Ancestral Cult in African Traditional Religious Belief Systems and its Theological Relevance Today

Introduction

Most African Christians have grown up in cultures that are intricately intertwined with the traditional religion of that ethnic group. These indigenous African religions vary in detail but they agree in essentials such as the spiritual nature of the world, the existence and remoteness\(^1\) of God, the role of spirits and mystical powers, the role of ancestors or the “living dead”\(^2\) and the way humans relate to their world and to the Supreme Being.

According to ethnographic studies, the religion of African peoples is at the very heart of their cultures. It controls much of their social, moral and political systems. It is the main source of power, and regulates matters relating to the land and the weather on which the most Africans depend for their survival. Becoming a Christian does not automatically change all of one's worldview nor does it need to change completely. Conversion is, first and foremost, a switch of allegiance from whatever one trusted in before conversion, to Christ. In the African setting, this usually means forsaking one's ancestral sacrifices or *Ntangri* in the Nso culture in Cameroon. It means setting aside all dealings with the spirit-world and trusting in Christ. A Christian theologian must then be aware of how pastoral practices relate to the traditional religious customs. Many current pastoral approaches in the Church run the risk of promoting what could be called a "misguided or unfounded inculturation.\(^3\) This has led to the categorization of African traditional belief systems by some as demonic because there has been a

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\(^1\) Remoteness should not be taken in the literal sense here. It connotes the fact God is so great that one needs to go to God through intermediaries. But on certain occasions God could be addressed directly.


\(^3\) Inculturation is the incarnation of the Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but also becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about “a new creation”. This definition, supposedly taken from Pedro Arrupe, is cited in Peter Schineller, *A handbook on Inculturation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), p.6. However, this definition of inculturation has been challenged by many theologians. This is a one-sided approach to inculturation. It sees the Christian message as the sole bearer of truth. Many theologians today would advocate the understanding that both culture and the gospel message are media of divine presence. The encounter between culture and faith is one that makes possible the fruitful manifestation of God's constant presence to the created universe.
failed attempt to truly understand the complexities of these traditional belief systems.

This essay will first begin by explaining how and where ancestral veneration belongs in African traditional worldviews. This will be followed with a theological analysis of belief in ancestor veneration as a way of highlighting a path to true inculturation. In this project, I will be drawing extensively from the reflections of Professors Charles Nyamiti and Bénèzet Bujo.

I- The cult of Ancestors or Ancestral veneration in Black Africa

There is no homogenous (better, universal) view on ancestors or categories for becoming ancestors in Africa. This practice belongs to a majority of African communities and portrays many elements in common. This ancestral veneration is intrinsically linked to the traditional African world view or weltanshauung. In this worldview, life is understood as a “sacred power” or a “vital force” according to Placid Tempels in his work, Philosophie Bantoue. In the Nso Culture in Cameroon, God is reckoned as “Tar Mbom” meaning creator of all and source of all life. Life is the core element in this traditional worldview on which everything rotates. Nyamiti argues that the ideal of African culture is coexistence and the strengthening of the vital force in the human community and the world at large. This ideal of coexistence and the strengthening of life is the fundamental motivation for ancestral veneration in Black Africa. This may be the reason why in almost all communities, the person without a progeny can never become an ancestor. There is a common belief that an ancestor can only be survived if he/she is remembered by his/her descendants through prayer, incantations and ritual offerings. On their part, an ancestor is expected to procure benign effects on his/her kin like good health, material wealth, high birth rate, good

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4 Black Africa is that part of Africa which lies south of the Sahara, or what is generally known as the Sub-Sahara.
8 Ibid.
harvest, and rains for planting. In the ancestral relationship, the idea of kinship is also fundamental. One is only an ancestor for a particular kinship. This is why consanguinity is of vital importance in the ancestral kinship. According to A. E. Orobator, “an ancestor is a blood relative of a living community; this relationship could be of common parentage or shared ancestry.”

Hence, rituals are directed to particular ancestors; if not they are valueless.

It is worth noting that not all ancestors have blood connection with those who venerate them among many of the African cultures. There are primordial ancestors, transnational ancestors, national, communal, and family ancestors. For instance, Nelson Mandela is considered an all-African ancestor. He is not only restricted to his tribe of origin in South Africa but he is venerated by all Africans. The fathers of independence like Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and so forth have become national ancestors for their respective nations.

Although dead, an ancestor is believed to “enjoy a sacred super human status with special magico-religious powers that can be beneficial or even harmful to the earthly kin.” Due to his nearness to the Supreme Being, an ancestor is believed to possess the ability or power to exist everywhere, even though they have loci of preference (area charged with ancestral spirits) like shrines or sanctuaries, particular trees, tombs, and large bodies of water. Every one will unanimously agree that the African environment is spiritually charged. All the same, there are some sacred places where sacrifices are offered. These are the sanctuaries where living persons communicate with the ancestral world through sacrifices and incantations.

If ancestors are forgotten or neglected by their descendants, they are said to “manifest their anger by sending to their descendants bodily or spiritual calamities.”

The dead can only be happy if they live in the affectionate remembrance of the living; nevertheless, they are stronger than the living.

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11Ibid., p.67
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 track laid down by them.\textsuperscript{12}

Funeral rites are eloquent expressions of the fact that ancestors become invisible guardians of the family. Among some Bamilike tribes in Cameroon, the dead are buried beside the kitchen, so that they may stay warm and be very near to the family members during meals and their conversations. In Cameroon, one will often hear \textit{“les morts ne sont pas morts.”}\textsuperscript{13} Life is a continuum and death is just a change of state. Such a worldview like is the case in some Bamilike groups is in perfect resonance with the Christian belief where death is viewed as a passage to a better state of life, where all will be united with God and encounter Him face to face. An African family is not limited only to the living but embodies the dead relatives. Fortunately, this anger or rage can be appeased through ritual offerings, libations and incantations, and so forth. It then goes without say that ancestors are entitled to constant communication with their loved ones in this world.

Ancestors are said to visit their living relatives through lions, gigantic trees, stones, leopards, monkeys, “royal or sacred pythons” found in \textit{“kire’ke Nyuy”} or the “ the locus of God” in Nso Culture in Cameroon. These cosmic beings, like those mentioned above, become “totems”, that is, objects of “great and due respect.” We can perceive clearly that the living and the ancestors form a sacred environment in which “solidarity is lived and shared through prayers and rituals, whereby human and cosmic solidarity is engaged”\textsuperscript{14} This is why human beings must respect nature or the cosmos and failure to do this may bring about disasters such as lack of rainfall, floods, epidemics, erosion, and early death. This ancestral wisdom could have been a way of preserving the \textit{flora} and the \textit{fauna}.\textsuperscript{15}

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\textsuperscript{12}Bénèzet Bujo, \textit{African Theology, its social context}, (Nairobi: Paulines, 1992), p.23.
\textsuperscript{13}Literal translation “the dead are not dead”
\textsuperscript{14}Charles Nyamiti, \textit{Studies in African Christian Theology, Jesus Christ, the ancestor of Mankind}, p.67.
\textsuperscript{15}Flora and fauna refer to plant and wildlife, respectively. The indigenous plant and wildlife of a geographical region is often referred to as that region’s flora and fauna. Both are collective terms, referring to groups of plant or wildlife specific to a region or a time period. For example, the flora and fauna of a warm region may consist of tropical to warm-temperate vegetation and exotic species of birds. http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-flora-and-fauna.htm, (accessed on 4\textsuperscript{th} Sept 2010).
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In those days, due to the fact that ancestral spirits were believed to inhabit these valuable and rare species, their preservation was guaranteed. Nowadays, human beings' outright destruction of the trees and the *fauna* has led to the extinction of many valuable species with very harmful consequences and disastrous effects. The mistreatment of the environment has led to the prolongation of the Sahara desert in Chad, prolonged dry seasons and outright destruction of the Mau forest in Kenya and other disastrous consequences. Today, ecological theology could draw some inspiration from this worldview.

Furthermore, due to the proximity of ancestors to God, they perform mediating roles in many African societies. The Supreme Being is so great that to approach this transcendent being, one must pass through the intermediary of one's ancestors. This Supreme Being who is the Almighty, the “unbreakable stone”, the “ineffable” and the one who sustains cosmic life, is believed to have his throne high above in the lofty heavens and that the living can only go to Him through the ancestors. In an African chiefdom, one does not go directly to the chief. A chief or *Fon* is approached through intermediaries. And then what more of *Olodumare* (Yoruba), *Chuchu* (Igbo), *Nyuy mbom* (Nso), or the Supreme Being?

And finally, to attain ancestorhood, one must have led a morally sound life as understood in the particular African cultural setting one lives within. An ancestor is regarded as the “the model or exemplar conduct in the community.”\(^{16}\)

Bujo and Nyamiti have written extensively on the ancestral Christology. Nyamiti has put forward the idea of the “brother-ancestor” and Bujo speaks of the “proto-ancestor” or “Proto-Life-Force”. According to the former, Christ is “the brother-ancestor” because He is the perfect mediator between us and God as written in the letter to the Hebrews (9:15-20). Furthermore, Christ is the foundation of moral conduct of Christians. For Nyamiti, Christ fulfils all the conditions one requires to

\(^{16}\)Ibid.
become an ancestor. Commenting on this notion of brother-ancestor, Orobator affirms that Christ’s “ancestorship subsumes and eminently transcends the limited notion of ancestorship. Jesus Christ completes and perfects what Africans believe to be brother-ancestor. Christ is no longer one among many ancestors, but the universal Brother–Ancestor par excellence.”

Bujo thinks that ancestral cult is a ritual founded on the African belief on the sacredness and permanence of life. Life is a continuum. In this cult, Africans enter into communion with the dead or the world beyond. The ancestors are the source of life to the living. As Christians, we believe that Christ is the fullness, the source and summit of Christian life. He took our human flesh and brought it to perfection. Our mortal lives are divinised by the incarnation. Christ’s resurrection is a concrete sign that our mortal bodies shall be raised also from the death. According to Bujo “if the vital force emanating from God actually passes through ancestors, and in particular, through the proto-ancestor of a clan, the Christian believer is convinced that God similarly communicating His own divine life to us by means of His Messiah and son, whom He thereby constituted as our Proto-Ancestor.”

II- Relevance of the Ancestral Cult in a theological context

Ancestral relationship is not simply “a product of human conventions but is founded on human spiritual, bodily and societal structures.” Ancestral veneration may not be the monopoly of black Africa. Nyamiti citing Mircea Eliade asserts that “the fact that ancestral cult is found in practically all human societies in different times and places confirm this view.” However, the cultural and spiritual values attached to this cult may not be the same worldwide. Africa has its own specificity.

Christians believe that human beings are created in the likeness and image of God (Imago Dei), (Genesis 1:27) and they are stewards of creation. Therefore, ancestral cult serves as bridge which links

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20 Ibid.
the creature to the creator. It is way of expressing the human desire for the transcendent, this inner desire to be face to face with the creator in the world beyond the grave where can be found ultimate and everlasting happiness. One can rightly say that ancestral veneration informed by an eschatological character given the fact there is afterlife where one is to be received in the realm of ancestorhood. This is only possible provided that one led a life which could elevate him or her to the status of an ancestor.

In *Ecclesia in Africa*, Pope John Paul II writes that there is not an *iota* of doubt that, ancestral veneration is intrinsically linked with “a profound religious sense, a sense of the sacred, of the existence of God the creator is implied in African belief in ancestral mediation and in God as the great Ancestor of a spiritual world.”21 This cult is far from being diabolic or pagan as was taught by early missionaries to Africa. For them this is tantamount to idolatry, sin against the first commandment, “thou shall have no God except me” (Deuteronomy 5:7).

It is true that like most of the cultural practices, this cult is accompanied with erroneous and superstitious elements which have to be purified in the process of *inculturation*. This purification or purgation is to be done with the help of the Gospel message. For instance, ancestral veneration can bring about tribalism, or nepotism. Members of the same of family or clan are united by the bond of consanguinity and, consequently, venerate the same ancestor. This practice consciously or unconsciously can foster tribalism or nepotism in the political sphere.

If inculturation could be considered the contextualization of the Gospel message within a certain cultural milieu, those aspects of the cultural practices which are incompatible with Gospel values are to be discarded or eradicated. Ancestral veneration is born in a worldview where there is a strong emphasis on the sacredness of life. Consequently, there can be a tendency to impute sudden deaths or early deaths to witchcraft. This has caused conflict in families and has strained family ties, thus creating unnecessary enemies. This is one of those sensitive areas which need purification in the

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process of inculturation.

Nevertheless, African ancestral veneration offers many valuable elements to humanity. Ancestral forms of worship are closely related to the love of life as is reiterated in *Ecclesia in Africa*: “it is precisely this love for life that leads the Africans to give such great importance to the veneration of their ancestors”. This is why practices like abortion and euthanasia are considered abominable in the African traditional culture. Life is a precious gift from God which must be revered. One may ask, how can ancestral veneration be a valuable tool in bioethics?

But one must acknowledge the fact that in some African cultures there has been the killing of twins has been practiced in the past. There has been and continues to be violence against widows, against those accused of witchcraft, against the corpses of stillborn children, referred to as *Abikus* among the Yoruba of western Nigeria. These are practices which need purification in the process of inculturation.

Closely linked to this ancestral cult is a strong sense of solidarity which is intimately associated with family life and love of progeny. This solidarity is vertical and horizontal at the same time. It is vertical in the sense that, human beings are related to the Supreme Being and horizontal in that human beings are related between one another because they are social beings. This lays the emphasis on the important aspect of community within the African context. Solidarity amongst family and members of the clan could be considered horizontal and solidarity with the transcendent Being through or without ancestral mediation is vertical. Ancestors are guardians of their living kinship. Solidarity is one of the strong African cultural values. In the words of John Mbiti, “I am because we are and we are because I am.” This reiterates the African Philosophical (*Ubuntu*) which claims that a person is a person through, with and for the community. The identity of a person or human being (*umuntu*) is defined by

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22 Ibid., no.43.

23 At the very heart of the Zulu maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* ("a person is a person through (other) persons") is the word *ubuntu* which can be rendered “humanity”, “humanness”, or even “humaneness”.

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his or her relationship to the community. However, there is also a danger of “parasitism”. Though participation is an important aspect of African community life, some persons just tend to profit from their kin.

Analogously, ancestors could be considered “saints” as is the case in the Catholic Church. And furthermore, the saints as well as the ancestors are those who have lived exemplary lives. If in an African worldview, the community stretches from the world of the living to the ancestral world, then the doctrine of the “communion of saints” can make a lot of sense in this worldview. In Catholic teaching as professed in the creed, the communion of saints refers to persons in spiritual union with all members of the Christian Church living and the dead, those on earth, in heaven, and, for those who believe in purgatory, those also who are in that state of purification. They are all part of a single "mystical body", with Christ as the head, in which each member contributes to the good of all and shares in the welfare of all.\(^{24}\) Hence, theologically, this cult clearly brings out its eschatological character. A believer in this cult will not doubt that there is life after death, that life is a continuum.

This analysis has outlined only a few of the rich values found in the ancestral veneration, but it suffices to show the objective validity of this cult. This reveals something of the storehouse of what John Paul II terms “the wealth of cultural values and priceless human qualities which Africa can offer to the Churches and to humanity as a whole”\(^ {25}\).

Conclusion

The main objective of this study is to bring out the relevance of ancestral veneration in African cultures in a theological discourse. It is clear in the text that this cult is full of many cultural values which could be shared with the whole of humanity. Despite some superstitious and harmful practices such as witchcraft which may accompany this cult, ancestral veneration is not incompatible with the


\(^{25}\) *Ecclesia in Africa*, no.42.
Gospel and, hence, remains a fertile ground for *inculturation*. Ancestral veneration is certainly not the totality of the African worldview, but it is an important aspect of this worldview. This cult has an eschatological character to it. Theologically, this cult portrays vividly the objectives of the theology of hope. One who believes in this cult will not doubt that there is life after death. Life is a continuum. This is the core of the Christian faith. Our eternal home is in heaven.

However, this project seems to give the impression that to be saved, one simply needs to fulfil the conditions for becoming an ancestor. Some may risk looking at it as being a sort of superstitious belief in the presence of spirits. Finally, this project could have brought out some pastoral guidelines in the inculturation process but this is the focus of another paper.

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