


# Perichoresis and Ubuntu within the African Christian context



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This article is about the juxtaposition of the notion of perichoresis in the work and theology of the Cappadocian Fathers and the notion of Ubuntu in the African Traditional Religion (ATR). Perichoresis was a result of an attempt to understand and to resolve the relationships within the Trinity. The issue at hand was how to make sense between the one and the many at the same time. The Cappadocian Fathers understood the oneness of God as unity in plurality, not a singularity. One Ousia and three hypostases were based on the understanding of the relationships within the trinity. The question of three yet one God (the church in Jerusalem continued worship of God the Father and Jesus Christ in the Power of the Holy Spirit), the apostles according to the information we have never question nor try to resolve the position and status of Jesus within the oneness. It appears as though they celebrated the tension rather than resolving it. They heard from Jesus, who said to them 'you believe in God believe also in me' and 'if you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him ... whoever has seen me has seen the Father'. They also heard him when he said 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me'. The article is going to investigate and analyse the two notions, Perichoresis and Ubuntu, within the African Christian context. Yet there is a tension between Jesus and the ancestors. Can this tension be resolved? The notion of Ubuntu is based upon the understanding that a person becomes fully a person in the presence of other persons. It is a notion that deals with the relationships from an individual to the community and from physical to spiritual perspectives. The article shall also attempt to analyse any categories of thinking that are within the ATR that may better explain the relationship within the Trinity.

## Introduction

The Early Church was faced with the challenge about the role and position of Jesus Christ within the trinity. Jesus' deity was questioned and there was a need to resolve that. The church came to conclusion after a lot of debates and controversy that Jesus is divine. Being divine means that human beings within the Christian tradition do worship Jesus as God. In the African Traditional Religion (ATR), there is a claim that they worship the same God of Christianity. The question is, does Jesus have the same position in ATR as in Christianity. Is Jesus in the same position as the ancestors? Both concepts deal with relationships: the relationship within the Trinity and the African relationships about how one becomes a human in the presence of others. Yet within the African understanding, the relationships also include the ancestors. The relationship within the ATR goes beyond death.

The article analyses the concept of Perichoresis as viewed by the Cappadocian Church fathers and also the African understanding of Ubuntu. The interpretation of Perichoresis is viewed from the position of Greek philosophy, while Ubuntu is viewed from the cultural approach.

## Problems with Perichoresis

Perichoresis (or *circumincession*) according to the Catholic Encyclopaedia (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01296a.htm>) is the term that was used by the Church Fathers, first by Gregory of Nazianzus and later John of Damascus explored the term further. The word 'perichoresis' (*circumincession*) refers to the mutual interpenetration and indwelling within the threefold nature of the Trinity: God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Catholic Encyclopaedia (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01296a.htm>) explains the word as based in homo-ousia, which refers to intercommunication and unconfused and inseparable nature. But the word must not be confused with co-inherence (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01296a.htm>), which refers to the two natures of Jesus Christ.

**Note:** This article is a reworked version of aspects from the PhD thesis of Jele S. Manganyi, titled 'Church and society: The value of perichoresis in understanding ubuntu with special reference to John Zizioulas', in the Department of Dogmatics and Christian Ethics, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria with Prof Johan Buitendag as supervisor.

Perichoresis can refer to the Trinity and to incarnation. Crisp (2005:119) states that 'Perichoresis is the notion that the two natures of Christ and the persons of the Trinity somehow interpenetrate one another, yet without confusion of substance or commingling of nature'. Crisp's (2005:120) paper is an attempt to make sense of these two applications of the doctrine of Perichoresis to the incarnation and Trinity. It is well noticed by Crisp that it is impossible to have a precise analysis of Perichoresis with regards to the hypostatic union or the ontology of the Trinity because of the fact that the Trinity and incarnation are divine mysteries. For this reason, the issue needs to be approached with respect and humility.

## Nature Perichoresis

Crisp (2005:130) says that 'nature-Perichoresis involves an asymmetrical relation between the two natures of Christ'. Thus, the divine nature of Christ interpenetrates his human nature without confusion and without being mingled with it. The human nature does not interpenetrate the divine. Just as the divine nature interpenetrates the whole of creation, sustaining it and upholding it at each moment of its continued existence, the divine nature of Christ interpenetrates the human nature of Christ, upholding and sustaining it at each moment of its existence.

## Ubuntu

Some comments have been made regarding the concept of *Ubuntu* and what it is. Here the discussion is carried out within the context of community and communion. The question is how does the notion of *Ubuntu* relate to ATR and how can it benefit the discussion of the doctrine of trinity. God says to Abraham, 'I will make you ...'. This may call both the human part and the spiritual one in the making of the person. The question is how we connect between the making of a person through *Ubuntu* and that of God? To be able to respond, there are some issues to be dealt with in order to discuss the concept in greater detail.

Shutte (2001:2) in his book entitled *Ubuntu an ethic for a new South Africa* states that his concern is that the humanity of all South Africans can develop and flourish. For him *Ubuntu* means humanity. He further explains that the concept of *Ubuntu* embodies an understanding of what is necessary for human beings to grow and find fulfilment. Gaylard (2004:266) links the concept *Ubuntu* with humanism, which has an impact on western thought. He says that its core idea is that human beings possess a value and dignity in themselves as human beings. Muriithi (2007:277), from the position of human rights says 'there are rich traditions on the African continent founded on the notion of human dignity and humanness'.

Shutte (2001:3) views *Ubuntu* as a solution to the results that were caused by the policies of apartheid. He points out that apartheid is a key idea in separation, separate development and development through separation. In contrast with the policies of apartheid, for the concept of *Ubuntu* a person becomes a person in the presence of others. *Ubuntu* in the

context of the discussion here is viewed as a building block of relationships and can further be a concept that can help to maintain relationships. *Ubuntu* in times of apartheid kept the oppressed united for a common cause. It may also be a concept that can assist in understanding why people are held in higher esteem than programmes, projects, plans or schedules (O'Donovan 2000:7). O'Donovan explains that within the African context one can be forgiven for coming late for a scheduled appointment, but it is a serious offence to overlook the feelings or sensitivity of another person in a conversation. Therefore, any policy or structure which separated a person from his or her community in an African context should be viewed as an enemy or something evil.

## Reflection on the Cappadocian Fathers

Starting with Basil, Beeley (2010:91) points out that he was associated with Eustathius of Sebaste, who was Basil's spiritual mentor in the 360s. Eustathius, around 370s, played an influential role to a group that was called the Pneumatomachians. The Pneumatomachians were a heretical sect that began to have an impact during the latter half of the fourth and the beginning of the 5th century. Macedonius is regarded as the founder of this heretical sect. Macedonius denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed defended the homo-ousion of the Son with words like 'from the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of light and God of God'. But of the Holy Spirit the Creed just said 'we believe in the Holy Spirit', without any qualification. In the absence of any qualifying words for the Holy Spirit, the Macedonians took advantage, claiming that he was not divine. Athanasius in 362 AD as well as Basil in 374 AD began to condemn the Pneumatomachians. Both Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa wrote against this sect. It seems from the time of Basil to the present time, theologians are debating whether Basil did move completely away from the Pneumatomachians or not. The shift from being a *homo-ousian* to being a *homo-ousian*. Of course, this also depends on one's own intention; people may fabricate their own interpretation rather than extracting a sound interpretation. Around 360 AD, Basil had to deal with the 'radical subordinationism' of Eunomius (Beeley 2010:92). Eunomius claimed that the Holy Spirit is third in nature to the Father and the Son and is a creature. As it was stated in the last chapter concerning the position of the Holy Spirit by the Cappadocian Fathers, Beeley says that Eunomius agrees that the Spirit is third in rank in dignity after the Father and the Son. Basil denied that the Holy Spirit is third in nature to them and a creature. Basil as seen by Beeley concluded that 'the Spirit is divine in nature, infinite in greatness, mighty in works and good in blessings'. Not only is the Spirit holy and good in himself but just like the Son he is in communion with both the Father and the Son and they were all together before the beginning of time. This communion is described with words like 'which dwells with', 'inseparable' in 'union' and 'unity'. However, Beeley (2010:93) noticed that Basil 'does not say that the Spirit possesses the same nature as the Father and the Son'. Basil does not share the homo-ousion ontology of Athanasius, still less that of his

brother Gregory of Nyssa or Augustine. Basil is also seen by Beeley (2010:94) as stating the Spirit's divinity chiefly in its self – subsistent goodness and life rather than in its possession of the goodness and life of God the Father.

Beeley (2010:95) has some problems and limitations about Basil's position as stated above: He is 'not clear about the Spirit's nature and divinity'. Another pitfall is that when the Son is compared to the Holy Spirit, it seems as if Basil puts more emphasis on the Son than on the Holy Spirit. Basil is seen deliberating more on the communion between the Father and the Son, while that of the Holy Spirit is implied indirectly. He is blamed for his language of essence for the Spirit and that he does not call the Spirit 'like the Father'. This kind of language is regarded as that of *homoiousian*. Words like begotten are used lightly in regard to the Father and Son but none for the Holy Spirit. Beeley observes that in *De Spiritu Sancto* Basil argues that it is better to say the Spirit dwells 'with' the Father and Son, rather than 'in' them. Thus, Basil had said too little about the Spirit's relation of origin to God the Father.

Beeley's (2010:97) reflection on Basil focuses on the work of sanctification and asceticism. Basil perceives the Holy Spirit as more of a helper with Christian sanctification than the actual cause thereof. The Spirit is referred to as some catalyst or agent that mixes with the soul like dye in wool or heat in iron, which causes sins to manifest and the iron to be purified. Though on the other hand Basil makes a turnaround and states that the Spirit will not mix with the unworthy, but only with those who have already been purified.

Reflecting on Gregory of Nazianzus, Beeley (2010:99) observes that Gregory specifically articulated on the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Beeley makes it clear that his readers have to notice how Gregory of Nazianzus differs from Basil, especially in regards to the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Beeley already revealed about their friendship and they were not automatically identical or in agreement in all matters. Beeley continues his evaluation and states that Gregory of Nazianzus' pneumatology is distinct from Basil's in several key aspects, such as their famous disagreement on whether or not to call the Spirit God.

Gregory of Nazianzus, as recognised by Beeley (2010:101), believed that the divinity of the Son and the Spirit is the same as that of the Father. Gregory of Nazianzus is accredited to deem more on the Godhead as the monarchic rather than a generic. Because the Father eternally conveys his divinity to the Son and the Spirit in generating them, Beeley points out that Gregory of Nazianzus can affirm that the Spirit is consubstantial (*homoousion*) with the Father. Thus, it can be concluded that Gregory of Nazianzus was persuaded of the idea of consubstantiality (*homoousion*) with the Father. It can be further concluded that Gregory of Nazianzus was enthusiastic about the consubstantiality of the Holy Spirit with the Father and that is what distinguished him from Basil. Beeley (2010:102) credits Gregory of Nazianzus with being the first to define the Spirit mode of generation

specifically as a 'procession or going forth' from God the Father, as distinct from the Son's begetting. Gregory of Nazianzus maintains the only begotten of the Son, but when he uses the term 'procession' from the Father, it means the Holy Spirit shares his divinity with the Father. According to Beeley (2010:102), Gregory of Nazianzus distinguishes the Father from the Son (because their generations are different) by using 'procession' or 'going forth'.

As Beeley states, the Cappadocian Fathers must not be regarded as a unit because there are some distinguishing factors. Beeley (2010:104) argues that the difference between Gregory of Nazianzus' theological method and that of Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, who believed that the Biblical proof of the Spirit can be objectively foundational, is significant and far-reaching. Basil insinuates that purification depends on the ability of human beings to fight for purity, but Gregory of Nazianzus insisted that purification is based on the power of the Holy Spirit alone. Beeley regards Gregory of Nazianzus as having a clear and more robust doctrine of grace and that suggests that his pneumatology is more clearly soteriological.

Beeley (2010:104) draws the conclusion that Gregory of Nazianzus offers the strongest and most comprehensive doctrine of the Spirit among the three Cappadocians and that Gregory of Nazianzus has a stronger sense of the reality of the knowledge of God and the Holy Spirit than any other 4th-century theologian.

Beeley's (2010:105) judge Gregory of Nyssa's pneumatology on the whole as less substantial than either Basil's or Gregory of Nazianzus' pneumatology. In evaluation, Gregory of Nyssa was marked as being more closely associated with the Antiochene network of Mellitus than either Basil or Gregory of Nazianzus. The link with the Antiochene had an influence on Gregory of Nyssa's Christology. Beeley (2010:106) indicates that Gregory of Nyssa paid little attention to the definition of the Spirit's procession. Another important reflection is that after the death of Basil, Gregory of Nyssa started confessing that the Spirit is God and consubstantial with the Father. Beeley also points out that Gregory of Nyssa departs from Basil in confessing that the Spirit exists and works along with the Father and the Son.

## The Cappadocians and the future of pneumatology

Beeley (2010:108) gives preference to Gregory of Nazianzus, claiming that he stands out as the premier theologian of the Spirit in the 4th century and one of the main authorities in all of Christian Tradition. Beeley views Basil as more Trinitarian and ascetically more robust than both the Gregory's. He judges Gregory of Nyssa's pneumatology as having diminished because of his Platonist metaphysics and spirituality. As stated above, when one engages with Cappadocian pneumatology, Beeley (2010:108) recommends that it is best to start with Gregory of Nazianzus and be complemented with 'harmonious' elements from Basil and Gregory of Nyssa. Beeley also notices that the Nicene or

Constantinopolitan Creed affirms that the Holy Spirit is worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son but silent on him being God, or of one being, consubstantial with the Father. Therefore, Beeley's view is that the language of the Creed reflects the doctrine of Basil and Gregory of Nyssa more than that of Gregory of Nazianzus or that of Athanasius.

## The union of God and man in Jesus Christ

Wesche (1984:83) focuses and reflects on Gregory of Nazianzus' engagement with the two natures of Jesus Christ. The challenge that had faced the church Fathers was:

the matter of duality of natures in one person; the section in the analysis of Gregory of Nazianzus of the union of the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ and the theological insight which is evinced in his solution forms the subject of this study. (p. 84)

Gregory of Nazianzus was responding to Apollinaris and the Antiochenes. For Apollinaris, the term *hypostasis* is the same as *prosopon* and he preferred *prosopon* when dealing with the Trinity. Thus, Apollinaris holds that the concept of nature governs the concept of person.

In Moses' time, God wanted a tabernacle so that he might dwell among his people. In Jesus, Who is one with the Father, God came to human beings as a human being and dwelt with them as a human being. It was God reaching out to his people to reconcile the world to him. The question is whether nature or the person of Jesus Christ was more influential in this. In the article of Wesche (1984), it seems that Gregory of Nazianzus was changing the terms used by Apollinaris to give a more accurate setting. Wesche (1984:85) points out that Apollinaris' notion of the relationship between nature and person, the significance of which, lies not so much in that they are improperly distinguished but in that essence or nature possesses the individual person. The problem is that the person subordinate to nature becomes constrained within the limits of nature. The interpretation of Apollinaris by Wesche is that he can only conceive *prosopon* to be composed of one *ousia*, one nature, precisely because *prosopon* was derived out of *ousia*. If Christ had two complete natures, he would be two *prosopoi*, two *hypostases* and two persons.

Jesus was fully God and fully human. The two natures accommodated each other, for that reason neither nature was denied the space of expression at the expense of the other. Being confronted by the reality of human sin and the incarnation, the Church Fathers had to respond to the reality of the two natures (divine and human) and how they had an impact on the person. Wesche's (1984:93) discernment of Gregory of Nazianzus on the two natures of Christ is that the relationship of God and man means that at the deepest ontological level there can be full communion between God and man. Jesus Christ, who is one with the Father in the incarnation, was two natures converged into one person in order that God may bring humanity into His oneness. Jesus is from three *hypostases* of one *ousia*, to one *hypostasis* of two *ousia*, yet him being a person did not subordinate to nature.

Therefore, Wesche (1984:94) perceived that Gregory of Nazianzus on the ontological level set the *hypostasis* in agreement with the philosophical distinctions made in the 6th century where the hypostasis is not the product of nature. It is that in which nature exists, the very principle of its existence.

## The role of philosophy

Historical events, especially the Exodus, the journey to the Promised Land, the receiving of the Law and the covenant made between God and Israel, created a way of thinking and specific vocabulary for Israel. These historical events also set a way of life for Israel. For this reason, Israel does not speculate about the being of God because the beginning of all wisdom is to fear the Lord. According to Pryor (2005:online np), Israel does their theology by the way they worship. The highest form of worship is to study the law that God commanded in order to obey him. Although Africans don't have the historical part of God's revelation, they too don't ask if God exists. It is an uncontested given. After many years after the Exodus, God was still saying to the Israelites: 'that He is the God who took them out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery' (Jude 6:8; 1 Sm 10:18; Mi 6:4). The church at the beginning from the Judaistic background was able to articulate the event of Jesus Christ based on the historical background of Israel. But when the gospel moved away from the Jewish setting to a Hellenised world, the same truth had to be told but in a Greek setting.

The Hellenised world was the world of Roman and Greek gods and philosophy. Christianity took the Jewish God out of the holy place in Jerusalem to the ends of the world. Christianity had to respond to a new setting of many gods and philosophy. Zizioulas (1995:50) argues that a careful study of the Cappadocian Fathers reveals that they were as obsessed with Greek philosophy as those who were heretics. He continues to explain that the doctrine of the Trinity offered the occasion to the Cappadocians to express their distance from Platonism both explicitly and implicitly and thus introduce a new philosophy.

The Cappadocians used terms like 'the cause of divine existence is the Father' and developed the *homo-ousios* further to emphasise the position of the Father as the cause of divine being. Zizioulas (1995:51) points out that 'by making the Father the only cause of divine existence the Cappadocian Fathers aimed at understanding freedom in ontology, something that Greek philosophy had never done before'.

Zizioulas (1995:49) compared the term (Of the essence of the Father) used by Athanasius in the Nicene Creed with that of Gregory of Nazianzus in the Creed of Constantinople (Being of one substance with the Father), especially on the substance or essence of God the Father one with the Son:

*The English translations: Of the Nicene Creed says*

*Of the essence of the Father*

*or*

*Of the same substance as the Father*



The translations: *Of the Constantinopolitan Creed is:*

*Being of one substance with the Father*

*or*

*Of one essence with the Father*

Zizioulas (1995:51) indicates that Gregory of Nazianzus, who was chairperson during the Council of Constantinople, changed the wording of the Creed of Nicene where it says 'from the substance of the Father' (*Ek Tes Ousias Tou Patros*) to 'from the Father' (*Ek Tou Patros*). In other words, the Son is not from the substance but from the person who is the Father.

The other term that was employed by the Greek Fathers is *monarchia* in the explanation of the oneness of God. Zizioulas (1995:52) explains that 'the one *arche* in God came to be understood ontologically, that is in terms of origin of being, and was attached to the person of the Father'. Zizioulas says as pointed out before, 'one God' referred to the person of the Father rather than to one substance. It is clear that the emphasis of the Greek Fathers lies on the 'person'. Zizioulas (1995) continues to add that:

if we wish to follow the Cappadocians in their understanding of the Trinity in relation to monotheism we must adopt an ontology which is based on personhood, that is on the unity or openness emerging from relationship, and not of substance, that is of the self-existent and in the final analysis individualistic being. (p. 52)

Zizioulas (1995:52) regards the Cappadocian Fathers as 'revolutionary thinkers in the history of philosophy'. The Greek philosophers gave priority to the one over the many. Zizioulas explains that on the theological level, the predominant pagan Greek philosophy at the time of the Cappadocian Fathers, namely Neoplatonism, had identified the one God himself, considering the multiplicity of beings, the many, to be emanations basically of a degrading nature, so that the return to the one through the recollection of the soul was thought to be the purpose and aim of all existence. Before Philo and the influence of Platonism and Neoplatonism concerning the priority of the 'one' over the 'many', one needs also to consider the Shema where there is one of Judaism. In Jewish Theology, there is only Holy God and besides him there is no other. The Cappadocian Fathers had to harmonise the:

Jewish oneness what the Christian had done in worship of that one God alongside Jesus in that oneness with the philosophical interpretation answering philosophical questions and re-appropriating that oneness of God in the light of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. (Zizioulas 1995:52)

They re-appropriate the one by giving priority to the person rather than to nature. The one being regarded is the cause and the source of the 'many' (Trinity). The Cappadocians were writing their own philosophy as Zizioulas (1995:53) remarked instead of following the classical Greek thinking 'where human in all diversity and plurality of persons was subject to nature because nature or substance always preceded the person'. In the philosophy of the Cappadocians, any significance is the one who gives human beings their

significance in existence. That may also mean the life of a human being cannot be based on the interpretations of the stars but on the relationship with God. That is freedom.

## On the anthropological consequences

Human beings were created by God the Father in the image of God. Because he or she has been created, he or she lives life within the limitations of a creature but that life is lived according to the will of God. There is the being as nature and the being as a person. Zizioulas (1995:55) gives clarity that 'the distinction made by the Cappadocians Fathers between nature and person or mode of existence needs to be considered in order to understand the *imago Dei*'. One had to consider that nature stood for what human beings live for and the person stood for the how of life. The human nature was regarded as passing, leading an individual to decomposition and to death. But the person was regarded as God's image to live life being free from the substance being united with God. The kind of life one lives is based on the person, not nature, as an image of God living as God's will leads towards glorification.

Paul might have been influenced by this understanding when writing the letter to the Romans while he was at Corinth: 'o wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death' (Rm 7:24). He continued to state that those who are in Christ Jesus must not walk according to the flesh but after the Spirit. The emphasis is the freedom of the person from nature because the person precedes nature. It's free from nature because the person is united with the Father by the Spirit.

Zizioulas (1995:56) draws the following conclusion from the discussion and reflection on the philosophical approach by the Cappadocian Fathers:

- The person is not a secondary but a primary and absolute notion in existence. The person cannot be sacrificed or subjected to any ideal, to any moral or natural order or to any expediency or objective even of the most sacred kind. Human being as a person must assume absolute freedom from the environment. Human being was not created for the environment but the environment to serve the person.
- The person cannot exist in isolation. God is not alone, he is in communion. God is not singular because no one can love without an object to love. God is love and love is not a feeling, but it is a relationship. In the words of Zizioulas (1995:56), love is a free submission to the will of another. He continues to say it is the other and our relationship with him that gives us our identity, our otherness, making us to be persons, for by being an inseparable part of a relationship that matters ontologically we emerge as unique and irreplaceable entities. As a person, you exist as long as you love and you are loved. This has a similar understanding as the African concept of Ubuntu (humanity) that says 'I am because of others'.

- The person is something unique and unrepeatable. Nature is not unique only when nature is hypostatic or personal, as is the case with God, who exists truly and eternally.

## Ubuntu in African philosophy

Some of African opinions and ideologies are based on the life lived on a day-to-day basis. Not that concepts and ideologies are not valued but because they had to be linked in practical life. Gathogo (2008:40) maintains the view that in Africa an ideal person is primarily hospitable. And that this hospitality is extended to all friends, foes and strangers.

What is African hospitality? According to Gathogo (2008:42), 'African hospitality can be defined as that extension of generosity, giving freely without strings attached'. History can tell how Africans in most part of the continent warmly accepted missionaries. No matter what the treatment by Europeans by government or by the church, Africans continued to embrace Christianity. Africans stood against colonialism and apartheid yet remained hospitable. They were ready to offer themselves to Christianity in the presence of much hostility based on systems that were evil. The understanding by Gathogo (2008:42) is that 'the hospitality can also be seen as an unconditional readiness to share'. He continues to say that the sharing has to be social and religious in scope. The practical part of the philosophy is seen in a willingness to give, to help, to assist, to love and to carry one another's burden without necessarily putting profit or reward as the driving force. As a way of life not theoretical, Gathogo (2008:43) says 'the concept of hospitality is too wide and that, like African religion, it permeates all spheres of African life'. It is his thoughts that African hospitality needed to be considered as a powerful tool for gluing the community.

Shutte (2001) first viewed an individual as being part of the community. Africans become human or a person because they belong to a community. As the saying goes, '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*' [a person is a person because of others], 'in other words one does not come into fullness of becoming in the absence of others'. It is by belonging to the community that Africans become themselves and where they find their identity. Shutte (2001:9) also explains that the community is not opposed to the individual.

Within the community an individual can be viewed as receiving a gift of personhood from other persons. Shutte (2001:12) says 'community as an interpersonal network of relationships'. He believes that reality in traditional African thought 'is not seen as a world of things but as a field of forces interacting'. Here Shutte (2001) seems to concur with Ejizu (2008) when he talks about the visible and invisible realities of life. He mentions the cosmos as a three-tiered structure where the heaven is above that where God the creator is, while on the world beneath are where the ancestors and other spirits are. Between the world above and the world beneath there are human beings. So Shutte (2001:12) says 'in this universal field humanity occupied the central place'.

African world view assists in understanding this notion of *Ubuntu*. World view in Africa is one of the aspects that many scholars and writers identified as a key to understanding Africa and Africans. World view has been linked to religion, politics and even issues of identity. As a result, issues of culture, values and customs seem to be building blocks of being an African. All these are viewed as components in developing the self and issues of relationships. Shutte (2001:23) explains that 'because the self exists only in relationship with others there are as many sides to the self as there are relationships'. He says, in a relationship an African realises a different part of himself or herself. So the life of an African is within a context of interacting with forces visible and invisible and continues to make relationships whatever he or she becomes.

When an African is hospitable and accommodating those who are in need and begins to form a relationship within the context of a community, then an individual becomes fully a person. Shutte (2001) says:

not the will of the majority but the will of the community should be realised even in a classless society, African tradition is still afraid of solitude and close individuality. (p. 24)

There is another view which Shutte (2001) explains, at the beginning of life where the issue of relationships are not yet developed, at that moment an African is not yet a person at all. He says an African only becomes fully human when he or she is included in a relationship with others. This is where the rituals of development of an African play a role.

Each individual member of the community according to Shutte (2001:27) sees the community as themselves as one with them in character and identity. When an African beholds another person, especially another African, it is like he or she is standing before the mirror. There is so much about each individual in another, for that reason there is no room for separation between the individual and the community, and all the relationships and transaction between individual members and community as a whole remain fully personal. The unity and the oneness is so deep that Shutte (2001) expresses it by using the metaphor of breathing together at a level where Africans have one breath, one spirit and one heart. It can be regarded as a community, a unity of a uniquely personal kind. The picture painted here can be a precious instrument to support Africans to construe the unity and the relationship within the trinity.

O'Donovan (2000:13) says that when African people begin to embrace western culture and values, they find that these values have the negative effect of dividing and separating the community instead of producing unity and co-operation. The word embrace may not tell the entire story because for some they have had to embrace to survive. In the context where one had lost the power to determine his or her own destiny, without land the only way for some was to embrace western culture. Saayman (1990:28) can testify that 'the nineteenth century missionaries equated Christianity with western culture and civilisation as a result of this conviction

South Africa was westernised at the same time as it was Christianised'. O'Donovan (2000) may view Africans as embracing western culture; meanwhile, Saayman (1990) saw it as something imposed upon them through the process of civilisation and colonisation. Yet Gathogo (2008) may argue that Africans had to embrace western culture because it is within them, because Africans are hospitable and that this hospitality is ideally extended to all people: friends, foes and strangers.

When Africans embraced western culture, they feared that they may turn away from the African ancestors. No matter where Africans go, they don't leave ancestors behind. O'Donovan (2000:57) says 'in the cities for an African, life can be of intense isolation, fear, loneliness and difficulty outside the community which is a place of belonging'. O'Donovan (2000:58) views the cities as having a negative impact on an African because 'the security of a predictable life among their own people has been replaced by an unpredictable, insecure and often dangerous life among strangers who seem to care only for themselves'. Maybe the life in the cities may become a test to the concept of hospitality and *Ubuntu*. Because Africans are hospitable, being away from the community of origin the African can belong no matter where he or she may be. The challenge is that the community has to be closer to the land of the ancestors and also closer to the graves for the sake of rituals and sacrifices.

## Communion in African traditional religion

The notion of communion in ATR may be viewed within the context of the African people. Yet there is a need to find the building blocks or components of the communion within ATR. It seems the community may give us light to the notion of communion. Ejizu's (2008) work is titled 'African traditional religions and the promotion of community-living in Africa'. In his view, 'the sense of community and human living are highly cherished values of traditional African life'. It was stated by Mbiti (1969) that Africans are notoriously religious in all that they do. Sankey (1994) is from the position that:

the church is like an African clan, he says incarnation of the gospel does not only involve a relationship between Christian revelation and culture, it requires a movement towards a transformed culture that is both Christian and African. (p. 437)

At the same time, Phelps' (2000:673) contribution based on his work entitled 'Communion ecclesiology and black liberation theology' says that 'the challenge of black liberation theology makes clear that the final goal of liberation theology is identical with the ultimate goal of communion'.

Ejizu (2008) argues that for traditional Africans, the community is basically sacred rather than secular and surrounded by several religious forms and symbols. There are communities in the rural areas where an African seems to identify that their place of belonging and the community in the urban area is for economic reasons, and he or she is so

attached to the rural area for spiritual reasons. According to Ejizu (2008), people generally return to their villages from their residence in the cities from time to time to join members of their village community to celebrate important rituals and cultural events like initiation, title-taking or festivals. Another point which is connected to the issue of community is the land and the ancestors. In most African rural areas, the king owns the land and the land owns the people. There are places called *Ga-mphahlele*, *Ga-masemola* or *Ga-sekhukhune*. These places are called by the names of the chiefs and kings because the land belongs to the chief or king on behalf of the people and the ancestors.

## African community as a unity

Ejizu (2008) presents the community as:

a unity of two worlds the invisible and the visible. The visible is the physical world of the living today and the invisible is the spiritual world of the ancestors, divinities and the souls of children yet to be born.

The unity of the invisible and the visible has some indication of human relationships both physical and spiritual. Ejizu (2008) says the networks of relationships among human beings are remarkably extended and deep.

Because the spiritual world is called by Ejizu (2008) as the invisible world, the ancestors are called the invisible members of the family. The relationship within the family of brothers and sisters with a close connection to the parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, nephews and nieces is known as the extended family. Yet the relationships go beyond the other side of the grave, it is extended to the ancestors, the invisible members of the family. Shutte (2001:29) says that the 'ancestors and spiritual beings are powerful and by far superior to human beings'. Shutte further explains that they continue to exert an influence on the living.

In Africa this understanding suggests that relationships in Africa are so important that they go further than the grave. O'Donovan (2000:7) states that 'people are held in higher esteem than programmes, projects, plans or schedules'. Most writers like O'Donovan (2000:9) say 'Africans tend to be more holistic than analytical and more group oriented than individualistic'. The emphasis may not be on the right connection in relationship but on the quality of relationships. The question in Africa according to O'Donovan is what is good for our community. It is for this community, the extended family, the clan or tribe. Therefore, what is good for the community implies the rightness of that thing.

## Enhancing the community ideal

Ejizu (2008) points out some activities that are practised in order to enhance the community ideal. He points out the naming ceremonies where the community comes together to give a child a name. Ejizu (2008) explains that 'elders usually try to convey significant life-experiences of parents or community as well as their important aspirations in the



names they give to babies during the naming ceremony'. The naming is part of their religion and naming ceremonies and initiation always take place within the context of ritual performances. It is stated and known that many traditional African names have meaning and are symbolic. According to Ejizu (2008), 'most of the African names imply values that relate to and enhance community consciousness in traditional African societies'.

The traditional prayer is pointed by Ejizu (2008) as playing an equally important role in the promotion of the sense of community. He further indicates that the elder in most traditional societies begins the day by offering a prayer and supplications for himself, members of the kindred and the entire community:

The prayer is directed to the ancestors, divinities and other spiritual beings for his health, that of his family, for progress of members of the lineage, both the young and the old, for peace and harmony, for protection from the attack of evil forces, sorcerers and witches, and finally for the elimination of his enemies and evil doers in this community.

## The worship of ancestors

African theologians like Seoka (1997) and Mtetwa (1996) argue that the terminology of ancestral worship is not African. Their arguments are based on the terms used in Africa when the events or rituals are directed to the ancestors. Seoka (1997) and Mtetwa (1996) prefer to use terms like the 'service of our father' or 'mother'. Zulu (2002) questions the use of the term 'worship'. Kiernan (1995) explains that:

the living communicate with the dead by regular ritual sacrifice and invocation, the priest or official which is the family head or the senior group representative, while ancestors of large groups are being addressed by the term ritual sacrifice has an idea of an animal killing. (p. 22)

Kiernan (1995:23) claims that 'the type of an animal to be slaughtered varies according to economic circumstances which will be accompanied by a beer or grain offering'. These rituals according to Mndende (2006:161) 'revive relationships within the community and between the living and the ancestors'. It is also a way to revive the relationship between the physical world and spiritual world.

Mbiti (1969:1) says 'Africans are notoriously religious so much so that religion permeates permanently into all departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it'. Mndende (2006:161) is in agreement with Mbiti (1969) when he said:

religion is part of the fable of society; it is deeply ingrained in social life, and it is impossible to isolate and study it as a distinct phenomenal, therefore when members of a family clan gather together in a sacrificial ritual for the ancestors that is a religious activity in honour to an ancestor or ancestors.

Another point to be considered is the position of the ancestors between human beings and God. First Moila (1987) gives us some names that are used by Africans in reference to God.

In addition to the known names like *Modimo Xikwembu*, *uNkulunkulu* Moila (1987:23) includes others like 'Kgobeans, *Lebepe and Khutsoane*'. These names are largely used by the people who speak Northern Sotho, especially those who are from Sekhukhune. Moila (1987) further explains that *Kgobeane* comes from *kgobe* meaning son of *Kgobe*. He says it is not clear what *Lebepe and Khutsoane* mean. God is also known as *Mmopa-Batho* [the creator of human kind] and *Motlhodi* [Creator or the Initiator]. According to Moila (1987), these names of creators are an influence from Christianity. Moila (1987) and some African theologians and African scholars are in agreement that the ancestors have a position of power higher than human beings and which is closer to that of God. Donders (1986:11) says that all Africans' ideas of God as the creator are not the same as Christian's ideas about God as the creator. Africans believed that human beings came out from a hole in the ground, maybe this is the reason why sometimes the ancestors are being referred as the ones from below or ground. When praying to the ancestors, Africans pour water, beer or blood on the ground and claim it is for the ones from the ground. For this reason, Moila (1987) is correct to say to worship God as creator in Africa is an influence from Christianity.

Turaki (1999:86) is aware of the fact that even though Africans generally have an awareness and belief in the Supreme Being, the truth is, this Supreme Being is not known to have been exclusively worshipped by traditional Africans. The reason why God is remote according to Turaki (1999:162) 'is that human beings had done something which offended God'. There are some scholars like Turaki (1999) who argue that Africa never had altars or temples for the Supreme Being. Some argue that because Africa has names for God this suggests that there is worship directed to the Supreme Being. But the means to approach the Supreme Beings is through what Turaki and others call intermediate directions. Mbiti (1969) says:

it is a widespread feeling among many African people that man should not or cannot approach God alone or directly, but that he must do so through the mediation of a special person or other beings. (p. 68)

Mbiti (1969) explains further that the living-dead occupy the ontological position between the spirits and human beings and between God and human beings.

'Africans are notoriously religious in all that they do in life' but the challenge is how to define their relationship with God. The vacuum created a lack of ideas of who is God. In African languages, there are names for God or Supreme Being but there are no historical events that inform the names Africans have for God. There seemed to be no historical event of God's revelation. The African perceived a distance between them and God or the Supreme Being. The ancestors are closer to the African people while the Ancestors are regarded to be closer to God. When Africans offer sacrifices and prayers to the ancestors, it suggests that the ancestors have the ability to hear prayers but it is not clear what the prayers mean to the ancestors. Khathide (2003) who noted that:



deeply committed Christians faithfully attending church services on Sunday, praying to God who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, but in time of need or existential crisis, they turn to the local Shaman, Inyanga for healing, a diviner for guidance and to an exorcist, traditional or spiritual that is, for deliverance from spirit oppression. (p. 14)

Once more the words of Khathide (2003) suggest the closeness of Africans to their ancestors rather than to God or Supreme Being.

## Closing remarks

The African child from birth until death is introduced to a number of relationships: the relationship with the parents, with extended families and with the spiritual world through the ancestors. The evidence in the discussions suggests that Africans have a closer relationship with the ancestors than with Jesus Christ whom the Christians regard as the mediator between God or Supreme Being and humans. The involvement of ancestors in African life may imply that God has a lesser role in influencing African life. Yet some perceive that ATR is a preparation for the Gospel. This is the historical background of Africans who moved out of the missionary churches to churches that accommodate their African culture. It was like they were going back to what they were before encountering western missionaries, but they were going back as Christians. Yet it is not clear what it means, whether Africans would justify ATR using the categories and resources from Christianity or they would interpret Christianity using the ATR resources and categories of thinking.

The formation of the church is something that was new. This raises the question of the relationship between the Early Church Fathers and Africa. The Cappadocian church Fathers used the Greek resources to debate the nature and the position of Jesus in relation with the Father. The Greek culture was used as a tool, not as an authority. The debate about the nature of Jesus is no longer an issue. Jesus is Lord. A person is able to have a relationship with God the Father through our Lord Jesus and able to say Jesus is Lord by the power of the Holy Spirit. No one is born into Christianity, it is a choice. It is by faith in the Son of the living God.

Relationship could be more like a covenant or contract. Jesus is the only way into the presence of God by faith. Within the ATR, one is born into that relationship. From birth, one is ushered in into the human and spiritual relationship. It is still not clear about the position of the ancestors. They cannot be shared to others because they are confined to one family, a challenge to the African theologians to come with a clear position about the role of the ancestors within the Christian faith.

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### Authors' contributions

Both authors equally contributed to the research and writing of this article.

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