

THE CULT OF ANCESTORS IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

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Introduction:

The spiritual world of the African people is very densely populated with spiritual beings. Broadly speaking we have two categories of spiritual beings, those, which were created as such, or emated, and those, which were once human beings.¹ The cult of ancestors belong to the second category, and it is one of the essential elements of African traditional religion.

It does not mean that the totality of African Traditional Religion as many foreign investigators have made us to believe to the extent that they had to designate it "Ancestor worship". It is a gross misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the cult of the ancestors. Most African scholars on the field of African Traditional Religious Studies have seriously challenged this submission. We have the likes of Mbiti, J. S. Dopamu, and others. We shall take a careful study in this exercise of the cult of the ancestors; again from African perspectives, which we think is the best approach for the study. Her own people best study a people. This however, does not discredit the bulk of works from foreign investigators with an objective mind.

Conceptualization:

Cult: the word cult is defined as a system or community of religious worship and ritual. It is an obsessive devotion to a person or ideal. It is used to describe a group of persons sharing such devotion¹. It thus includes all the acts of religious perform by the devotees in honour of God, the Saints, divinities and ancestors.

WHO ARE THE ANCESTORS?

Generally speaking, the ancestors are the deceased who were once members of the social group of a clan. As J.S. Mbiti rightly suggested, there are two categories of the dead: those who are still within memory or the departed of up to five generations called the living –dead², and those who can hardly be remembered again by the living.

This distinction we must say does not apply to all Africans an ancestor is an ancestor whether within memory or not. For instance, Nigerians use the same word to include all the dead. They belief that they belong to the same group and are all relevant in the affairs of the living. Hence, the Yoruba call them *Baba – nla* meaning (the great fathers) the Igalas call them *Okwoikwo* meaning the great parents (males and females)

the Igbo call them *ndicie*, meaning those of old, the Urhobo call them *Eriuwu* meaning the dead fathers and mothers.

Generally in Africa men are believed to become ancestors except in some areas like the Igalas and Urhobos. During sacrifices, pouring of libations, when homage is paid and prayers are said; it is only those within living memory that are mentioned. However, it is believed that though not remembered by name, they can still share in the offerings made to the dead and even exert some influence over the living.

In the African belief system, the family is made up of both the living members and the ancestors. The ancestors are still present, watching over the household and the property of the family. They are the powerful part of the clan, maintaining a close link between the world of men and the spirit world. They are believed to be interested in the welfare of their living descendant. They even exercise protection and discipline any erring member of the living belonging to their clan. Thus they are guidance of family affairs, traditions, customs, ethics & morality, health and fertility. They punish cases like incest, stealing, adultery, bearing false witness and other moral vices are regarded as elders of the family and they are reincarnated into the family.³

Even, when a woman is being given in marriage libation is poured to the ancestors. Since ancestors are no longer visible in the physical sense, Africans attributed some element of spiritual powers to them. Their power is derived from the Supreme Being but used independently of him. Death has given them greater and enhanced dignity and prestige. Such powers are believed to be for good or for evil. It is believed that witches and sorcerers cannot harm a man and bad medicine cannot have effect on him if his ancestors are not asleep. That is why the Yorubas say to their ancestors *Baba mi ma sun lorun* meaning my father, do not sleep in heaven'. He is expected to be vigilant, watching over the living. If they dream of a dead relative, it is believed is a proof of the presence of the ancestor. The ancestors can also influence rainfall, good harvest, promote prosperity etc. misfortunes like drought, famine and destructive calamities are also attributed to them. Misfortunes however belong to those who break their taboos.

Africans ascertain from time to time the will of the ancestors through the oracle. They secure their help and appease them when they are provoked to anger. It is essential that the living be in good terms with the ancestors and even gives them more regard than they deserve while the living in physical form. This is why Africans usually do not go to sleep with their pots empty. In fact, food is always left outside at night for any visiting ancestor. Water is not poured away at night without first announcing it so that any ancestor around may not be injured. When people drink wine or hot drinks, they pour a little on the ground for the ancestors. All this is to acknowledge and strengthen then the interpersonal relationship between the living and the dead. Despite this closeness, ordinary people cannot see the

ancestor. It is only those who possess special power or medicine that can notice their presence.

The ancestors functions as a cohesive factor in some communities. For instance Awolalu and Dopamu says:

... among the Ashanti, the sacred golden stool which is the ancestral symbol is regarded as the shrine and symbol of the national soul . Which means that in it, the whole nation is united as of one 'soul'.⁴

The Ancestral Cult:

There are no separate annual festivals for the ancestors except where they have been deified.⁵ such communal ceremonies are done in honour of the ancestor and to remind the people of the great deeds of their ancestors. Some of these festivals include *Oro*, *Egungun* (Yoruba), *Mmuo* (Igbo), *Adae* (Ghana) among others.

The ancestors have shrines where sacrifices and prayers are offered to them. Among the Yoruba it is called *Igbo Igbale*'. There are priest and priestesses attached to the shrines. The priests and priestesses are usually the most elderly men and women in the family. It is however not a woman married into the family. Prayers offered are ultimately directed to absolute honour done goes to God alone.

In many communities the same words are used for both the worship of God and the ancestors. For instance 'Bo' is a general word for worship among the Yoruba. During the festival for the ancestors, a mask figure is designed specifically to give impression that the deceased is making a temporal reappearance on earth. In West African, ancestors are even addressed the same way as the living.

Veneration And Worship:

The word veneration means great respect⁶. It then means reverence and great respect, admiration and awe. Thus it is an act of worship. However, it is done or given to the saints in contradiction of worship given to god alone. In the strict theological usage of the word veneration; absolute honour goes to God in worship.

The Roman Catholic Church have situation very analogous to the African attitude towards their ancestors. The Virgin Mary is highly honoured. She has a corner (more or less a shrine) dedicated to her in the church where candles are burnt and prayers are said. What is done is commonly described as relative honour, which is reserved to God the creator of all things. It is believed that she got her uniqueness form God and so could be prayed to. The common Roman Catholic prayer: "hail Mary mother of god pray for us in earth now unto the hour of our death. Amen" confirms this view. The

honour and prayers said to the saints does not end with them but goes to God. This is also the African view in venerating their ancestors.

The word worship on the other hand is defined as the act of showing great reverence, honour, respect, etc, especially to God or a god.⁷ Worship in its strict theological usage suggest the acknowledgement of God's unique excellence and His total dominion over all nations express by adoration, reverence, and submission to Him. It thus includes acts prompted by veneration.

Worship combines the act of submission, which shows the attitude of an inferior to his superior with veneration, devotion and respect. In worship, the worshiper depends on his object of worship having the faith that this object of worship is capable of meeting his needs and demands. He does not see his object of worship as a means to an end but an end in itself. The function of worship is in making the sacred present in the consciousness of the worshiper as the power responsible for preserving their existence, the society and the entire universe. Therefore, worship is all embracing, it includes the simple act of bowing, salutation, prayers, offering of food items, pouring of libation and sacrifices of animals and human beings.

Therefore we submit that Africans venerate their ancestors and not worship them. Although veneration at times as we have seen above come close to worship. Kwabena Amposah writes of the Ghanaians that that they do not worship their ancestors as Christians worship God. They venerate them, honour them and more involved in the day-to-day activities of the people than the gods⁸.

QUALIFICATIONS TO BECOME AN ANCESTOR

Perhaps the ultimate qualification to become an ancestor is death. Death is the dividing line between the world of the living and the world of the dead. It is however not the only criteria. Not all dead people are considered as ancestors.

Generally in African before one can become ancestors he must die at an old age. Young boys and girls who die cannot become ancestors. Among the Yoruba and Igbo, It is believed that the death of young people may have been caused supernaturally as a result of some hidden fault of the deceased. A person must die a good or natural death.⁹

Person who die in war are honored as ancestors for their death are described as honorable death. Death through leprosy, dropsy, sleeping sickness, child birth, epilepsy, suicide or motor accident are believed to might have been caused by a hidden crime and are there not considered as natural death. Even if a man died of age and does not have a child or children to perpetrate his memory he is not considered an adult. Therefore he is not honored as an ancestor.

The celebration of a second burial by the children of the deceased is also very important. It is this that enables the deceased to enter into a place of rest where he enjoys the company of other ancestors. If the second burial is not done some believed that the deceased soul shall remain in a dirty place and shall not be properly cared for in his new world. Failure to accord a deceased ancestor a second burial could make him torture the living relatives.

Lastly, but very important, an ancestor must have led a transparently good moral life as dictated by the ethical standard of the society. Names of wicked people, thieves, lazy person, drunkards, cowards, an extravagant person, adulterers and the likes are not mentioned when libations are poured to the ancestors. There is the belief that if a living person is not good his ghost also cannot be good¹⁰. The cult of the ancestors therefore helps the living that wish to be honored as an ancestors to life a good here on earth.

Conclusively, the ancestral cult is very important in African. They are spirits and do not feel the kind of pain that human beings do experience. They are believed not to be deformed. If a leg was amputated, it shall be replaced in the land of the dead. Africans do not Joke with their ancestors, they are held in high esteem.

NOTES AND REFERENCES.

1. Mbiti J.S. African religion and philosophy, (New York: double day company, Inc.(1969).p.97.
2. Ibid. P.107
3. Amponsah, k. Topics on West African traditional religion volume 1(Accra: Mc Graw-Hill FEP, 1974), p. 85. see also Awolalu and Dopamu West African traditional religion (Ibadan :Onibonje press, 1979),pp.272-273.
4. Awolalu and Dopamu, West African traditional religion. Ibid . pp..226-277. see Amponsah.k. op. cit. pp.86 – 87.
5. E.Bdaji Idowu Olodumare God in Yoruba belief, (London : long man, 1970) p.110.
6. Morris, G.Watkins et al All Nations English Dictionary , Sri Lanka: New life Lit. Ltd. 1992 p. 763
7. Ibid p. 796
8. Amponsah, k. op. cit. p.90.
9. Amponsah, .k. op. cit .p 90.
10. Ibid.

LIKELY EXAMINATION QUESTIONS

1. Who are the ancestors? Comment on their functions in African traditional religion?
2. Discuss the relationship between the living and the dead?
3. Carefully examine the qualifications to become an ancestor?
4. Are the ancestors worship or venerated?