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ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN MADAGASCAR: AN ADVENTIST PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

An important aspect of the Malagasy communal life is summarized in this old saying used particularly by the elderly people:

We live under the same roof
We lay in the same tomb!

This saying implies that any member of the family is not allowed to break its rules. The other implication is that it does not tolerate any non-participation in traditional practices. If a member dares go against the tradition, such a person would be rejected, and would lose all the rights and prerogatives of the members of the circle.¹ It is the fear of this rejection that brings rejection or syncretisation of the gospel message.

This paper addresses the issue of the ancestor worship as practiced in the ancestral exhumation in Madagascar and faced by the Adventist message and world view. According to many, it involves ancestor worship, if not an ancestor worship itself.² In this paper, the present writer will try to approach the subject within the framework of proper and critical contextualization of the gospel message. This will be done by first describing ancestor worship in Madagascar, by objectively evaluating the practice in the light of biblical practices and teachings, and then by providing a realistic and practical approach to it.

I. Ancestor worship in Madagascar: A survey

Definition

The "famadihana", literally "returning the dead", consists of exhuming the remains of the dead, wrapping them and returning them again to a family grave. It is normally a costly ceremony which takes place during the dry season (August and September) throughout Madagascar. While it is difficult to trace its origin, it was practiced a long time before Christianity was introduced to Madagascar, about a century and a half ago.

Exhumation is reserved for three categories of dead: (1) dead for repatriation, even within the territory of Madagascar, (2) dead buried in the courtyard of the tomb, because the tomb has been recently opened for burial, (3) old dead buried in the tomb to be exhumed.

Malagasy concept of the ancestor

Behind this practice lies the strong concept of the family tie: "not-separated family". In it, a family is the union of the ancestors and their still-living descendants.³ They are called "ancestors", first those from whom one descends, now dead, but they are also those who lived before us, or just the souls of those who lived before us.⁴ Their souls go to heaven, says Rajosefa, and now they have become saints.⁵ In other words, they have come to the stage of "living-dead".

Abandoned body and living spirit

In regard to the relationship between the body and the spirit of the dead, it is stated,

The spirit no longer needing the body lets it sleep and rot by abandoning it. It [the spirit] wants to be alone. However, it keeps all the characters of the deceased, which means that it has sympathy or grudges toward those people whom the person who died have hated or loved during his life.⁶

Although dead, they still participate in the activities of the living. At first glance, this could be described as an animistic form of traditional folk religions, in which things, beings, or phenomenon like thunder have souls. This spirit world is very real for them. But there seems to be more than that.

Ancestor and Creator

Rakotonirainy explains that the word "Razana" (Ra-za-na, translated into "ancestor"), is from "Za". And "Za" is the beginning of the word "Zanahary", the "Creator". He goes on to say that the people of old considered the "Razana" as the life-giver, and they rightly called the ancestors "Zanahary" or Creator.⁷

"Zanahary" ("ancestor") is actually made of two words: "Zana", an abbreviated form of "Razana", ("ancestor"), and "hary" (from "mahary", "to create"). Thus, "Razana" or "Zana" may be an shortened form of "Razanahary" or "Zanahary". If this is the case, "Razana" ("ancestor") has been equated with "Razanahary" or "Zanahary" ("Creator").

Says the tribe of the Bara: 'the dead ancestor becomes god [andriamanitra]'; says the tribe of the Betsimisaraka, 'the dead ancestor becomes creator [Zagn-Hary]'; says the tribe of Merina, '[the dead ancestor] becomes god [andriamanitra]. . .

Oh god! Oh creator! Oh ancestor . . . !⁸

Another name for God is "Andriamanitra" which is formed of two words "Andriana" (king, prince) and "Manitra" (who/which has good odour). When a king (or a prince) died, his people could not say that he smelled bad: his good odor remained. At his death, then, he became "andriamanitra" (which means to say "god").

It is often said that Malagasy people worshiped God (or gods) before the introduction of Christianity in Madagascar. This is attested by the fact that the divine titles were used long ago. The translators of the Malagasy Bible did not invent any new name or title for God. They retained these primitive titles in the Malagasy Bible, and it seems that their use has never been questioned until now. There is the possibility that the elders knew and believed in the Creator God who, they may have thought, was keeping himself aloof from His creature. This aloofness of God may have evoked the thought of considering the saintly ancestors, the life-giver-creators, as gods, and thus, worthy of worship.

However, some people have a slightly different belief. Xhi and Naa explain that for them, the dead ancestors are now with God, and their position gives them the prerogatives of interceding in favor of the living before God.⁹ So in prayer, they invoke the Creator, and then the ancestors, who are the liaison between man and the Creator.¹⁰

It appears then that ancestral exhumation is more than just a custom in the Malagasy culture. It involves ancestor worship. Rakotonirainy affirms it clearly and strongly, that before Christianity came, "Malagasy people worshiped their ancestors," and he goes on to say that in general, it continues until today.¹¹ And this worship is beyond doubt based on the belief of the immortality of the soul.

The roles of the ancestor

In the Malagasy beliefs there is a continuity between this earthly life and the afterlife. This implies also belief in the possibility of communication between the living and the dead.

First of all, these ancestors, now living-dead, were our life-givers. They gave us hands, long feet and made us human beings.¹²

As elders, the ancestors are counselors,¹³ and blessing-givers. These counsels consider future plans, and blessings may be received upon the invocation of the ancestors on the grave. They also may be given at home of the living, through dreams and visions. Their spirit is present and participates invisibly in all the activities of the family and community.¹⁴

Thirdly, the ancestors are intercessors. They are considered as a favorable medium to plead to God for his family.

However, people are very afraid of the dead because everything, not only blessings and favors, but also afflictions and misfortunes, comes from them. Common people dread these spirits more than they like them.¹⁵ The spirit of the ancestors has harmful objectives. In the words of Genep, it is "very dangerous".¹⁶ Thus the idea was born: they must be worshiped, and in a certain number of years after death, their exhumation takes place.

Outward manifestations of the belief on the immortality of the soul.

The beliefs on the immortality of the soul are demonstrated in the excessive desire to have a good funeral. A good funeral is preceded by having a good ancestral grave.

Family grave

Any speech during a funeral service, particularly in the high-plateau regions, must mention that the dead is leaving the wooden door and going to the stony door. The wall, the door, and the bed for the dead must be in stone. If a new grave was built for the great ancestor, it was inaugurated as "his house" during the exhumation and the transfer of his remains in it.¹⁷ Here surely lies the idea that this-earthly life is passing; only what happens after it lasts forever.

Funeral service

Consequently, great care is taken for the funeral. Not being buried in the ancestral cave to be gathered among his ancestors is considered as the worst of miseries for the living family.¹⁸ For the dead, not having a good funeral will affect his afterlife. Some say that the dead ancestors will not welcome him, neither his parents, nor his wife.¹⁹ Vig informs us that there were some important people who, at death, needed the company of their wives or their slaves, some of which were put to death in order to continue to serve their master.²⁰

But respect must also be shown, and a request must be addressed to the dead ancestors already in the grave, before opening their house. The well-respected person apologizes for disturbing them, and informs them that the family members and all the community have come to leave the newly dead with them. Then, he pleads with them to welcome their new living-dead-mate. Once the door is opened, everyone rushes into the grave to greet his ancestor, by touching it and asking,

"how are you"?²¹ The decision to exhume the remains of the ancestors is taken usually during the opening of the grave.

Involvement and Participation in ancestor worship and exhumation

Reasons and purposes for ancestor worship

Ancestor worship has mainly a religious aspect, growing out from the concept of the immortality of the soul, and the deification of the ancestors. They are capable of listening to and answering prayers; or interceding.

The emotional character of the practice finds its support in that the practitioners want to show love, respect, and honor to those who made them human beings. They were so attached to these ancestors while they were living that death could not break that attachment and relationship. Thus, the practice becomes a sacred duty.²²

At present, the social aspect is becoming more and more predominant for ancestral exhumation. There is the strong idea of "not-separated-though-extended" family. It is claimed that preserving the concept of "fihavanana", a typical Malagasy term for family tie and social relationship which is expressed in being at peace, and in good terms with others, is the motto. This concept, when demonstrated through the ceremony provides a practitioner with a highly prestigious status in the community.

Moreover, the practice of "atero k'alao" (give and receive) becomes a vicious circle for the once-practitioners. It stipulates as an unwritten but binding law: "invite to be invited." That means, that the guests at the ceremony are obliged to invite their hosts when they, in turn, will perform their own exhumation.

The rite of exhumation is carried out to please the ancestors.²³ This is a time when the family seeks to have their favor and to avoid their discontent in the future.

But ancestors may show their discontent by inflicting curses on the family. Sterility is believed to be the result of the non-observation of certain taboos that ignited the anger of the ancestors.²⁴ Poverty, death at a young age or sudden death strikes the family because it did not take care of its ancestors.²⁵ It is believed that by satisfying the demands of the ancestors by the worship and the rite, the family can be liberated from these curses.

Some expect a fulfillment of a vow from the ancestors as a condition.²⁶ When the vow is fulfilled, worship and exhumation take place.

The time

People get involved and participate in this practice when:

(1) the shrouds are torn away or rotten. Expectedly, shrouds will be rotten in a few years. However, the ceremony must always be held every three, five, or seven years. But sometimes, the family does not wait until a fixed date. An ancestor may appear in a vision or dream to the head of the family and states that he is cold and need to be rightly wrapped.²⁷

(2) a woman who died before her husband and was buried in her husband's family grave, when the latter wants to get married, is removed and transferred from there to her parents' grave.

(3) the remains of the dead are repatriated.

(4) a newly built family grave is inaugurated.

The role of the diviner

The diviner has an indispensable role. Nothing gets done without consulting him. His prescriptions especially on how and when the rite will be conducted, must be followed meticulously, otherwise misfortune will fall upon the family, such as the death of a member of the family.

A great expense

Because of the reasons and purposes of the ancestor worship, it is reported that practitioners will do anything to carry it out, even contracting debts for their "foolish expenses".²⁸ Most of the time, the result is that it is only augmenting their poverty.²⁹

The Biblical view of ancestor worship

Biblical practice

Charles Kraft describes the feelings different people of different background have when they come into contact with the biblical teachings. He writes that

How the faces of Africans light up as they hear that God endorsed levirate (Deut 25:5-10), polygamous (2 Sam 12:7-9), arranged marriages (Gen 24:50,51; 34:10-12) and many other customs similar to theirs.³⁰

Ancestral exhumation in Madagascar may be classified as one of these similar customs. That means that to deal with this practice in order to objectively and critically evaluate it requires an analysis of some biblical examples of burial occurrences.

Family burial site and practice

It seems to be beyond doubt that the Israelites put great importance on having a proper burial in the family burial site. It was their great ambition and considered as the crowning of a blessed life.³¹ It was not imaginable for a corpse, (1) to be refused for burial (Rev 11:10), and (2) to have nobody to bury it (Ps 79:3); or (3) to cremate it. The importance was such that improper burial made the person to be considered as an animal.³²

Abraham, when faced with the death of Sarah, went to the Hittites to buy property for a burial site for his family and descendants (Gen 23:1-20). David's burial site at his death is not specifically mentioned in the Bible (2 Chr 29:28). But the statement that Solomon was buried in the city of David undoubtedly implies the burial site for David's royal family to be in the city of David (1 Kgs 11:43). This practice in David's burial place seemed to have continued until as late as Josiah (2 Chr 35:24). In the New Testament times, it probably continued as a practice in non-Christian environment. The scriptural record of the reply of an unnamed man to Jesus "let me go and bury my father" (Mat 8:18), may be an evidence for it. But there is also the support of archeological findings: ossuaries may have been used in order to make place to the new dead coming into the family grave.

Repatriation

The importance attached to the practice of being buried with one's ancestor is found again at the death of Jacob, Abraham's grand-son:

Then he [Jacob] gave them these instructions: 'I am about to be gathered to my people. Bury me with my fathers in the cave in the field of Ephron the Hittite . . . which Abraham bought as a burial place. . . .

So Jacob's sons did as he had commanded them (Gen 49:29-31; 50:12,13).

Transfer of remains

Joseph too, as his last will, requested his brothers to carry his bones from Egypt to the place where his ancestors were buried (Gen 50:25). Firstly he was placed in a coffin in Egypt (v. 26). Moses brought the bones of Joseph with him (Ex 13:19). This practice was followed by every pious Jew.³³

"God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob"

The memory of these great ancestors of the past was still cherished by their descendants, in their heart, and through their mouth (Gen 31:42; Ex 32:13). Even God Himself, hundreds of years after their death, declared that He was the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob (Ex 3:15). One of the reasons for the genealogical records of God's people may be the importance of the respect and memory that they attached to their ancestors (1 Chr 1-10; John 8:39).

Christian Practice in the New Testament

John the Baptist, Jesus' precursor, after being beheaded by Herod, was buried by his disciples (Mat 14:12). Jesus was buried by the community of believers, not in a family tomb, but in a new cave (Mat 27:57-60). Ananias and Saphira, the unfaithful believers were buried by Christian young men, apparently not in their family tomb (Acts 5:1-11).

Biblical Practice Versus Ancestor Worship

The burial practice of Biblical characters in the Old Testament, and in non-Christian milieu of the New Testament times strongly suggests the importance of being buried among their ancestors. However, it is also clear that it was not to approve any form of ancestor worship, even if repatriation or transfer of the bones was needed. In addition to this, the practice of burying the dead in the family grave was not always followed. It seemed to comply particularly with the religious convictions of the head of the family. Two different examples may be cited for this:

(1) The two different sites of burial for Terah and Abraham together with his family members. Terah died in Haran and was buried probably in Ur or in Haran, but Abraham intentionally chose his burial site in the so-called promised land. The call of God, now appropriated as his religious conviction, made him leave his former country with its pagan religion, to establish his home in his new country, undoubtedly for the worship of the one true God (Gen 12:1).

(2) The death of Ishmael and his burial. Apparently, Ishmael was buried elsewhere, not with Abraham. Jacob cites all his ancestors and family members buried in Abraham's burial place but Ishmael is not on his list (Gen 25:17;

cf Gen 49:31). This fact may have been associated with the religious dimension of the Abrahamic family and God's promise (see Rom 9:7,8).

In regard to the exhumation, three examples may be cited:

(1) the transfer of Joseph's bones with a specific reason. Joseph's expressed last will carried a prophetic dimension, predicting the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt. Uttered by Joseph himself (Gen 50:24,25), the writer of Hebrews explained later on that it was by faith that Joseph made such an important pronouncement (Heb 11:22).

(2) Jeremiah predicts also an exhumation which was not followed by the re-burial of the kings of Judah. The prophet describes a sad situation which clearly indicates God's judgment upon the wicked (see Jer 8:1-3).

(3) The attitude of the women toward the corpse of Jesus is worthy of note. Jesus' corpse was wrapped with the spices in a linen cloth and buried in a new tomb, "in accordance with Jewish burial customs" (John 19:40). The women, probably ignoring that he was already anointed, came to exhume his corpse in order to anoint it (Mark 16:1-6). This seems to indicate that they thought that Jesus did not have a proper burial. Thus, the emphasis is on having a proper burial. Jesus actually rose from the dead before the women came; exhumation for anointment was not needed.

The Bible strongly condemns the practice of asking the blessings of the ancestors (Is 8:19). Although the Israelites' unfaithfulness was demonstrated in their communication with the dead, not even one among them was said to have performed any rite to ward off the harmful attacks of the spirit of his ancestors. In addition, there is no occurrence in the Bible where one prayed to God through the medium of the ancestors (1 Kgs 8:22-53; Ez 9:5-15; Dan 9:4-19).

Thus, Harrison concurs that "Scripture is particularly adamant in its opposition to any cult of the dead or worship to the deceased."³⁴ Ancestor worship is based on immortality of the soul. But the Bible teaches that the soul (man) is mortal (Gen 2:15-17). When a man dies, he is really dead (Eccl 9:5,6). The idea of the immortality of the soul came from Satan (Gen 3:4). In John 8:44, Jesus tells that the devil "is a liar and the father of lies." A dead said to come to his family in a dream is none other than the devil himself or one of his angels, disguised to deceive people (2 Cor 11:13-15).

All of these taken into account, we conclude that

(1) the Bible does not support any form of ancestor worship based on the belief on the immortality of the soul. However,

(2) the custom in the biblical accounts and ancestral exhumation in Madagascar bear some similarities to the great care and respect for the dead at his burial. Added to this respect, is their memory of the ancestors.

(3) this custom was still carried out by early Christians. However, it is quite different from that of the Jewish people. Now Christians have established a spiritual family in a community of faith bounded by love for one another. Everything was done within that new concept of spiritual family (Mat 12:48-49; Acts 4:32-35).

Ancestor Worship: a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective

Since it was practiced prior the introduction of Christianity, it is no surprise to find out that "Christians or pagans, Malagasy people have a profound veneration toward their dead".³⁵ This gives rise to a deplorable outcome. Ancestral religion exercised a great influence on Christian religion.³⁶

The Christian church, whatever its denominational profession and confession, had to face it. It had to be "either adopted by the church or

replaced by something more fitting to a Christian community."³⁷ When it comes to ancestor worship, the Catholic church seems to pronounce no official position. Its teaching about the intercession of the saints undoubtedly favors ancestor worship. The Protestant position is somewhat different. Originally, when the church began to realize the idolatrous character of this practice, its official position was to prohibit it. Later on, when it found out that the church constitution was one thing and practice another, ancestral exhumation was no longer among the ancestral traditions that the church prohibited officially.³⁸ This could be classified as an official neutral position.

The Seventh-day Adventists church and ancestor worship

Some Protestant churches, among which is the Seventh-day Adventists church, took a stand, though it is not written officially, not to take part in any form of ancestor worship. However, individual members do not escape the ever-present reality of the ancestor worship. In some regions, fifty percent to seventy percent of church members will participate in the ceremony. In the cities, because of less pressure, this percentage may be less, but in the country-side, there is even higher percentage. The following three main reasons may be stated:

First, there is the influence of the culture in which the members live, and is reflected in their traditional beliefs. A lady, when the coffin of her deceased son was about to leave the house and was carried toward the family grave, told him to send her greetings to her adoptive mother who died more than twenty years before.

The fact of being a "social-being," of holding the concept and values of "not-separated family," is stated by James Sire in this way,

each person is, of course, in many senses an individual, but that individuality is bound up with immediate and extended family. Each person is who he or she is only by virtue of relationships with others.³⁹

Second, spiritual immaturity may be a decisive factor when faced with this kind of issue. Indeed, some church members are still at the phase of needing milk (1 Cor 3:2; Heb 5:12,13).

Third, individual receptivity to the gospel message also contributes to the problem. When a whole family receives the message, the family members are able to resist the pressure. However, Seventh-day Adventists in Madagascar could be, in general, termed as a church for the "singles". Most of the women experience conversion before their husbands. The husband being the authoritative head of the family, it would be difficult for the wife to seclude herself from participating in the family activities. Young singles accepting the message before their parents are no exception.

Non-participation includes harsh treatment, even ostracism. Often among the punishments are the exclusion from the family's inheritance, from being assisted when adversities strike, from being buried in the family grave, and from having mourners at death. Thus, any new religion has to be either wholeheartedly accepted, whatever the cost, or totally rejected, or simply accommodated in the old.

A Critical and Realistic Approach to Ancestor Worship

Proved to be unbiblical, the practice of ancestor worship is to be rejected by Seventh-day Adventists. However, there are two questions to be answered. Other than ancestor worship in the strict sense of the word, there are some practices that are done to pay respect to the ancestors, like, for example, taking care of

the burial place. How should Seventh-day Adventists face these specific practices? In the same line of thought, how should Seventh-day Adventists relate to those members who practice ancestor worship? To what extent can we apply Paul's admonition and principle "to become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some?"

Principles

Following are three interrelated points to be considered.

1. The principle of obeying God rather than man (Acts 5:29)

This is an ultimate principle for anyone who is learning to build his faith and trust in God. This requires him to know the cost of discipleship and the implications of what it is really meant by following Jesus (see Mat 10:34-39). However, he should not think that he has lost. On the contrary, Jesus' promise about the reward for those who sacrificed anything for his sake is sure (Mat 19:27-30). "He said it, and I believe it."

2. The principle of Paul on becoming all things by all possible means in order to save some (1 Cor 9:19-23).

In no way does Paul ratify religious syncretism, since it assumes the fusion of two religious systems in such a way that the gospel is distorted or completely disappears. The same Paul who approved that Jews could eat with Gentiles (Gal 2:11-14), refused to eat "food polluted by idols, . . . meat of strangled animals and blood", in accordance with the decision taken by the church council in Jerusalem (see Acts 15:19-31). He himself boldly declares that we should live at peace with everyone, "if it is possible" (Rom 12:18).

Ellen G. White warns that

There is constant danger that professing Christians will come to think that in order to have influence with worldlings, they must to a certain extent conform to the world. But though such a course may appear to afford great advantages, it always ends in spiritual loss.⁴⁰

Accordingly, this second principle should not be detached from the first one. As Paul says it, "I do all this for the sake of the gospel," (1 Cor 9:23), signifying "in the light of the gospel". Thus, Holmes points out, that "we see things from a Christian point of view".⁴¹ Seventh-day Adventists distinctiveness should be in view.

3. Reconciling principle: alternatives.

This third point is actually the reconciliation between the first two. Here, Seventh-day Adventists need to look for alternatives in dealing with this issue. The suggestions listed below are usually stated. Practical and realistic approaches are provided with the goal of banning any thoughts or misinterpretation in regard to ancestor worship.

In dealing with his own ancestors, there is:

- a. Wrapping the corpse when the grave is open.
- b. Organizing a holy ancestral exhumation.

It would be a family reunion with an opportunity to witness (stress

on the hope of the resurrection). There is no diviner, no pork, no alcoholic drinks, no dancing.

d. Adopting functional substitutes.

Although ancestors are really dead, they still remain in our memory. They were so attached to us while they were living that the attachment and relationship cannot not be easily broken. Following are four functional substitutes in order of acceptability. Each proposition is designed to thank God for having had that ancestor as a family member, to ask God to keep the living family faithful until the end, and to witness to non-Christian members of the family.

1. Cleaning and leaving flowers on the grave site once in a while.
2. Celebrating anniversaries: the days of his birth and death.
3. Displaying his pictures at home.
4. Erecting a project, or establishing a trustfund in his memory.

In dealing with practitioners:

1. Physical participation

This consists of attending their ancestral exhumation for the sake of being at peace with them. This suggestion hides behind it other issues, such as the meat for the feast on which the blessing of the ancestors to be exhumed was called upon. A quite similar issue happened in Corinth concerning meat offered to idols (see 1 Cor 8:1-13). There is also the vicious circle of the invitation which calls for another invitation.

2. Financial and material participation

Just give the "sao-drazana" ("participation in form of money", or give cloth to wrap the ancestor without going to the ceremony.

The idea of "spiritual family grave or grave site"

This is a practical solution. As the Bible does not oppose the idea of having a burial site for the religious family members, Seventh-day Adventists in the local church or in a group of localities should have a "spiritual family grave" or "spiritual family grave site".

This point, however, requires a renewed concept of spiritual family tie among Seventh-day Adventists. Members should know the basic definition of spiritual family, "here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Mat 12:48-50). Not only will individual members be welcomed and feel adopted and loved, but also ancestral tradition practitioners will be able to identify who Seventh-day Adventists really are. "By this the world will know that you are my disciples, that you love one another" (Jean 13:35). The Christian ideal of unity in spirit (see Acts 4:32-37) may be experienced here. It does not only testify to the authenticity of true Christianity, it provides also a considerable help for Seventh-day Adventists to cope with the consequences of being faithful to God.

Approach

1. Preventive approach

- (1) **Paul's advice**, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Cor 5:14).
- (2) **Take care of the parents while they are still alive.** This is to prevent any misinterpretation of Seventh-day Adventists attitude after the death of their parents. To them, "whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. . ." (Eccl 9:10). Parents, clearly knowing our biblically-founded beliefs, would not think of the so-called expectation of concerns and care after their death. This act of love, if done in the sight of non-Seventh-day Adventists, may help them to remove their prejudice toward Seventh-day Adventists.
- (3) **Give a proper burial to the dead.** In this specific culture, the Bible seems to advise to provide a proper care of the dead before and during burial, not after it.
- (4) **Convert all members of the family to Seventh-day Adventists church, as much as possible.** The isolation of a person from her family after conversion is often followed by a stronger pressure from the other members of the family when the practice is carried out.

2. Theological approach

(1) Reassure the people of the unfailing and powerful protection and care of God (Ps 37:5,7; Is 43:1,2; 1 Pet 5:17). There is nothing to pay to trust on Him and receive His blessing.

(2) Strengthen the hope of resurrection. This reaffirms the biblical teaching on the state of the dead. According to the Bible, the dead is really dead. He does not have anything to do with the living (Eccl 9:5,6). Also, it brings joy to know that we will meet again those who died in Christ when He comes again and resurrect them from the dead. What we need to do is to remain faithful to Him (1 Thes 4:13-17).

3. Educational approach

(1) **In the primary and secondary level**, students are taught traditions, customs, and civil responsibilities. Here is a place where every Seventh-day Adventists teacher (not only in the subject of Malagasy) has an incomparable opportunity to convey biblical teachings about this issue. A valuable aspect which is highly stressed is the respect to the elderly ones. "Honor your father and your mother" (Ex 20:12). Paul adds that this is "the first commandment with a promise" (Eph 6:2). However, this kind of respect is due to the living parents. And also, the promise "you may live long" is from God, not from the dead ancestors. Indeed, God is the "God of the living, not of the dead", by the virtue of the resurrection of the dead at the second coming of Christ (Mat 22:32).

(2) **The importance of developing a curriculum**, in theological studies, which addresses the need. This curriculum includes courses such as "Seventh-day Adventists and ancestral traditions, customs, and culture". The main goal is that, in their learning, students will lead a social, academic, and spiritual life based on "thus says the Lord. . .", thus having more faith, trust, and obedience to the Lord - not on human beings, nor ancestors.

(3) **Students' exposure and mingling with practitioners**, while the practice is going on in order to:

- be aware of what it is really
- appreciate values attached in it
- critique what is excessive in this practice, especially when it comes to stewardship (i.e. unnecessary expense)
- evaluate the practice in the light of biblical teachings
- renew his commitment and trust to God
- be able to address the issue in the church especially

when he is through with his studies.

(4) **The need of further research and study**. Beliefs and practices attached to these cultural issues are sometimes taken for granted; but the real reasons are not known. And people continue practicing it in their ignorance.

(5) **The need of a publication which deals with ancestor worship and other cultural issues**. This is an urgent need. Its importance has been neglected in the past.

(6) **The need of a continued education in the family and in the church**. This practice will not change overnight⁴² due to the cultural background of the church members, particularly the new converts. It is a process.

(7) **We need also to stress on the importance of the role of the elders in the church**. Firstly, they are the ones who are always present in the church, and thus, deal with the issues. Secondly, they can not depend on the Pastors who have the heavy responsibility to take care of an average of twenty churches. The better the elders are trained, the better they will be able to face the problems. This calls the church to provide a regular theological training for the elders.

(8) **Our attitude toward practitioners should not be judgmental**, in our relationship with and in our witness to them. We should rather "speak the truth in love" (Eph 4:15).

Conclusion

In the practice of ancestor worship, the image of God is so distorted that trust and fear are put more on the ancestors than solely on God. Education helps to firstly love God "with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" by seeking "first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness". Then, from Him, blessings will flow, "and all these things will be given to you as well" (Mat 22:37; 6:33).

Redemption, as claimed by our educational philosophy, implies true reform -- true reform that includes not only a new religion but a new character in line with and required by the new religion. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17).

ENDNOTES:

1. P. Randrianarisoa, Madagascar et les Croyances et les Coutumes Malgaches (Paris: Association Nationale des Ecrivains d'Expression Francaise, 1967), 13.
2. Among others, Lars Vig, Croyances et Moeurs des Malgaches, traduit par E. Fegereng, edite par Otto Chr. Dahl, vol. 1. Antsirabe: Edition personnelle, n.d.; Rajosefa, Ny Anton'ny Famadihana sy ny Misiteriny (Tananarive: Imprimerie Antananarivo, 1959); M. Olsen, "Le Famadihana et Ce qui l'accompagne dans le Vakinankaratra" in Bulletin de l'Academie Malgache, 1929, 12:61-65; Xhi et Naa, Les Malgaches et le Retournement des Morts (Tananarive: SNIC, 1977).
3. Rajosefa, 9; Robert Cameron Mitchell, African Primal Religions (Illinois: Argus Communications, 1977), 27.
4. "Aspects de l'Humanisme Malgache," in Fokonolona 2 (November 1964): 28.
5. Rajosefa, 7.
6. Randrianarisoa, 17.
7. J. Rakotonirainy, Ny Famadihana sy Isika Kristiana momba ity lazaina hoe Fomban-drazana ity (Tananarive: Pirinty Manokana, 1995), 10.
8. Rajosefa, 8.
9. Xhi et Naa, Les Malgaches et le Retournement des Morts (Tananarive: SNIC, 1977), 13.
10. Randrianarisoa, 21.
11. Rakotonirainy, 13.
12. Olsen, 61.
13. This is probably due to the oriental thinking that wisdom belongs to the elders.
14. "Aspects de l'Humanisme," 27.
15. Benoit, "Heritage Ancestral et Christianisme," in Lumiere No 1670 (1968):4, et 1671 (1968):4. "The living man is happier than the departed because he is alive. But the departed are more powerful." (Quoted in Mitchell, 27). Thus, "they [ancestors] can

now come to abide with folk on earth invisibly, to aid or hinder them." (Ibid.).

16. Gennep, 70.

17. M. Olsen, "Le Famadihana et ce qui l'accompagne dans le Vakinankaratra," in Bulletin de l'Academie Malgache 12 (1929):64.

18. Ibid., 61.

19. Rakotonirainy, 18.

20. Vig, 54.

21. Olsen, 61.

22. Xhi et Naa, 8.

23. Ibid., 63.

24. Randrianarisoa, 26.

25. Vig, 53.

26. Olsen, 65.

27. Rakotonirainy, 13.

28. Ibid., 8.

29. Olsen, 65.

30. Charles Kraft, Christianity in Culture (New York: Orbis Books, 1979), 13.

31. "Tombeau," in Dictionnaire Encyclopedique de la Bible, publie sous la Direction de Alexandre Westphal (Valence-sur- Rhone: Imprimeries Reunies, n.d.), 2:785,786.

32. Rakotonirainy, 36. Thus, unburied corpse eaten by the beasts and birds was the climax of indignity (1 Kgs 14:11; 16:4). An improper burial of a corpse is likened to the burial of an ass (Jer 22:19).

33. William Smith, Dictionary of the Bible, revised and edited by F. N. and M. A. Peloubet (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, n.d.), s.v. "Burial, Sepulchres."

34. Rolland K. Harrison, "Burial," in International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, fully revised edition, edited by G. Bromiley (Grand

Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:561. In order to ban any thoughts on immortality of the soul in their burial, the Israelites "resisted all trends toward bodily preservation through embalming. . . . This seems to have been occasioned not simply by Israel's relative poverty and lack of resources but by its conscious antipathy to Egyptian belief and practice [i.e. the immortality of the soul]." (Ibid., 560).

35. Randrianarisoa, 21.

36. Vig, 1.

37. Barclay, 123.

38. Rakotonirainy, 52.

39. James W. Sire, Discipleship of the Mind: Learning to Love God in the Ways We Think (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 59.

40. Ellen G. White, Prophets and Kings (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1943), 570.

41. Arthur F. Holmes, The Idea of a Christian College, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 59.

42. It's true even in the cities where the practice tends to slowly disappear because of the ongoing growth of the cities due to the migration of the young people, and their openness to new ideas.