



# The socio-practical dimensions of *isitshisa* [burning of the heifer] in the Corinthian Church of South Africa

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In this article, I argued that the performances of the ritual sacrifice of burning the heifer [*isitshisa*] and worship, held annually at Mlazi in Durban by the members of the Corinthian Church of South Africa, has social implications. Not only does the ritual worship enhance religious bonds of affinity amongst the Corinthians, it also instils in them the values of sharing, cooperation and care for those in need in the community, for example the blind; thus, *isitshisa* acts as a resource that empowers the Corinthians for social commitment and action in their community.

## Objective

The objective of this article was to try to understand how the sacrifice of the heifer [*isitshisa*] and other rituals that accompany this ceremony at Mlazi, south of Durban, influences the lives of the members of the Corinthian Church of South Africa. To what extent do the rituals and structures of the Corinthian Church enhance social development in the context of poverty? Hence, this article rests on the premise that there is a possible link between poverty, social capital and development (cf. Cilliers & Wepener 2007:39–55).

## Methodology

As part of the on-going National Research Foundation-sponsored research project on ritual and social capital and social development in the context of poverty, the researcher joined the members of the Corinthian Church of South Africa<sup>1</sup> at Phepheni in the Eastern Cape, near Kokstad in the annual service of the burning of the *isitshisa* [heifer] in the Mlazi township outside Durban on the night of 31 October 2009. The intention was to experience and observe this act of worship and the ritual that accompanied it with a view to documenting it. The group was led by the minister, Reverend Wellington Phungula Dingani.

To try to grasp the issues involved, some worshippers were asked questions relating to the rituals of the service, what they meant and how they influenced the lives of the worshippers. This data was then documented. A detailed description of these rituals will be presented in what follows, augmented by data collected from interviews conducted during and after the service.

In trying to interpret and consolidate the data gathered, insights have been drawn on from scholars in the field of anthropology and development studies, who work with the concepts of social capital, social development, ritual and poverty. For this article, observations and experience of the rituals that took place at Mlazi on 31 October 2009 will be shared and the issues involved analysed from the perspective of social-capital and social-development in the context of poverty.

## Defining the concepts: Social capital, social development and poverty

### What is social capital?

Scholars define social capital<sup>2</sup> in various ways; however, almost all of them tend to agree that social capital relates to the extent to which groups of people or individuals collaborate to achieve mutual benefits. In this article, I will use the definition used by Harvard political scientist, Robert Putnam. Putnam places the value of social networks and trust, collaborative spirit and reciprocity at the centre of social capital (2002:3). He asserts that social capital 'refers to features of social organisation such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and co-operation for mutual benefit' (1995:65–68).

1.The Founder of the Corinthian Church was Bishop Johannes Richmond, who passed away on 19 October 1991. There are four bishops at present, serving in the following hierarchy: Bishops Zuma, Zibuthe, Mnyandu and Zwide.

2.The concept is attributed to an article published in 1916 by L.J. Hanifan, about social cohesion and personal investment in the community. Others attribute the concept to Jane Jacobs in the 1960s, Robert Salisbury in 1969 or Jole Coleman in 1977. It was in the 1990s that the concept gained wide currency, after Robert Putnam used it in connection with his work, including *Bowling Alone: Americas' Declining Social Capital* (Wikipedia n.d.).



Given that they enhance a collaborative spirit, Putnam concludes that these values are assets, 'first of all for the people who are in them ... and that they have private or "internal" returns' (1993:6).

In his view, social interaction 'helps to resolve dilemmas of collective action, encouraging people to act in a trustworthy way when they might not otherwise do so' (1993:8). In other words, according to Putnam, social interaction is the key to solving the challenges that relate to group activity; hence, these networks create value, because both the individual and groups can 'invest' in networking (1993:8). Therefore, in Putnam's view, social capital derives entirely from this interaction (1993:5).

Social capital, therefore, relates to 'a measure of generalised trust, norms of reciprocity and networks' (1993:7). Similarly, a distinction is made between a bonding social capital, which entails interactions with people of the same group and a bridging social capital, which involves interactions with the wider groups (1993:5). Put differently, for Putnam, the capacity and ability of groups of people to function well depends on the degree to which the group has generated trust amongst its members.

### What is social development?

The Oxford Dictionary defines (social) "development" as (something) gradual, an unfolding, a bringing into fuller view, the bringing of latent capabilities (of anything), the act or the process of developing' (1989). Philip McMichael and Karana Moraraji particularly identify 'equal opportunity' as one of the cardinal values of 'development' within the context of the evolution of civic and democratic institutions of the developed world (2010:15). From this perspective, this article seeks to address the question: What 'opportunities' does the *isitshisa* create for the Corinthians and the others in the community, to engender this social development?

In the view of McMichael and Moraraji, development entails power-relations and consequently can serve ideological purposes, where the 'powerful' become richer at the expense of the exploited; hence, development is frequently contested, even when its enduring principle is human emancipation (2010:15–16). Thus, they asserted that 'struggles over meaning or resources raise the questions about "development" – questions that focus on theories that all people are equal except that some are more developed than others' (2010:15–16).

### What is poverty?

Poverty is the antithesis of social development. The Oxford English Dictionary denotes poverty as 'the condition of having little or no wealth or material possessions; it is indigence, destitution, want, [it is] the condition of scarcity, lack, scantiness, dearth, smallness of amount' (1989); however, in view of the African context, this definition of poverty from the developed world is lopsided, given that it exclusively applies to the acquisition of material benefits,

whilst ignoring social and spiritual values, attributes of African cultures. In this sense, it can be argued that the Corinthians are materially 'poor', as they mostly live in the impoverished rural communities of South Africa (interview with Bestina Mthopi Richmond, Jean Richmond and Wellington Dingani, January 2010).

If social capital promotes the existence of trust, collaborative efforts and networks amongst groups of people and individuals, poverty, conversely occurs because of the absence or the scarcity of these. This article seeks to discover how the ritual of *isitshisa* [burning of the heifer] affects the collective life of the Corinthians as a group, the lives of individual Corinthians and also the lives of those with whom they come into contact, for example, the blind and the poor to whom they minister.

From what I have just stated, it would seem apparent that the concepts of social capital and social development do interact. This article seeks to address the question: What is the relationship between the Corinthian ritual of *isitshisa* [burning of the heifer] and social capital and social development in the context of poverty? What is being presented here is merely a small contribution to the complex issue of social capital and this article falls within a wider framework of liturgical ritual studies, drawing insights from the disciplines of theology and anthropology.

## Background

The burning ritual of the red heifer is popularly known as *isitshisa*, meaning literally 'burning'. The act refers to the burning of a heifer as a sacrifice to God (interviews with Bestina Mthopi Richmond and Jean Richmond<sup>3</sup>, 04 January 2010). This worship centres on the sacrifice of the heifer and when going to this ceremony, the Corinthians say 'siya etholeni', meaning literally, 'we are going to the heifer.' Approximately 4000 worshippers came to Mlazi from all over the country in October 2009. Most of them were 'materially' poor<sup>4</sup>. Dressed mostly in golden attire, [*iminazerete*], they spent the whole night, from Saturday 21:00 to Sunday 10:00, in vibrant worship, singing and dancing (including running around in circles). It was an experience that will not be forgotten.

Preceding the ritual of burning a heifer, which took place at about midnight and was the climax of the worship, other rituals were performed, notably the initiation of the female members [*abajoyini*] who recommitted themselves to the service of the church. The whole act of worship ended the following day, Sunday, with the presentation of gifts to 60 blind people who were brought to the place of worship in

3.The calf was burnt at 00:00. According to B.M. and J. Richmond, this is the standard time for the sacrifice, because it is the time when the ancestors are active. They stated that this ritual follows the sacrifice of his son Isaac to Yahweh that Abraham tried to offer.

4.It has already been established that the term 'poverty' can be relative, meaning different things to different people or places. Here, it specifically applies to 'material' poverty, where most people are not in gainful employment, not employed or self-employed; for example, the wife of the minister at Phepheni is self-employed and sells fruit in Kokstad, Rev. Dingani is not employed and Xolani Zondi works as a taxi driver in Matatiele.



a bus specially hired by the Corinthians. What was striking about this occasion was that many of the people brought gifts, in cash and kind, for the blind. There were approximately 4000 people present and the cash collected from donations amounted to an average gift of R10.00 per person.

For the Corinthians, '*inkonzo yesitshisa*' means the 'worship service of the burning of the heifer' and encompasses wide-ranging rituals of singing, dancing, preaching and the initiation of the women's guild members, occurring before the act of burning the heifer itself. Each of these rituals had its own characteristics, but derived its significance from the single act of sacrificing the heifer (interviews with Bestina Mothopi Richmond and Jean Richmond, January 2010).

## Discussion

What motivates these crowds of people from almost every corner of the country to annually come to Mlazi for worship? What motivates them to donate food items to the blind and share a meal with them? What makes it possible for them to work together? What religious values influence their practice? These are some of the questions that this article seeks to address and answer. In other words, the issue of how cooperation and collaboration enhance the capacity of the Corinthians to bring about social change in their lives and the lives of others.

In response to the preceding first four questions, Jean Richmond, the founder's daughter, Bestina Mothopi Richmond, the founder's wife and Reverend Wellington Phungula Dingani simply attributed the collaborative spirit witnessed to the influence of the 'spirit' or 'angel' of the founder, Johannes Richmond (interviews, December 2009 and January 2010). Whilst this explanation cannot be dismissed, the researcher believes that there are deeper underlying issues that must be discovered to explain why the service of *isitshisa* [burning of the heifer] draws large crowds of people and positively affects the lives of the Corinthians and that of their communities.

One of the ritual actions, the ritual slaughtering of the goat, had taken place even before the beginning of the service. The blood and fat of this goat were then used in the ritual of the re-dedication of the women to their guild<sup>5</sup>.

In what follows, some of the major elements of the proceedings of the service and their social implications will be considered.

## Proceedings and features of *isitshisa*

### Fellowship with the spirit or messenger: Fellowship with one another

The service started with a prayer offered by a member who had been nominated by the bishop. The elements of the prayer

5.The beginning of the ceremony of initiation is of particular significance. The initiates, all dressed in green attire [*iminazereti*], surround a goat and place their hands on it, whilst the bishop prays over the goat and those to be initiated. Afterwards, the goat is slaughtered.

included the invocation of the spirit of 'the Lion of Judah' (Jesus Christ), 'the messenger' and the spirit of the founder, Johannes Richmond. The blessing and the lighting of 14<sup>6</sup> candles by Bishop Zuma followed. These candles had been lying on the table placed in front before the service began. Apples, oranges, biscuits, sweets and cool drink were also on this table. According to Dingani, the presence of the light and the food would serve to draw the spirit of the founder-guardian angel into the midst of the gathering. The presence of these spirits would also ensure the personal security of the worshippers (interview with Wellington Dingani, November 2009).

The bishop then burned a shrub of incense [*impepo*], which was placed on the floor in such a way that the smoke permeated the church. According to Jean Richmond and Bestina Mothopi Richmond, this is a cleansing ritual, used to purify the people of bad spirits and to invoke blessings upon the worshippers (interviews with Bestina Mothopi Richmond and Jean Richmond, January 2010).

As Gerrie ter Haar (2009:1) noted, communication with the 'spiritual world' (and with the ancestors) is widely practised in nearly in all African Initiated Churches; however, what is unique here, is that it is associated with the guardian spirit of the founder, alongside Jesus Christ. Very much like the Roman Catholic Church and in contrast to the churches of the Reformed tradition, the Corinthians venerate their ancestral founder like a saint, who is considered to be the key to communication with the spirit world.

As Ter Haar asserted, 'one of the most striking elements of religious belief in Africa ... is its spirit orientation', which she noted that 'Andrew Walls referred to as its "open frontier" the porous nature of the wall that separates the human from the spirit world in such a way that they can derive messages from it ...' (2009:1). For the Corinthians, their founder opens the door of fellowship and communication with the spirit world.

Another important stage involved the temporary handing-over of the iron sword, which is the symbol of the founder's authority.

### Handing over authority

It is significant that, in this male-dominated church, the wife of the founder is revered as 'woman leader' [*umongamelikazi*] and is regarded as the custodian of the traditions of the church with a special role to play. It is she who brought in the golden iron sword<sup>7</sup> [*induku*], which bestowed authority on the Bishop to preside over all the following proceedings.

Holding it with two hands, she lifted it up, whilst the other leaders prayed over it. After Mrs Bestina Mothopi Richmond

6.In an ordinary service, seven candles are used, referring to the seven candles of the Book of Leviticus. According to Dingani, 14 candles were used on this day because it was such a large and special service.

7.This iron golden staff is about 2 metres in length, with sharp ends with symbols. It is known in IsiZulu as 'stick' [*induku*] and is kept in the sanctuary [*isigodlo*].



made the sign of the cross on his head using the sword, Bishop Zuma then received the sword from her. He placed it in front of the congregation, leaning it against the wall. From that moment on, Zuma formally assumed responsibility for the whole proceedings.

According to Mrs Bestina Mthopi Richmond, the choice of who takes responsibility for the sword and therefore, the service, depends on the intimations of the spirit or angel (interviews, January 2010). According to some worshippers, Sifiso Mbele, Mbongeni Gwala, Nokuthula Sikhakhane (interviews and discussions, 31 October 2009), the presence of the spirit ensured that they were safe from physical or spiritual dangers 'as they were now under the protection of the spirit and the angel or messenger'. In the belief of these informants, it was the presence of the messenger and the spirit that inspired the worshippers to engage in this vibrant worship.

The implication was that the authority or spirit of the founder was transferred from the past and made a reality in the present. This is what Ronald Grimes considers the transcendental or mystical dimension of ritual. Ritual mediates its efficacy mystically (Wepener 2004:26). Essentially, the ritual of handing over the sword marked the start of worship and the proceedings that were to last throughout the night and over the next day, as the spirit of the founder was now believed to be officially present at the service. This part of the ritual signifies the highest authority that the Corinthians accord to the spirit or angel of the founder. That night, the ritual appeared to convey the notion that the founder, through his authority expressed symbolically, continues to rule his church. In this manner, the ritual legitimised the rest of the proceedings.

## Corporeal dimension of worship: A key to a deep fellowship and social cohesion

A very important feature of the worship at Mlazi was its strong physical dimension. Worship at Mlazi, in the same way as at Phepheni near Kokstad, involved vigorous dancing, singing and drumming and the blowing of the 'trumpets' [*imibhobho*] for hours on end in a relatively small space for the congregation of about 4000 in the church. These activities were interspersed with occasions of Scripture reading and spontaneous sermons. The worship was very physical and the worshippers were engaged at all times in very dramatic, visionary and sensory interaction. A strong smell of incense prevailed. Worshippers were sprinkled with holy water at intervals, leading to the atmosphere becoming spiritually and emotionally charged. M.E. McGann captured something of this sort of spiritual experience, as cited by Johan Cilliers (2008):

There is a natural tendency for interpenetration and interplay, creating a concert or orchestration in which the ear hears, the eye sees, and where one both smells and tastes colour, wherein all the senses, unmated, engage in every experience.

(Cilliers 2008:76)

Engaging all their senses, this sort of experience opened possibilities for knitting together the worshippers emotionally and spiritually, consequently giving them a sense of social identity and solidarity, which in turn influenced their social outlook. Thus, as Cilliers noted, 'this kind of worship expresses in a dynamic and corporeal way, the essence of participatory identity' (2008:74). In his experience of the worship, Xolani Zondi stated that it was the continuous dancing and singing which, in his view, generated a spirit of deep fellowship amongst the members (interview, December 2009). He went on to assert that through such vigorous worship, they felt a sense of brotherhood. This intense character of worship created the space and opportunity for worshippers to bond with one another. A high degree of fellowship was generated, which enhanced group cohesion. People felt a stronger sense of belonging! It is in this regard that ritual becomes a resource capable of generating spiritual energy that translates into social commitment and practice.

## Presentation of gifts

During the course of worship, for almost three hours, women carried food parcels on their heads as they 'danced' their way to the secretary, who received the items and recorded them. According to Bestina Mthopi, Jean Richmond, Nokuthula Sikhakhane and Wellington Dingani, these food items, about 500 in all, had come from nearly all branches of the church. This was made possible through the close network of congregations where the secretaries [*oonobhala*] exercised unique leadership, coordinating the process of giving (interviews, October 2009).

Thus, the role of these secretaries is critical to the whole operation; they are like a 'chain' providing links to the various units in the network of congregations. Coordination of this work is possible as, over the years, trust has been built up between the *oonobhala* on the one hand and the congregations on the other, so that they can work with great efficiency. Networks, trust and mutual cooperation, according to Putnam, are assets that create value, given that they make it possible for groups of people to work in collaboration (1995:65–68).

It should be noted, however, that this was no ordinary manner of 'dancing.' Symbolically, it was 'ritualistic' in character, celebrating God's gift to them and an offering to others as well. Paul Post identifies this type of ritual as 'dramatic,' 'lucid,' symbolic or referential (Wepener 2004:46). This food was distributed to the blind and the poorest of the poor in the community of Mlazi on Sunday afternoon.

## The role of a 'prophetic word' for social welfare or well-being

To the question: what makes this service more important than the other ordinary Sunday services, Nosipho Mbele, Zukiswa Zondi and Thulani Dlamini said that they were interested in hearing a 'word' of prophecy regarding their own personal conditions (interviews and group discussions,



October 2009). Thus, it would seem that a fair number of people come to this service expecting to hear a 'word' of prophecy regarding their social needs; it is something one might call spiritual 'consultation.' There seem to be close parallels here with African beliefs and practices. Just as some Africans would go to consult a traditional African spiritual specialist in times of need or crisis, so some Corinthians are attracted to the service, to 'consult' the spirit of prophecy.

Consequently, care is taken by worshippers to discern the prophetic 'word' during the course of worship. The importance of prophecy becomes apparent with regard to the role that the spirit (of prophecy) plays in prescribing the colour of the attire that the member must wear. For instance, in some cases the prophetic spirit may prescribe that a member wear red attire to ward off impending danger (interview and group discussions, October 2009). It may also be a white garment, adorned with symbols of the moon, sun or stars, which signifies the well-being of the individual (interviews with Bestina Mthopi Richmond and Jean Richmond, January 2010). Veliswa Dlamini asserted that the experience of the worshippers being in uniform, praising God in unison, made each one of them feel special, that they belonged to one another (interview with Veliswa Dlamini, December 2009).

In other words, according to the informants, worship at Mlazi engendered a degree of personal belonging amongst the worshippers. It is this sort of experience that Ter Haar refers to when she asserts that 'spiritual power not only represents real power for those who believe in it, it also is *transformative* power ... what Allan Anderson has called "enabling power"' (2009:2). Through this prophetic spiritual experience, the Corinthians are 'empowered' as 'a group.' This is an experience that gives them a sense of purpose in life. Thus, as Ter Haar (2009) notes:

... through interaction with the spirit world people acquire access to, and may share in, a form of power that may transform their lives. It is power that can be employed to improve the quality of lives, for individuals and communities.

(Ter Haar 2009:2)

As a result, a deeper level of worship and fellowship was present and it set the stage for other important rituals.

## Initiation of the re-committed members of the women's guild

Seven women and one young girl were seated on benches. Four ritual objects, goat's blood, fat [*umhlwehlwe*], oil and holy water were set out, ready to be used. Firstly, the palms of the initiates and then their faces and heads were smeared with goat's blood, oil and fat and each initiate was sprinkled with holy water. Then Reverend Dingani placed the Bible on the head of each initiate. Finally, using the iron sword, Bishop Zuma made the sign of the cross on the head of each initiate (interview with Xolani Zondi, January 2010). According to Dingani, each time the minister administered part of the ritual, he said a prayer for the strengthening of the initiate

(interview with Dingani, December 2009). It is believed that by this act the initiate was put under the protection of the founder.

Ritual engenders social reality; it is a lens through which its performer perceives it (Nell 1989:3). On the other hand, the performer of ritual relates to it on emotional and spiritual levels and thus, the performance of ritual does not leave its performer unaffected. The ritual described previously is symbolically significant. It construes social reality in the sense that the enactment of the ritual projects a perception that the animal world and human world are interconnected and interact. Hence, in this ritual, personal behaviour is implicated as the blood is thought of as fostering commitment to social action. Gerard Lukken noted that ritual has ethical implications. He argued that performed with conviction, it influences the conduct of the one who performs it (Wepener 2004:125). Therefore, highlighting the significance of placing the Bible on the head of each initiate, of smearing the initiates with goat's blood and fat, Dingani stressed that the blood of the goat was meant to prick the consciences of the initiates, so that they give themselves for service to God and his people in the community (interview with Dingani, December 2009). Just as the goat was sacrificed for them, so they too must 'sacrifice' themselves to God and his people<sup>8</sup> (interview, December 2009); that when tempted to do wrong, the blood (life) of the goat which was slaughtered must then remind them of the life that it offered for them (interview, December 2009). Here is an attempt to make the ritual influence the conduct of the members of the women's guild.

It is also noteworthy that, unlike the ritual of *isitshisa*, where the heifer's meat is not available for consumption, the meat of a slaughtered goat is made available as a meal for all. Yet, as Cas Wepener argued in his recent studies on ritual and liturgy, sharing a meal involves more than eating, it determines social boundaries (2009:229–246). Whilst the purity codes regulating the Lord's Supper amongst the Corinthians of Phepheni tend to constrain members who feel ritually 'unworthy' from the partaking of the Supper (Mbaya 2009:5), this meal knows no boundaries. In the spirit of *ubuntu*, it is open to all, even to those who under normal circumstances could not have afforded a meal of meat in their homes. In other words, the 'relatively well-to-do' share with those who have 'very little' or 'nothing at all.'

In discussions taking place over these meals, the bonds of friendship are further strengthened and personal trust is fostered as old friendships are reinforced and new ones forged. Thus, the 'relatively rich' connect with the poor, where the latter also benefit. The sharing of the meal provided the space where socio-economic distinctions between the Corinthians and the visitors become blurred, as they met on the same social level. Besides worship, the sharing of a meal engendered a sense of belonging that fostered a spirit of wholeness amongst the Corinthians.

8. According to Dingani, the Corinthians believe that the goat survives death and that its soul lives before God. Therefore, a live goat must always remind them of the sacrifice that it made for them.



However, it seemed the preceding rituals merely acted as a prelude to the main ritual of the day, *isitshisa*, the climax of ritual ceremonies.

## ***Isitshisa*: Its social implications**

At the height of the service, at about 23:30, a procession of worshippers brought the red heifer into the church. It was sprinkled with holy water and purified with incense and a prayer was said by Bishop Zwide before it was led to the slaughter and burning place.

According to Bestina Mthopi Richmond and Wellington Dingani, the ritual of the burning of the heifer [*isitshisa*] observed in the Corinthian Church today was prescribed by the founder, Jean Richmond, under very strict prophetic instructions before he died in 1996 (interview with Bestina Mthopi Richmond, October 2009). Jean Richmond asserted that the sacrifice follows the pattern of Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac, for whom a ram was provided as a substitute (interview, January 2010).

At midnight, the heifer was slaughtered and burnt in an open fire and as it was burning, the bishop raised a long, wide, red cloth into the air. Saying a prayer, he placed it on the burning heifer and then repeated the same act with a shrub of incense and some mealie-mealie. The worshippers then threw their offerings in the form of food items, notably mealie-mealie, apples, sweets, bread and oranges into the fire as they said their prayers in silence. According to Dingani, midnight as the time of this ritual was significant, because the Corinthian Church believes that the ancestors are active precisely at that time of night. In this way the ancestors have some influence in this particular ritual and in the worship in general (interview, January 2010).

Similarly, all food items sacrificed or burnt denote productivity and the progress of the individuals (interview with Dingani, December 2009). Close parallels with some elements of African traditional religion seem to exist here, where, in some African communities, mealie-mealie was used as a ritual object of sacrifice to their gods under special 'divine' trees.

Asked why the worshippers wore golden attire for the occasion, Jean Richmond said that gold stands for beauty, happiness, brightness, excellence and goodness; in short, embodying all that is best. She went further to state that there was a connection between a red heifer and the golden colour of the attire. This sacrifice was a thanksgiving to God for his goodness and a prayer requesting his blessings. The prayers offered are varied, but in general they entail thanksgiving to God for his blessings. More specifically, they are requests for progress and prosperity in life, such as the need for employment and physical well-being (interviews with Bestina Mthopi Richmond and Jean Richmond, January 2010).

Xolani Zondi also stated that the worshippers receive the power needed to assist others in the community through this ritual and their prayers (interview, December 2009).

The teachings that night stressed perseverance in loving and being available for others. The sacrifice is symbolic of the need for the members to develop the 'love of one's neighbour', in particular those (neighbours) who are in need and those not cared for by the secular community. In other words, the Scriptural principle of 'love of one's neighbour' translates into the African spirit of *ubuntu*<sup>9</sup>, expressing the value, the dignity and hospitality accorded to a human being. It is in this regard that Jean and Bestina Mthopi Richmond stressed that *isitshisa* is inseparably linked to the Corinthians' hospitality, annually accorded to the blind (interviews, January 2010). These teachings have pastoral imperatives, exhorting the Corinthians to reach out to the needy in the communities with a view to transforming their lives for the better.

Although the meat of the heifer is not eaten, its ashes nevertheless become available to all who may need them as a ritual object for the after-burial cleansing ritual<sup>10</sup>.

At Mlazi, on the Sunday morning at 10:00 following *isitshisa* [*burning of the heifer*] on the Saturday night, 60 blind people were brought into the church. They had been brought by a bus hired by the Corinthians and were given presents of money, clothes and food parcels. The food had been collected from country-wide branches of the church (interviews and group discussions, October 2009). As previously stated, these were presented as part of the ritual of the service the previous night. After the presentation of the gifts, the blind shared in the meal with the rest of the people. According to Jean Richmond, the secretaries who work closely with 'home cells' in the circuits had organised the collection of the vast quantity of food, which was distributed (interview with Jean Richmond, January 2010). This networking, cooperation and collaboration made it possible for the Corinthians to accumulate these resources of money, clothing and food for the blind. This is as a result of the team spirit and the work ethic engendered by the cohesive character of worship and the teachings. Robert Putnam identified the importance of social networks similar to these in providing 'social and psychological support for the less fortunate members of the community' as bonding social capital (2000:22). In his own words, he said that 'they provide members with friendships and business connections that pay off personally' (2002:7). They are assets that enrich the people's lives.

Similarly, the ability of a group of people to connect with the much less privileged groups or individuals, where the latter also accrue social benefits is known as linking capital. In this case, the blind and the other needy people benefit from the generosity of the Corinthians. Thus, through efforts such as these, the lives of the blind and the needy acquire new meanings and hope for transformation and a better way of life.

9. The concept expresses the core of African philosophy, defining values and traditions of African life. It embraces inclusivity as opposed to exclusivity and embodies the spirit of hospitality or generosity to all, hence the maxim: 'I am because we are', implying 'a human being is a human being through other human beings'. For more detailed information on this issue, see Cilliers & Wepener (2007:47), Ubuntu (2004:10-17) and Mbaya (2008).

10. For more details on the issue of the cleansing ceremony after burial, see Mbaya (2009).



Highlighting the significance of the occasion, Jean and Bestina Mothopi Richmond stressed that the founder first concerned himself with the blind in 1952, when he saw that there was no one to care for them. They went on to state that the loitering of the blind in the streets, with no one to care for them, moved him to devote himself especially to these blind beggars (interviews, January 2010).

Responding to the question 'what relevance has the *isitshisa* to the donations to the blind?' Jean Richmond stated that the sacrifice of the heifer implied that the Corinthians must also 'offer' their lives for the neediest in society, such as the blind (interviews, January 2010). Commenting further on that, Zondi stated that *isitshisa* [burning of the heifer] was about the offering of love to God and seeking his blessings. The Corinthians' commitment is to love those who need God's love so that they too will be blessed (interview with Xolani Zondi, January 2010). On that night, Bishop Zuma had emphasised the Biblical principle of 'love of thy neighbour.' More significantly, Jean Richmond stressed in this case that practice must follow belief, what they believed, they also had to put into action (interview, January 2010).

Implied here are two interrelated principles: the recognition of the existence of the social gap that exists between the blind and the community and the need to close that gap. In this sense, the *isitshisa* [burning of the heifer] acted as a ritual of 'reconciliation' and integration where, as it were, the blind are 'socially' re-integrated in the community. This is what Lukken calls the ethical dimension of ritual, devotedly performed; a ritual will not leave its performers unaffected, but will rather influence their conduct and behaviour (Cilliers & Wepener 2007:52). In short, as Cilliers (2008) stated:

[in this kind of] worship service people have been literally *empowered* to act prophetically, but even before that, to be reminded of their human dignity, often in the face of a society that structurally proposed and actively enforced the diametrical opposite.

(Cilliers 2008:77)

Consequently, in this context, issues of justice and equity, power and redistribution of resources come to the fore as, somehow, the blind tend to be seen as victims of injustice (Cilliers & Wepener 2007:42). The blind and the other needy who are socially excluded benefit from the generosity of the Corinthians as they try to give them equal opportunities. It is an attempt to transform the social conditions of the blind for the better. By providing such services, the Corinthians are subtly and covertly critical of structures that seem not to provide adequately for the blind and other needy in society in the spheres of justice and equity.

Jean Richmond placed the ritual of *isitshisa* [burning of the heifer] in a broader social context. Although she primarily associated it with her father's special interest in the care for the blind, she linked this service to the care for all the needy in all communities. In her view, a network of 'home cells' and various guilds exists and operates as an expression of the 'sacrifice' that the Corinthians must offer in looking after the needs of the vulnerable in their communities, regardless of their social status, or religion. In this regard, she drew a close link between the sacrifice of the heifer and the people's

obligation to 'sacrifice' themselves to serving the needy in their communities through the structures provided by the church (interview, January 2010). In this respect, the teachings, which are very much part of the ritual of *isitshisa*, have pastoral dimensions where, by offering themselves as a 'sacrifice', the Corinthians are exhorted to reach out to the needy in their communities.

## Conclusion

Returning to the questions that were raised at the beginning of this article, namely: 'to what extent do the ritual of *isitshisa* [burning of the heifer] and others positively bear on the life of the Corinthians and others in community?' or 'to what extent do the rituals and structures of the Corinthian Church enhance social development in the context of poverty?'

The *isitshisa* [burning of the heifer] plays a very significant role in the life of the Corinthians on several levels: the performance and experience of the ritual of *isitshisa* and its accompanying rituals act like glue, bonding the Corinthians together and providing them with a sense of belonging to one another. It is precisely this identity that derives from a deeper sense of fellowship, generated by the intense corporeal character of worship. In this atmosphere, a spirit of trust and cooperation is engendered, which enhances cooperation of all. This is further reinforced by the sharing of communal meals on Saturday evenings and midday on Sundays.

In other words, worship and meals enhance bonding social capital as the *isitshisa* [burning of the heifer] draws people into fellowship. Because generosity is extended to the blind and the needy, this dimension of networking is an example of linking capital. Of similar significance, the teachings and preaching given at *isitshisa* provide pastoral imperatives, urging the people to become involved in the communities around them.

Thus, rituals have turned out to be important resources that spur the Corinthians' commitment to social actions, particularly in the sphere of the alleviation of poverty. It is the quest for personal social security and well-being or material or spiritual progress of the individual members and others that spurs the worshippers on to perform rituals (worship), which affect not only the members but also others in the communities.

This is possible because of the spirit of trust raised amongst the people. Trust is a resource that has been built up over a long time in the Corinthian Church, through the annual services held at Mlazi, amongst other things. It is a resource that has cemented friendships manifested in the sharing and distribution of material resources to the blind and others in need. Nonetheless, although visitors are made welcome and will enjoy their liberal hospitality and friendliness, unless they undergo some rites of initiation, they remain outsiders, 'foreigners' in this territory, shut outside the door of their church. However, the researcher is grateful to the Corinthians and in particular the ability of their rituals to generate social capital. Nonetheless, these rituals are not free from criticism. It is possible that another researcher may reach a conclusion opposite to the one arrived at in this article.



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