believed to live in the water”. Mtumane (*opcit.*) adds the forest as another locale where the spirits of the departed are believed to dwell. He communicates this point by explaining that Burns-Ncamashe had another hut “in the forest” which “was used to seek fortunes from those which are believed to live in the forest”. Burns-Ncamashe was the chief of amaGwali, a subgroup of amaXhosa.

As they live in the spiritual world, the dead are believed to be spiritual beings. They are then part of the religious beings among amaXhosa. In fact, they are regarded as occupying the position between human beings and God. In this manner, they are considered to be closer to God than the living human beings (Mtumane, 1992:16). Their closeness to God makes it appropriate that they are generally regarded to be acting as mediators between God and the living (Qangule, 1979:68). For this reason, living human beings approach God through these mediators, hence the traditional amaXhosa worship Him through them. Magubane (1998:29) emphasises that it is “old people who die, women no less than men,” who “become ancestral spirits...”. This implies that in the ancestral world there is no gender discrimination, as both men and women become ancestors after death.

Ancestors are believed to be taking care of the living. They are considered as protecting them from misfortunes and giving them blessings and fortunes. While rituals are constantly performed for the departed, when a misfortune befalls someone, ancestors are often purported to be angry or having their backs on them for a ritual that has not been performed or, if performed, it was not done properly. Even social misconduct and misbehavior by the living may cause the displeasure of ancestors, for which they may inflict some form of punishment. In this regard, West (1976:18) says:

Far more significant in religious activity was the role of the shades of ancestors. They concerned themselves with the fate of their descendants and were believed to help or harm them according to their behaviour. Ancestors communicated with their descendants in most cases through dreams and could give instructions, express displeasure and so on. They had power only over their own children whom they could punish with sickness or misfortune if they were displeased or good fortune if they were satisfied.

Should ancestors be displeased and sickness or misfortune befalls one of their descendants, a need arises to appease them by performing a particular ritual where sacrifices are made. This point is accentuated by Jafta (1978:37) as follows:

The ancestors (*izinyanya*) keep surveillance over their wards (the living). Their assistance is always sought as nothing can ever succeed without their blessings. A constant link has to be maintained between the living and the ancestors by means of sacrifices. The ancestors become pleased and a healthy communication is established between man and his ancestors.

Soga (1989:29) affirms the idea of punishing people who are unfaithful and blessing those who are faithful as he describes ancestors as:

...zinamandla okubulala abanganyanisekileyo kwanawokuthamsanqelisa abasukuba bekholekile ekunquleni kwabo oothixo baseluHlangeni.

(...they have the power to kill the unfaithful and to bless those who worship the gods of the Nation satisfactorily.)

In the text discussed in this article, Khuselwa, the leading character, finds herself in unfortunate situations. The news of her mother cheating on her father affects her. The mother's deserting her and her father is another unfortunate situation. The death of her father, shortly after these incidents, leaves her an orphan with no one to share her problems. After qualifying as an attorney and being employed at the Zwelitsha Magistrate Court, she becomes a victim of a conspiracy by Vuyisa Mgxali and eventually loses her job. After she is vindicated and is able to find another job at the Peddie Magistrate Court, Vuyisa Mgxali continues with his plot and Qhalikishi, instead of Khuselwa, gets the job. Khuselwa is only appointed as an interpreter. All these miseries lead Khuselwa to consult with her ancestors and conduct rituals for them.

After losing her job as attorney at the Zwelitsha Magistrate Court, due to Mgxali's conspiracy, Khuselwa visits her father's grave where he pleads with her forefathers to reveal to her what she has done to deserve this punishment. Standing next to his grave, she speaks as follows:

“Nina maMpondo, kwasezingcingeni zam bendinicele, xa ndisiza kwezitsha izizinde ndiphelekeni kaloku. Ndinguye lo mna ndimi phezu kwentloko yedlaka lendoda eyandizalayo, yandondla, yandifundisa. Ndingumafungwashe nethumbu kumzi kabawo. Ndiyincam nenkulu engafakelwanga emaMpondweni aseMngqesha. Ndiyintombi ndingunyana kumzi kaDumile Hombile. Ndize kuni ke maMpondo, nkomo zikaThahle, zikaNdayeni. Nini abanehlathi elishukumayo lakwaSibiside. Nditsho kuni nzala yaseQawukeni, bantu baseNyandeni. Iintonga zokulawula amaNyawuza zikuni kaloku. Nkunzi ezingqukuva zikaBhala noGangatha. Xa kuyingxoboshishi nengxovungxovu enje, ndandive ngani ukuba kungxolwa kwingcwaba lenkulu yomzi, ibizwe nangezama layo lenkobe ukuba ayiva. Thina

maMpondo sizingcwaba ezethu iinkulu sizijongise ubuso emakhaya. Siyazikhapha sibuye sizibuyise. Makashukume ke amathambo akho, Dumile, ndikubone. Nakuni zintloko zeli khaya andizazi ndinatyala kuni. Ityala ukuba likhona laziwa nini yaye anilixeli. Thethani kaloku nangethongo ndilazi mna kaloku. Mabudede ubumnyama endleleni yam. Nditsho kuni ke boobawomkhulu nani boomakhulu. Makungabi lilishwa ukuza kwam kweli khaya. Sapho lukaNyawuza, kwaNdayeni, mna ndingowenu kaloku maMpondo. Ndijongeni, nindalathisi' indlela emandiyihambe. Kutsho mna ntombi engumafungwashe nelithumbu likaDumile ncam-ncam.”

(“You maMpondo, even in my thoughts I asked you when I was coming to the new sites, please escort me. Here I am standing on top of the head of the grave of the man who begot, nurtured and educated me. I am the first and last-born in my father’s household. I am the legitimate last and first born among amaMpondo from Mngqesha. I am a daughter and son in the household of Dumile Hombile. I have come to you then maMpondo, cows of Thahle, of Ndayeni. You are the ones with the shaking forest of Sibiside. I refer to you progeny from Qawukeni, people from Nyandeni. The rods to rule amaNyawuza are in fact with you. Hornless bulls of Bhala and Gangatha. When there is such a problem and complication as this, you told me that noise is made at the grave of the first-born of the household, to even refer to him by his proper name if he does not hear. We, maMpondo, when we bury our first-borns we make them face the homes. We send them off and then bring them back. Dumile, let your bones shake so that I can see you. Even to you heads of this household, I do not know what my fault is. If there is any fault, you are the ones who know it and you are not telling me. Please speak even through a dream for me to know it. Let darkness step out of my way. I refer to you grandfathers and you grandmothers. Let not my coming to this home be a misfortune. Family of Nyawuza, at Ndayeni’s home, I am in fact yours, maMpondo. Look at me, and show me the way that I should go. This is me saying so, the first and last-born daughter from Dumile himself.”)

(Mbambo, 1992:30–31)

This excerpt illustrates how Khuselwa approaches her ancestors because of the misfortunes that had befallen her. The mention of her thoughts as she was coming to the graveyard indicates how this visit is not an abrupt one. It is a planned and premeditated visit which she also asked the forefathers for. This further illustrates how the ancestors are not visited by surprise, but are consulted for their protection even on the way to them. That is why Khuselwa solicits their company in the words “*ndiphelekeni kaloku*” (please escort me).

What should be noted is how Khuselwa introduces herself by appreciating her father for begetting, nurturing and educating her. This indicates that while still alive, her father Dumile was able to perform his expected parental duties. Khuselwa therefore comes with the confidence that her begetter, who represents the other ancestors as well, was not a useless and lazy fellow when he was still in the land of the living. She then comes with the hope that he and other forefathers have the strength to assist her in her challenges. It should also be noted how she often introduces

herself by using contrasts that present her as both the first and last-born, and as both a daughter and son begotten of her father. These contrasts signify that she is the only child of Dumile. No other child was born before or even after her. As a girl, she also has to perform duties that befit boys. This is so because she has no brother.

Of interest is Khuselwa's use of the symbols "*nkomo*" (cow) and "*nkunzi ezingqukuva*" (hornless bulls) when referring to her ancestors. "*Inkomo*" (cow) is a very important animal among amaXhosa. In the words of Mtumane (2000:80):

... this is a very symbolic animal among amaXhosa. Generally it symbolises the survival of the nation, unity, loyalty, neighbourliness, wealth and prosperity... the milk and meat of a cow are used to feed people; the oxen are used to plough the fields. It is also slaughtered as a sacrifice to appease the ancestral spirits. In this manner people benefit from a cow in many ways.

Khuselwa uses the cow symbol to refer to her ancestors as they are significant for her survival, protection and blessings. On the other hand, "*inkunzi*" (the bull) is generally known for its strength, especially when fighting. The symbols in Khuselwa's speech then give the idea of the strength she regards her ancestors to have and that they cannot fail in solving her problems. They also points to the confidence she has in them.

It is observed that Khuselwa regards her forefathers not only as "*iinkunzi*" (bulls) but "*ezingqukuva*" (hornless ones). The concept "*ingqukuva*" is generally used to refer to a cow that has no horns. According to Bobelo (2008:77):

This cow is generally known of its stubbornness and always pushing forward, irrespective of bars that might be put on its way. It uses its strong head to push the bars away and get to its destination. Even herd boys may beat it in vain trying to turn it from its direction.

Khuselwa's giving her ancestors the attributes of hornless bulls then reveals how she regards them as strong fighters who do not succumb to any situation. Horns are generally used by the cow to endanger its opponent by poking it. The hornlessness of these bulls reflects that Khuselwa's ancestors do not fight with dangerous weapons. Instead, they rely on their intellectual and reasoning powers. It is interesting that intellectual and reasoning powers are generally associated with the brain which is in the head, and the hornless bull pushes with its head. This illustrates how Khuselwa depicts her forefathers as relying on their mental and thinking skills, even though they would be able to use physical strength when the need arises. Khuselwa may be using this

image as she is sure that her ancestors do not give up until they have attained their objective. In the same manner, should they be willing to rescue her from her dilemma, she expects them not to retreat until that has been fulfilled.

With these characteristics, these spirits should be sure to redeem Khuselwa from her misfortunes. Hence, towards the end of the story, she regains her job as an attorney. She also represents a client, Nodywebheza, against Vuyisa Mgxali (her worst enemy) and wins the case. Vuyisa is later stabbed to death by his friend. The stabbing of Vuyisa illustrates that Khuselwa's ancestors are fighting for her, as her enemy gets the misfortune of losing his life. Khuselwa also meets her mother and they reconcile before the latter's death.

“Ukungxola kwingcwaba lenkulu” (Making noise at the grave of the first-born) is an idiom that refers to the practice of visiting the cemetery and talking to one's ancestors. This is exactly what Khuselwa has come to the graveside for, as she is talking to her forefathers. Khuselwa, whose home is at Mngqesha, around King William's Town, is at a cemetery in the same vicinity. However, time and again, she refers to Qawukeni and Nyandeni when talking to her ancestors. Qawukeni is another name for Lusikisiki, a town found in Pondoland in the Transkei region of the Eastern Cape. Nyandeni is also a village that is part of Pondoland and where the Great Place of amaMpondo is located. This is where amaMpondo are mainly based and have their kingdom there. Those who are found in other places relocated from this area. The same is true of Khuselwa and her parents. Khuselwa's mention of these places then points to the origins of her family where earlier ancestors were buried. She then recognises these ancestors as she pleads with them together with those in Mngqesha to reveal her faults and guide her. All this illustrates that although she is in Mngqesha, she is still conscious of her roots in Pondoland and associates with her forefathers there.

Khuselwa's experience of misfortunes is emphasised by the use of the idiom *“mabudede ubumnyama endleleni yam”* (Let darkness step out of my way). Among amaXhosa, when one is overwhelmed by problems, one is often referred to as in darkness. That means one is in a predicament one is unable to get out of and cannot see a way out of it. One's situation is like traveling in darkness without knowing which direction to take in life. One's future is also bleak because of these challenges. This is the state in which Khuselwa finds herself because of the hardships she is faced with. She then trusts that her forefathers can remove this darkness.

The practice of making the first borns of the amaMpondo face home when they are buried, as Khuselwa reveals above, is done when they are buried at a cemetery away from home. This is based on the belief that, in their spiritual form, they are expected to see whatever is happening within their household as they should look after the homestead and its occupants. Where necessary, they will be able to send blessings to and protect their descendants. Khuselwa mentions the direction faced by the ancestors as she expects them to see what is happening at home and to her as their offspring. She is surprised that facing the home, they seem not to realise that she is in trouble and do not come to her rescue. If they do see her situation, she does not understand why they should let her face these predicaments on her own.

The phrase “*siyazikhapha sibuye sizibuyise*” (We send them off and then bring them back) refers to rituals that are conducted after the burial of an adult person. The sending off ceremony is normally done soon after the funeral. This is done by slaughtering a beast called “*inkomo yezila*” (*izila* beast). The slaughtering of this beast is a means by which the family members mourn the death of an elderly person, especially the head of the family. It is also a means to send off the spirit of the deceased. Some families perform this ritual on the day of the funeral while others may conduct it a later stage. The time of performing this ritual may depend on the economic situation of the family. When the *inkomo yezila* (the *izila* beast) is readily available to be used as a sacrifice, the ritual may be conducted on the day of the funeral. However, when the animal is not readily available, the ceremony is performed at a later date. Concerning this ritual, Bongela (2001:51) records:

When the head of the family dies, a beast is slaughtered either during[*sic*] the day of the funeral or a day or two after, in order to honour his spirit as the body is laid to rest in his grave ... During the slaughtering of the *nzila* [*sic*] beast, words of reverence ... are uttered by the piercer.

On the other hand, the bringing back ritual is performed sometime after the funeral. It is aimed at bringing the spirit of the deceased back home, where it is expected to look after the household by blessing, protecting and guiding its members. It is because of the performance of this ritual that the dead becomes a useful ancestor within the home. As the spirit is returned from the grave, the departed is considered as conscious and able to look after and even punish the descendants. Pertaining to this ritual, Bongela (*op cit*) records:

After six months or more, another beast is slaughtered in honour of the same ancestor and a ritual is performed where his spirit is asked to come back to his

homestead and look after the entire family... Before the beast is pierced, words of reverence ... are said usually by the most senior member of the family.

The time of undertaking this ritual, to a large extent, is also determined by the family's economic standing. The sooner the *inkomo yezila* is available, the sooner the ceremony will be conducted. Khuselwa mentions the sending off and bringing back rituals in her speech probably because she knows that they were conducted for her father and other ancestors. She then does not know what the cause of the ancestors not protecting her may be. She is surprised that she is a victim of misfortunes as she does not know what her fault is towards the forefathers. She then urges them to tell her, even by a dream. This illustrates Khuselwa's awareness and belief that ancestors appear to the living in dreams, as it has been alluded to earlier in this study. It is through these dreams that they are believed to speak to their descendants and tell them what to do.

Khuselwa presents herself as “*ndiyincam nenkulu engafakelwanga amaMpondweni aseMngqesha*” (I am the legitimate last and first-born among amaMpondo from Mngqesha). By this statement she reminds the ancestors of her rightful position in the clan. As a legitimate child, she expects the forefathers to listen to her. In other words, she is not only begging for but also claiming and demanding their attention. She is unapologetic that she has come to consult with them. It is for this legitimacy that she does not expect the ancestors to abandon her as she is their offspring indeed. This is supplemented by her repeatedly informing them that she is their child.

It should be observed that Khuselwa presents her case to both male and female ancestors, as is illustrated by the sentence: “*Nditsho kuni ke boobawomkhulu nani boomakhulu*” (I refer to you grandfathers and you grandmothers). This reveals how she does not discriminate according to gender among her ancestors. She expects both masculine and feminine ancestors to come to her rescue.

After consulting with Nozabemdeli, the diviner, who informed her that her misfortunes are due to the fact that the *imbeleko* ritual was never performed for her, Khuselwa conducts this ritual. This is presented as follows:

Kwiivekana nje ezingephi kuze isimelwane, izizalwana nezazi-Khuselwa kwaHombile. Intombi yomntu izinyanga yona ngokwayo. Ithethe yophela nooyise-mkhulu kunye noonina-khulu. Iwabize ngamagama amadoda azizikhulu zasemaMpondweni, iwabiza iwuchaza umcimbi ekungawo ivelise ibhokhwe emnyango. Iwanqule amaMpondo iwabiza ngamagama ooBhala, ooGangatha nooFaku. Isukile naloo bhokhwe emnyango yenjenjeya ukuya nayo ebuhlanti iyithe chu ngeempondo. Ihambe ngenyawo ihloniphile nokuhlonipha intombi kaDumile.

Imi exhantini yabhekisa yona ngokwayo kumawayo aphilayo nangatyi sandlwane sebhokhwe ezitya ingca, ingxengxezile izibika ubutyala ngamatyala enawo ekhaya eli. Iye iphuphuma ngumoya xa izibika ubuze bayo kumawayo, iwabize onke amaMpondo, de yabiza noyise uDumile ngegama. Ibhokhwe uyiwise emthonyameni eyalela ukuba mayiwiswe ilale ngecala lasekhohlo, ijonge emaxhantini yona, uthabathe umkhonto yena siqu, wathunga ngawo ebhokhweni apha phakathi kwemikhono nemilenze ngeli xesha ibhokhwe ilele ngomqolo. Yena ngalo lonke elo xesha unqula amawabo. Emva koko uyinyole buyihlaba embindini wesisu ibhokhwe ngomkhonto. Suka yahlahlamba ibhokhwe ixela ukuba icamagu livumile. Kuvakele isiwili-wili enkundleni yeli khaya isitsho emva kwakhe, “camagu”.

(In just a few weeks’ time neighbours, relatives and those who knew Khuselwa came to Hombile’s household. Hombile’s daughter was conducting a healing ritual by herself for herself. She spoke a lot to her grandfathers and grandmothers. She called the great men of amaMpondo by names; naming them and explaining what the matter is, holding the goat to appear at the entrance. She praised amaMpondo, calling them with names such as Bhala, Gangatha and Faku. She left the entrance with the goat and proceeded to the kraal, handling it by the horns. The daughter of Dumile walked barefooted showing respect as well.

She stood at the post of the entrance of the kraal referring herself to her people, the living and those who no longer eat the psalterium of goats that still graze grass, apologising and expressing her guilt about her faults around the home. She became spiritually high as she expressed her nakedness to her ancestors, naming all amaMpondo, even calling Dumile by his name. She caused the goat to fall on the dung ordering that it be made to lie on the left-hand side, facing the entrance posts, and took the assegai herself, moved it in-between the hind and forelegs as the goat lay on its back. All this time she is praising her ancestors. Thereafter she poked as if stabbing the goat at the centre of the stomach with the assegai. The goat cried out loud indicating that the ritual has been accepted. An uncontrolled sound was heard at the court of this home saying after her “there is propitiousness”.)

(Mbambo, 1992:53)

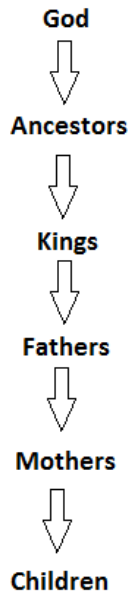
The noun “*imbeleko*”, as it is used in this excerpt, is derived from the verb stem “-*beleka*” which means to carry a child on one’s back. It is an isiXhosa name for the skin or hide that is used to carry a child on a woman’s back. A ritual is normally performed for a child around ten days after its birth, where a goat is slaughtered so that its skin is prepared and used for this purpose. This is the time around which the child has dropped the umbilical cord and the wound has healed. At this time, the child is normally ready to be carried on his/her mother’s (or anyone’s) back. Apart from getting the skin, this ritual is also meant to introduce the child to the ancestors and solicit their protection and blessings for him/her. This ritual is also called *imbeleko*. During modern times, where blankets instead of skins are used to carry children on the back, this ritual is only conducted as a symbol and to solicit the protection and blessings of the ancestors for the child. It is believed that should this ritual not be performed for the baby, the child will encounter problems

when s/he grows up, as s/he was not introduced to the ancestors and does not enjoy their safeguarding and favours. Should the ritual not be performed early in one's life, the ceremony will be held even for an adult. Khuselwa then carries out the ritual based on Nozabemdela's, (the diviner) instructions since it was not done for her as a baby.

When a ritual is conducted among amaXhosa, it does not only involve family members, it becomes a community ceremony as people come to give support. That is the reason why neighbours, relatives and people who know Khuselwa are part of the ceremony conducted by her. This reflects the communal interdependence of amaXhosa.

In addressing her ancestors, Khuselwa again refers to both the male and female ones. This reflects the belief that people of both genders are regarded as valuable ancestors, as that has been revealed earlier in this study. Calling all her ancestors by their names is an indication that Khuselwa expects them to play a collective role in looking after her. Reference to her people as those who are living and those who no longer eat the psalterium of goats that still graze grass illustrates how both the living and dead have a role to play in her dilemma in her speech. While appeasing the dead, she does not ignore the important role to be played by the living. These are the people who still need to support, comfort and guide her in life. Reference to the dead is marked by the idiom "*nangasatyi sandlwane sebhokhwe ezitya ingca*" (and those who no longer eat the psalterium of goats that still graze grass). This expression denotes that these people no longer live where there are goats, as they are deemed to be in the spiritual world.

It is generally a male adult who plays the leading role in conducting a ritual among amaXhosa. It is this person who often addresses the ancestors and the community about the ceremony. Where there is no male person in the immediate family, one of the paternal uncles or cousin brothers often play this role. This is based on the belief that males are generally regarded to be closer to ancestors than females. This idea is illustrated by Qangule (1979:67) in the following ranking order:



In this hierarchy fathers (males) are two steps away from ancestors while mothers (females) are three steps away. Kings, who are one step away, are normally males as well. It is because of their closeness to ancestors that males are the ones who normally play the role of a priest, interceding between the living and ancestors. In this case, Khuselwa, who is a female, performs the ritual herself. By presenting this scenario, the narrator illustrates how females can be equally important agents in the appeasement of ancestors within the household. As it has already been explained, Khuselwa could be doing this as she has no brother. Even so, it would conventionally be expected that one of her paternal uncles or cousin brothers played this role. By this act then the author is introducing a shift from the popular perception that only males can perform such important duties. In a way, he is refuting the belief that only males can be mediators between the ancestors and the living. This is further affirmed by the loud outcry of the goat which indicates that the ritual is accepted by the ancestors.

The loud outcry by the sacrificial animal when it is slaughtered is very significant among the traditional amaXhosa. When this animal does not cry out, it is perceived the non-acceptance of the ritual by the ancestors. Where this happens the ritual is normally discontinued or postponed and the animal is let free, hence the proverb, “*xa ingakhalanga iyayekwa*” (when it does not cried, it is let free). It is conducted again after consulting a diviner who often explains the reason

for the non-acceptance of the ceremony. The acceptance of Khuselwa's (a female) ritual then serves as a challenge to the patriarchal society of amaXhosa in this regard.

The exclamation "*camagu*" which is articulated by the audience following Khuselwe's actions needs to be noted. Whenever a sacrificial animal cries out, this exclamation is expressed out loud and in excitement as a response to the sound of the beast. This is taken as an indication that the mediation is successful. This is further emphasised in the text where the author says the bleating of the goat slaughtered for Khuselwa "*ixela ukuba icamagu livumile*" (indicating that the mediation has succeeded).

The goat is slaughtered within the kraal where there is a lot of dung (*emthonyameni*). Apart from being a shelter for domestic animals, the kraal is also believed to be where the spirits of the ancestors dwell after the ritual of bringing them back has been conducted. The slaughtering of a sacrificial animal at the kraal marks the belief that the offering is made to the ancestors and its blood is let to spill where these beings are believed to dwell. During the simulated motion of the assegai in-between the hind and forelegs, the one performing this action is pleading with the ancestors to accept the offering. By this action, one feels the presence of the spirits as it is a means of communication through praise and worship. At this point in time, one is concerned with whether the sacrifice will be accepted or not. One is thus relieved when the animal cries out.

The performance of a ritual is often accompanied by fasting among amaXhosa. Fasting entails abstinence from certain kinds of food, drinks, and activities for a certain period. This is meant to gain or maintain purity in the face of the ancestors. Mtumane (2004:20–21) explicitly explains the concept of fasting in relation to male initiation. He states:

Kaloku ibilixesha lokuba iqalise ukuzila, ibe nezinto ezithile ezinxwemayo kuzo. Ukuba ingulewu orhaqazayo, bekufuneka kuphele ukurhaqaza ngoku. Bekufuneka izigcine nyulu namsulwa ukuze ingangenwa zizifana ezinokuphazamisana nokwaluka kwayo. Ukuba yinkwenke enemikhuba engahle iyifake engxakini, bekufuneka iyiyeke. Nayo yonke enye into eza kuphazamisana nempilo yayo bekufuneka izinxweme kuyo. Bekuye kufuneke ukuba iyeke nokutshaya icuba kanti nokusela utywala.

(For this was time for him to start fasting, to abstain from certain things. If he is a playboy who sleeps around, sleeping around should stop now. He should keep himself pure and innocent so that he would not be infected with diseases that could disturb his circumcision. If he is a boy with habits that could put him into trouble, he should stop them. He was expected to abstain from any other thing that would disrupt his health. He was expected to stop smoking tobacco and even drinking liquor.)

Mtumane (*op cit*: 26) further reveals that:

Unina wenkwenkwe eza kwaluka ebephila ubomi bokuzila ngenxa yomntwana wakhe. Ebezinxwema kuzo zonke izenzo ezitenxileyo nezizintloni. Ukuba unguNohajis' olihenyu bekufuneka elubuyisile unyawo lwakhe kuloo mkhuba.

(The mother of a boy who is about to be initiated lived a life of fasting for her child's sake. She would abstain from all wrong and shameful activities. If she is a whore she should stop that habit.)

While male initiation is not part of this study, it is also a ritual that involves the belief in ancestors who are expected to protect the boy while in the forest. The inclusion of this subject is proof that fasting is an important activity in any ceremony that needs the attention of the departed among amaXhosa. As the foregoing excerpts reveal, fasting involves abstaining from certain foods and activities that may be at the disapproval of the ancestors. These may include smoking tobacco, drinking liquor and illicit sexual activity. In the text, the significance of fasting is revealed in the words of Xhomyakayaka, an elderly man who knows the people of the Hombile family extensively. Sharing words of wisdom with Khuselwa, this old man says:

Lisiko lakowenu ukuthi akuzondelela ezingile amashwangusha kuphalazwe igazi, kungxengxezwa kwizinyanya zeli khaya. Bekusenziwa oku ngenxa yonakano lwento engabonwayo ngeliso lenyama. Kunqulwa ngokuzinikela, kuzondelelwe kwinkonzo yokuzigcina nyulu, ukungazidyobhi kwinkanuko ezingamahlazo zenyama. Xa uhamba ngale ndlela uhamba ngayo wena, usekhondweni lendlela eyayihamba ooyihlo nooyihlo-mkhulu.

(When misfortunes insist, it is the custom of your household to shed blood, appeasing the ancestors of this home. This was done because of an inkling of what could not be seen with the fleshy eye. They worshipped with commitment, determinant in the service of keeping themselves pure, not defiling themselves in shameful lusts of the flesh. As you follow this route you are in the footsteps of your fathers and grandfathers.)

(Mbambo, 1992:55)

The shedding of blood referred to in this passage denotes the slaughtering of an animal for a ritual. The blood that is shed is the one of the slaughtered animal. In accordance with Xhomyakayaka's statement, the traditional amaXhosa generally believe that for misfortunes to be driven away and blessings to be received the blood of an animal must be shed. The phrase "...*ngenxa yonakano lwento engabonwayo ngeliso lenyama*" (because of an inkling of what could not be seen with the fleshy eye) signifies that a ritual is performed for the ancestors who could not be seen. All this depends on the faith the people have in these spirits.

It is worth noting that, in line with the earlier comment, Xhomyakayaka mentions the importance of keeping oneself “pure, not defiling themselves in shameful lusts of the flesh”. All this refers to fasting which he commends in conjunction with the performance of a ritual. This confirms the linkage that exists between fasting and the conducting of a ceremony among amaXhosa.

Conclusion

This article has examined the significance of ancestors as a cultural component in Mncedi Mbambo’s novel entitled *Amakroza* (1992). It has discussed the role of the deceased as deities and the rituals that are conducted in respect of them. Of importance in performing the rituals is the role played by Khuselwa, who is a female, instead of a male person, as the tradition would require. The significance of fasting that accompanies the ritual is another pivotal factor in the novel.

Mbambo’s portrayal of the ancestral belief in his narrative points to his enlightenment about the traditional cultural practices of his people. This belief, as it is illustrated in *Amakroza* (1992), identifies amaXhosa in particular, and Africans in general, as having a religion that is peculiar to them. As the traditional religious aspects of amaXhosa seem to be gradually vanishing, it is imperative that authors write works that depict these aspects, as Mbambo does in his novel. Scholars also need to conduct studies that reveal this religion. In this manner, information on the sacred practices of amaXhosa will be available for future generations to consider. With the advent of the African Renaissance, the accessibility of this knowledge will help those who want to revive isiXhosa traditional culture.

References

- Bobelo, N. 2008. *IsiXhosa poetry on Nelson Rholihlahla Mandela*. Unpublished M.A. Dissertation: University of Johannesburg.
- Bongela, K. S. 2001. *Isihlonipho among amaXhosa*. Unpublished Doctoral thesis: University of South Africa.
- Davis, R.C. & Scheleifer, R. 1989. *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies*. Addoson: Longman.

- Haralambos, M. & Holborn, M. 1995. *Sociology: Theme and Perspective*. London: Collins Educational.
- Herskovits, M.J. 1949. *Man and his Works: The Science of Cultural Anthropology*. New York: A. A. Knopf.
- Hodgson, J. 1982. *The God of the Xhosa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Jafta, D. N. 1978. A Survey of Xhosa Drama. Unpublished M.A. dissertation: University of Zululand.
- Kaschula, R. & Antonissen, C.1995. *Communicating across Cultures in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Lindsey, L.L. 1997. *Gender Roles: A Sociological Perspective*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Magubane, P. 1998. *Vanishing Cultures of South Africa*. Cape Town: Struik.
- Makofane, M.D.M. & Sepota M.M. 2006. Women Abuse: A Communication and Cultural Perspective. *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies*, 16(2):20–34.
- Mbambo, M. 1992. *Amakroza*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman.
- Mbiti, J.S. 1990. *African Religion and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann International.
- Mtumane, Z. 1992. Some aspects of Xhosa traditional thought as articulated in M. A. P. Ngani's play: *Umkhonto kaTshiwo*. Unpublished BA. Honours article: University of Fort Hare.
- Mtumane, Z. 2000. The poetry of S. M. Burns-Ncamashe. Unpublished Doctoral thesis: University of South Africa.
- Mtumane, Z. 2004. *Kungathintelwa Njani Ukufa Kwabakhwetha?* Alice: Lovedale Press.
- Qangule, Z. S. 1979. A study of theme and technique in the creative works of S.E.K.L.N. Mqhayi. Unpublished Doctoral thesis: University of Cape Town.
- Rooney, K. 1999. *Encarta World English Dictionary*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- Soga, T.B. 1989. *Intlalo kaXhosa*. Lovedale Press: Alice.

West, M. 1976. *Abantu: An Introduction to Black People of South Africa*. Cape Town: Maskew
Miller Longman.