

ANCESTRAL CULTS IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION: THEIR RELEVANCE IN THE CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

Africans had a strong belief in ancestors. The ancestors once lived in the physical world with their kinsmen, but now they reside in the underworld and still influence the lives of the living. They are moral regulators and were known as the living dead. It is a strong belief that they have the power to bring prosperity or misfortune to the members of their families, depending on the relationship that exists between them. The living venerates them in a bid to maintain a good and favourable relationship with them. However, this relationship is no longer as strong as it used to be in the past. Most people are negating the role which the ancestors can play in their lives and that of their families because of the influence of Western culture and modernity. This has caused far-reaching problems, especially in marriage-related matters. It is necessary, therefore, to evaluate the roles of the ancestors in maintaining the family ties and norms, and to identify their relevance in this global era. The study was descriptive in nature. Data collection was through observation and library sources. It was gathered that in the past, the ancestors were the moral regulators of their various families. People were afraid to commit evil and other

immoral acts for fear of punishment by the ancestors. But recently the reverse has been the case. It is, however, necessary for the younger generation not to neglect their ancestral lineage. They should follow the legacy preserved by their ancestors. Moral uprightness is the foundation of any given society; Africans should, therefore, as a matter of fact re-awaken the norms handed over to them by their ancestors for posterity.

Keywords: Ancestral cults, African Traditional Religion, contemporary African society

Introduction

Africans believe in the existence of the Supreme Being. There are also other beings that rank lower than God. Etuk (2002: 162), referring to Idowu (1973), states that, “in reality there are five component elements that go into the making of African traditional religion, and he lists them as: belief in God, belief in divinities, belief in spirits, belief in the ancestors and the practice of magic and medicine”. Among African societies, religion is at the very heart of their cultures. It controls much of their social, moral and political systems. Religion is their main source of power, and it regulates matters relating to the land and the weather on which most Africans depend for their survival. Igbo (2012: 166-167), while referring to Igbo people of Nigeria, states that, “Igbo people’s world view is divided into four sections: “*Uwa*” the visible world that inhabited human beings, animals and forest. “*Mmuo*” the dead ancestors and the forefathers of the present generation. “*Alusi*” which he referred to as the supernatural forces that have attributes of men and finally “*okike*” the Supreme Being who is the creator”. It is a clear indication that the Africans, especially the Igbo, have belief in the ancestors. It is deep-rooted in their belief system and manifests in all aspects of their lives. Africans show great respect to their ancestors, hold them in a very high esteem and always try to maintain a good relationship with them. There is a strong belief that a sour relationship brings punishment and

suffering to the living. Onwuejeogwu (2007: 236) asserts that, “The ancestors are regarded as the mystical custodian of the living minimal lineage. The punishments and rewards of the living members are meted out through the lineage head”. Families are blessed, punished or protected by the ancestors. It is a general belief that the ancestors perform great roles among the living members of their families; however, in recent times, these roles have ceased. It is on this note that this paper explores the functions of the ancestors, admittance into the ancestral cult and the notion of ancestral cult in African society, with reference to the modern society.

Meaning of Death

Death is very painful. In all African societies, it is believed that death is not the end of life. There is life hereafter, yet people are afraid of death. Many words are used all over African societies concerning the actual act of dying. People refer to dying as returning home, going away, departing, ceasing to eat, ceasing to breathe, refusing food, sleeping, being snatched away, being taken away, being called away, joining the forefathers, and so on (Mbiti, 1981:112). From the foregoing, “it is actually a general belief among Africans that death is not a total destruction, although the dead is separated physically with the living, there is hope that they will continue to live in the spirit world and still communion with the living”.

Ogbalu (n. d : 54) affirms that;

It is believed that life on earth is not the end of man and that a person on dying returns to the dead where his ancestors dwell. This under-world is inside rather than above the earth. There, the dead live in families, umunnas, villages and towns as they lived on earth.

Death is a necessary end that awaits every man. Africans abhor death at a very young age. Although Africans would not like any of their relations to die, however, death is most welcomed at a very ripe age. Premature death is very irritating and hard to bear. Africans strongly believe that children should bury their parents, not otherwise.

Death can be seen as good or bad. Bad deaths are the deaths of people known to be very wicked in the society. Wicked people include those who poison people or those that harm or kill others through different means. Death of witches and evil doers is also regarded as bad death. Other groups of people which their death is referred as bad include those who died of dreadful diseases and those who commit suicide. It is a general belief among African societies that anyone who died a bad death can never reach the spirit world where the ancestors occupy, rather they wander about. They are called “akalogoli” among the Igbo people of Nigeria. They are not given befitting burial, and some of them, such as those who commit suicide and those who died of dreadful diseases, are dumped in the evil forests. Since these groups of people do not have a place of rest after their death, they become malignant spirits that go about causing havoc to the living. They wander about, bringing misfortune to those in the land of the living. According to Temples (1959:99), referring to the Dukuwa people of Bantu, the Dukuwa believe in the future, *alise* place they call *Andakka*. There, the wicked are isolated for a term of two years, where they have neither food nor shelter. Ezenweke (2012:124) also affirms that “the soul of the living dead wanders about as a wandering ghost when not admitted in the ancestral cult on the basis of the failure of their physical part to live up to moral expectations while on earth”. Igbo (2012: 166), referring to the dead, says that, “If he was bad, he becomes a mischievous spirit of akalogoli or ajo mmuo.”

However, people whose death is regarded as good are those who died at a very old age. They must have been married, had children of their own, and must not have committed any crime that would prevent their burial. This group, after their burial, will join the ancestors in the underworld to continue to live. Temples (1959) asserts that, “the good are met by their predeceased friends, who bring them cloth, food and wine”. He, however, states that the ancestors are people who have died but who continue to live in the community and communicate with their families.

The Ancestral Cult

Africans have great regard for their ancestors. It is a general belief that they have a prominent role in their lives. The belief that death is not the end of life and that the dead continue to exist in the underworld and they have an overwhelming influence on the living, and will eventually reincarnate, is the major idea behind the remembrance of the departed ones in Africa. Parrinder (1976:57) indicates the knowledge of ancestors in some parts of Africa when he affirms that;

In South Africa, “the ancestor spirits are the most intimate gods of the Bantu: they are part of the family or tribe, and are considered and consulted on all important occasions”. In Zambia, “the family divinities are the ghosts of one’s grandfathers, grandmothers, father and mother, uncles and aunts, brothers and sisters’. In Nigeria, all Igbo believe that their lives are profoundly influenced by their ancestors... In southern Ghana, “in the everyday life of the Ga the dead are very present...”

The ancestors are perceived to be ever-present and aware of the happenings among the members of the family they left, and also oversee the happenings in the physical world. For this reason, they are buried in the homestead of their families, because it is believed that they are their guardians. When they were alive, they used to protect and provide for their families. They are, therefore, buried in their homestead for them to be closer home to continue with their work. According to Orobator (2008:107), “An ancestor is a blood relative of a living community”. Kingship is basic on the notion behind the veneration of ancestors among Africans. An ancestor must belong to a particular kin, and veneration must be directed to a particular ancestor. Belief in ancestor indicates that the Africans believe that man is made up of body and soul. The physical body will eventually die, be buried and decay, but the soul which is the spirit is

immortal. The spirit will be transformed and continue to live. The dead is also seen as one who is on a journey. This could be noticed among the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria, through some of the words/messages they usually give to the dead to deliver for them, such as: have a safe journey; when you reach, greet my father, mother, and so on.

Africans believe in spiritual beings and in God as the Supreme Being. They believe that God created the universe and everything in it, including the spirits. There are major divinities such as Anyanwu (sun god), Amadioha (god of thunder), etc. Earth goddess inhabits the earth; man and other minor gods also live on the earth. The inhabitants of the underworld are the ancestors and other malignant spirits. Mbiti (1975:36) declares that, "Every African recognizes God according to some cosmologies. However, there are beside Him, other divinities and spiritual beings, some of which are closely associated with Him".

It is a general belief that man has limited powers; the spirits have powers that are above human powers. The activities of these spiritual powers influence to a great extent every aspect of man's life. Man, in order to successfully cope in the physical world, must maintain a good relationship with the spiritual world. According to Edeh (1985:22-23), "There is a strong indication that for the Igbo there are communications between the visible world and the invisible world, there is a relationship between the living and the dead." It is a strong belief that since those in the spirit world are more powerful than man, they also have an overwhelming influence over man and are able to protect or mar their activities. With this in mind, the reason for worship of these spirits among Africans will not be far-fetched. According to Metuh (1981:134), "The belief in many deities and the ancestral cults has been observed and has overshadowed the worship of God". Metuh was correct, but when critically viewed, it was observed that Africans believe that God is the Supreme Being, and that other spirits are His messengers. In other words, all sacrifices and worships are directed to God through His spiritual messengers.

It is on this note that the ancestral cult and ancestral worship are found in most parts of Africa. However, Ukaegbu (2005: 60), writing about the Igbo people of Nigeria, disagrees with the idea that the Igbo people worship ancestors. He states that, “It is not true that the Igbo people worship ancestors but they honor the customs of their ancestors”. Idowu (1973: 178-179) poses a question whether the term ‘ancestor worship’ is correct. He states that certainly, the irrational fear of the dead is not uncommon and is still with us in every culture. He affirms that people relate their dreams and experiences to the movements or doings of the deceased. He further states that communion is possible between those who are alive on earth and the deceased, and that the latter have the power to influence or molest the former.

Ancestral presence is seen in the roles they play in the lives of the living. They manifest specifically among their kin groups. According to Parrinder (1976: 58), “The ancestors are believed to have survived death and to be living in a spiritual world, but still taking a lively interest in the affairs of their families”. He also states that “the departed are not far away and that they are believed to be watching over their families”. The ancestors manifest themselves in various ways to the members of their families. Ancestors continue to interact with the living through dreams, appearances, visions, sounds and incarnations, through animals such as: birds, butterflies, bees, snakes, lions, etc. Sometimes, messages are received from them through diviners, mediums, medicine persons or priest (Fabella & Sugirtharajah, 2000: 1).

Ancestors are the living dead; they understand the problems of the living. They continue to have their interest in mind and manifest in different ways. Ogbalu (nd. 54) affirms that, “The dead have supernatural powers. They can appear before men and vanish at will in broad daylight as ghosts or in dreams or vision”. The appearances to their kin group could be for good or for bad. Ogbalu, referring to the

Igbo people of Nigeria, notes that the dead live in families, umunnas, villages and towns, as they lived on earth, for they can bring fortune or misfortune on them, and protect them against *ndi akalaogoli* and other dangers. Ancestral cult is paramount in most African societies. They venerate their ancestors so as to continue to receive favours and protection from them. In traditional Igbo society, water is not thrown outside in the night or sand swept outside from the house at night for the avoidance of pouring them on the ancestors who are believed to have come to protect the family members. On this, therefore, Igbo (2012:167) points out that;

the powers and extent of intrusion of *Alusi*, *Ekwensu* and *Akalaogoli* on the living human are contingent upon the pleasure and disposition of the dead members of *Ndi ichie*. Hence a special relationship has to be maintained by the living one, offerings and sacrifices to the ancestors. Dead ones are never worshiped, but worthy *ndi ichie* and ancestors are venerated.

Ezenweke (2012:176) affirms that, “The phenomenon of ancestral cult seems to be a central Phenomenon since it is upheld in virtually every community. The name and pattern may vary but the substance; the kernel and the concept are similar”. Africans do not neglect their ancestors; they respect and honour them, bearing in mind the work they do for the living.

However, the issue of worship of ancestral cult does not arise, since the Africans do not disturb themselves about it. Rather, they are interested in how to protect and preserve life, which is the highest and greatest thing created by God. Life is regarded as sacred and no one has the right to take it. Parrinder (1976:66) avers that,

... Of worship or veneration Africans do not bother unduly about this. They are concerned with life, and how to protect and augment it. Their philosophy of forces serves as sufficient guide. They go upwards in the hierarchy of forces, from men to ancestors, to gods,

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to the ultimate God, convinced that if one fails, and
another will help.

Admittance

Admittance into the ancestral cult is not automatic. Certain obligations must be met before one is admitted into the group. Isidienu (2015:111) indicates that, “the ancestors are our grandparents and relations who are already dead. During their lives time on earth, they had wife/wives, progeny and were able to maintain their families. They are known for their hard work and so accumulated large barns of yams, livestock and so forth. They are great achievers”. They have good moral standards and have lived exemplary lives. They are not known for any abominable act in the society. She also states that when they die at a very ripe age, a befitting burial is given to them. However, those who do not achieve much in life but had families and also lived a good moral life are those who would join their ancestors in the spirit world. A source in Saint Leo indicates that to attain ancestor-hood, one must have led a morally sound life as understood in the particular African cultural setting one lives within. For instance, among the Igbo people of Nigeria, children, evil doers, witches and wizards, thieves, armed robbers, murderers and so on, are not admitted into the ancestral cult.

Another group of people that are not fit to be admitted into the ancestral cult are those who died of dreadful diseases such as small pox, leprosy, and so on. Added to these are those who committed suicide. In Igbo traditional society, these groups of people are thrown into the evil forest. Ezenweke (2012:177) states that to be considered an ancestor in Akan religion in Ghana, “One must have lived an exemplary life, and must have done much to enhance the prestige of the family, clan, or tribe as in other African areas”. Flora and Fauna regarded the ancestors as “The model or exemplar conduct in community.”

Functions of the Ancestors

The ancestors perform lots of roles in the life of the living. They serve as a means of social control and check on moral behaviours of the living. In African society, the ancestors are those who lived a righteous life. Evil doers have no place in the spiritual abode of the ancestors. For this reason, in traditional African society, everyone tries to live a moral and upright life, since everyone aspires to become an ancestor at the end of one's life. According to Onwuejeogwu (2007:125), "The ancestor cult is a common feature of many west African religions. Through it also the doctrine of lineage continuity is expressed and upheld. It has become a means by which social control is maintained by the older people over the younger generation, and it is manipulated to perpetuate and sustain the social order in time and space".

Africans believe in reincarnation; it is through reincarnation that lineage continuity is assured. It is a powerful motivation to the living, since no family member will want their family lineage to go into extinction. The only way is to live an exemplary life so that one would be able to join the ancestors and later reincarnate. Family norms and societal norms are passed from generation to generation. Bad traits are discouraged extensively so as not to be inherited in the family lineage. Because of this, a lot of inquiries are made during marriages. Onwuejeogwu also affirms that the continuity and perpetuity of the lineage are paramount.

The ancestors as symbol of sanctity, punish any member of the family that perpetuates an evil act. Nyamiti (nd: 66) asserts that the ancestors "Manifests their anger by sending to their descendants bodily or spiritual calamities". On the same note, Ezenweke (2012:182) opines that it is believed that "Calamity is often allowed by the ancestors to discipline the defaulting living members of their families". She goes on to state that each time there is a calamity, there is usually an inquiry to find out the cause, which in most cases ends up with a sacrifice to appease the ancestors and to correct the violated social

norms. Parrinder (1976:60) also states that, “Any evil may be attributed to the ancestors.” He further states that the ancestors may be annoyed at the neglect of their descendants, and special diseases are put down on them. Childlessness as one of the greatest curse to an African may also be ascribed to the anger of the ancestors. The ancestors may become angry when relationships are not the way they are supposed to be; it could be an atrocity by the members of the family or a neglect of the role of the living towards the ancestors. The ancestors, therefore, inflict on the living all sorts of misfortunes. Ogbalu (nd.55) puts it that, “The dead are believed to exercise tremendous influence over the living whom they can harm, or cause their death if they become offended or if they are not remembered through sacrifices and worship”. The ancestors are seen as retaining their roles in the affairs of their kin-group and only of their kin-group. They are appropriated with ‘sacrifice.’ They are seen as dispensing both favours and misfortune (Ezenweke, 2008). Because of the above, family members always work hard to maintain good relationships with the ancestors to avoid anything that might bring calamity on them. Nwosu (2000:19) states that the “Key point injunction in the existence of the African moral code is that, it is built from the injunction of the earth goddess through the ancestors”.

As the defaulted members of the families are punished, uprightness is rewarded. A saying among the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria is *mkpuru onye kuru ka o ga -aghọ*; meaning that whatever someone sows, that he/she shall reap. Family members are blessed with children, prosperity, and good health for their good life. Onwuejeogwu (2007:244), while referring to LoDagaa of Northern Ghana, affirms that, “Every new acquisition of wealth and success need to be followed by a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the ancestors”. This means that every progress comes from the ancestors, and must be recognized. This is the act of respect shown by the living through sacrifices to the ancestors, which helps to maintain a mutual relationship between the living and the dead. The relationship between the living and the dead is that of give-and-take, as Saint Leo puts it

that the ancestor can only survive only if he is remembered by his descendants through prayer, incantation, and rituals. On their part, ancestors are expected to procure for their kins benign effects such as: good health, wealth, high birth rate, good harvest, rains for planting, among others. Ilogu (1974:23), in Igbo (2012:65-66), emphasizing about the Igbo people of Nigeria, states that, “The ancestors exercise influence over almost every aspect of Igbo man’s life; including the production of staple foods such as yam and the provision of efficacious medicine”. In support of this, Bujo (1992: 23) declares that,

The dead can only be happy if they live in the affectionate remembrance of the living, nevertheless they are stronger than the living on whom they exercise a decisive influence, since the living cannot hope to survive unless they render due honour to their dead and continue faithfully along the tract laid down by them.

Ancestors also serve as mediators between the living and other major and minor divinities. They were once alive with the living on earth; they knew their needs and shortcomings. Now they are dead, they are closer to spiritual beings and can mediate for the living. Ezenweke (2012:182) affirms that the “Ancestors are intermediaries between the gods and the living”. This function could be in the form of attracting fortunes for the living or preventing misfortune for the family members.

Ancestors unify their family members. Most Africans up till today acknowledge their ancestral lineage. People from the same ancestry are blood relatives; they therefore avoid any form of harmful act against one another. They cannot intermarry. Any such act attracts calamity from the ancestors. Ezenweke (2012:181) declares that ancestors perform unifying roles to ensure the unity of all the members of the family. She also states that the link that ties each person with his ‘brother’ must be maintained so as not to incur the anger of the ancestors. It is, however, on this note that the Africans see

themselves as their brother's keeper. There is a general belief that as far as family members live in unity, the ancestors will be happy in protecting them. Mbiti (1978:91) affirms that, "There are defied ancestors who are regarded as being protectors of their families".

Relevance of Ancestral Cult in the Contemporary African Society

The influence of the Western culture has affected almost all aspects of African peoples' culture. In most African societies, belief in ancestral cult has gone to the lowest ebb as a result of the foreign culture, to the extent that most Africans no longer believe that the souls of the dead go to live with the ancestors in the underworld or wander as evil spirits; rather, the Westerners who brought Christianity taught that those who do good while on earth will inherit the kingdom of God at their demise, while the evil doers will suffer eternally in hell fire. The gospel of Mathew chapter 25, verses 33, 34 and 41, on Jesus' teaching on the final judgment, states that:

And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the king will say to those on his right, come, you who are blessed by my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world... then he will say to those on his left, depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

From the forgoing, those on the right are the righteous, those who lived a good life while on earth, while those on the left are the evil doers, they lived a bad life when they were alive on earth. Generally, in many parts of Africa, especially Igbo land, the belief in reincarnation is no longer acceptable. Most Africans are Christians, and they strongly believe that the dead will either go to heaven or hell fire.

Marriage among Africans is a communal affair; inquires are made to ascertain the ancestral background of a prospective couple. However, in recent times, some of the younger generations enter into a marital relationship without inquiring about the ancestral lineage of their

spouse, and this has brought unwanted traits in some families. It has also caused far-reaching problems in some families and has also affected the bond that holds the family. It is obvious that the neglect of ancestral cult has caused more harm than good in this era of globalization, especially in the areas of choice of partner and in the maintenance of family bond.

The role of the ancestors as mediators is declining in the contemporary African society. Evidences collected show that recently, most Africans are Christians and, as a result, they believe that Jesus Christ is the only one who mediates between them and God; although the Catholics who are Africans venerate the saints and Mary the mother of Jesus in place of the ancestors and also ask for their intercession. In view of the above, many Africans, especially the Igbo, do not go through the ancestors to seek their protection and intercession. Prayers, kola nut, wine, slaughtering of animals, among others, are no longer offered to the ancestors by most Africans, as it is done in the past. Ezenweke (2008) cited Anderson (1992a: 77) who revealed the opinion of a well-informed member of the Apostolic Faith Mission and a sincere Christian that:

I personally do not venerate the ancestors, but I believe that ancestors are there. Ancestors do exist; they are people who have fallen asleep. Before I was saved I used to venerate them; and I know what they can do in the life of a person. You really can become a slave of the ancestors. Even the Bible acknowledges that there are 'gods' and that we should not worship any other gods but our father in heaven. They do have the power to help or harm- that I saw when I was not yet saved... when I did what I was instructed, such as slaughtering a goat, then I saw things definitely improving. They have the power to harm you if you do not follow their instructions; and they have the power to help you if you follow them.... I believe that if people knew the power of the gospel they would not have anything to do with

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the ancestors. But because they are bound by the devil they are still in darkness. They go up and down buying goats, slaughtering cows- and nothing seems to come right. So if people could know the power of the gospel and believe in Jesus Christ, they could be set free... now that they are still in darkness they must do as the devil commands them.

Generally speaking, contemporary African societies, especially Christians, perceive veneration of ancestral cult as contrary to their Christian faith. Most of them abhor anything about their ancestral lineage.

Furthermore, in this era of Westernization, family ties are getting loose. It was observed that the family ties among African nations have been affected drastically. Speaking about the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria, Isidienu (2015) affirms that, "Influence of western culture has affected the Igbo family that the ties and bonds that bind the family are negatively affected." In some parts of Africa, most people are no longer their brother's keepers. There are indications of life of self-centeredness as against communal living which the Africans were known for in the past. Individualism has become the order of the day. Most individuals are virtually lonely, as some individuals live without hope. There are incessant cases of suicide which are traceable to a life of individualism. Also, most families are having serious challenges which are traceable to the neglect of their ancestral lineage. There are instances of ancestral curse in most families which are as a result of the neglect of family norms and good moral standard left behind by the ancestors.

It is worthy to note that ancestors are those who lived exemplary lives while on earth; therefore, Africans, especially the Igbo, should emulate them. Christians, while adhering strictly to their Christian faith, should not neglect the rich family norms and good moral legacies left behind by their ancestors. They should accord respect to

their ancestors by exhibiting a life of good moral standard and also being their brother's keepers.

Conclusion

The existence of the ancestral cult in most African societies cannot be denied. The ancestors are the dead members of families who lived exemplary lives when they were alive. They now reside in the underworld where the living cannot reach. They serve as moral regulators. They have acquired greater powers and can influence the living in various ways. They can bring fortune or misfortune, depending on the activities of the living. They perform various roles and serve as intermediaries between the living and the dead. It is the ancestral lineage that binds people together, and once this tie is broken, the family norms will be affected drastically.

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