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CONTENTS

1. A SURVEY HISTORY OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH FROM THE APOSTOLIC AGE TO THE COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON 451A.D.: T. ADAMOLEKUN 9
2. A RE-ASSESSMENT OF THE NATURE AND APPROACH OF TITHES AND OFFERINGS IN CHURCHES: T. M. OBAMUYI 27
3. THE HISTORY AND EFFECT OF MADRASAH EDUCATION IN NORTHERN NIGERIA: F. T. LATEJU 35
4. THE PLACE OF AFRICAN ANCESTORS IN THE AGE OF MODERNITY: ALAMU, A. G. 49
5. SOLUTION TO POVERTY: OYEDEPO'S PROPHETIC AND HEALING MISSION IN NIGERIA: S. A. OWOEYE 58
6. MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE AND THE QUAGMIRE OF KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION: AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF CHRISTIANITY AND TAOISM: S.A. LALEYE 71
7. THE CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF THE RETURN OF MISSION SCHOOLS IN EDO STATE: W. E. EHIANU 81
8. ORACLE CONSULTATION: ITS ROLE IN THE DÉNOUEMENT OF NINE YORUBA PLAYS: O.O. ALABI 92
9. INCARNATION AND THE SCIENCE OF EUGENICS AND HUMAN CLONING: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS: C. P. OLATUNJI 100
10. GENDER, SEX AND THE DIALECTICS OF RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP TOLERANCE: IRENE OMOLOLA A 115
11. CHRISTIAN RELIGION AND SCIENCE IN FUTURE NIGERIA: F.A. AKINSEYE (REV. FR.) 125
12. CHILD ABUSE IN NIGERIAN SOCIETY: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE: K.A. ADEGOKE 133

THE PLACE OF AFRICAN ANCESTORS IN THE AGE OF MODERNITY

Alamu, A. G.

Abstract

The cut and thrust of the paper is the re-examination of the place of the ancestors in contemporary world. The paper critically evaluates the pre-colonial status of the ancestors and lucidly highlights the pride of place they once enjoyed. The incursions of the proselytizing religions, especially Christianity and Islam virulently challenge the place of the ancestors today. It is the contention of the paper that since the missionary religions have made a lot of converts among the traditional people, as a consequence, little or no regard is paid to them. The converts prefer to go to their new worship centres instead of venerating their departed. The civilizing tendencies the West brought to Africa, particularly the globalizing forces, like the media, have helped in no small way to pave way for the high disregards for them. The paper concludes that since the living ones do not even reflect the moral sanctity Africa was once known for, propelled by avarice, materialism and greed, the 'moral paragon' should be allowed to rest in peace.

Introduction

"In the beginning it was religion, and in the end it should be all religion."¹ As a matter of fact, men took off from religion, march along with religion and arrive at religion in their daily engagement.² Arising from the foregoing, African people demonstrate their religion with mark of honour or reverence for the supersensible world. Thus, this demonstration serves as a schema of religious ceremony to the supreme being through the divinities or ancestors. African people possess a rich religious heritage, which they display in communion with the higher beings. This religious observance is pivotal to them and they are always with them. Thus, Africans are not bereft of religion.

Africans have always acknowledged their ancestors by preserving their cultural creations and belief in celebrating and performing rituals. As a matter of fact, we have benefited immensely from the various works of scholars such as E.B. Idowu, J.O. Awolalu, Ade P. Dopamu, J.S. Mbiti, among others. They have all done invaluable works on African Religion with particular regard to the ancestors. Idowu, for instance, observed that ancestors in African Religion are the departed members of the families on earth.³ In the same vein, Awolalu

supports what Idowu had previously posited that the ancestors are deceased spirits who stand in close relation to the family as well have enhanced prestige.⁴ In their various works, it was discovered that African ancestors have become common place. But none of these scholars has touched on the present positions of the ancestors especially in this age of technology coupled with multifarious problems in the post-colonial environment. It is the intention of this paper to explore African ancestors, and the place of African ancestors in contemporary society.

Understanding African Ancestors

The root of religion is the absolute dependence of human beings on the supernatural powers, capable of aiding them in time of trouble. The essence of this, makes Africans believe that they can commune with their ancestors, who have enhanced powers associated with their newly acquired status and particularly as intermediaries between man and the Supreme Being.⁵ This specifically informs the belief in the ancestors and their corresponding relevance.

Ancestors are the departed spirits who are honoured as result of their long, good, spectacular and extra-ordinary lives led on earth and at death are being venerated. Thus, Idowu describes ancestors as:

...the deceased who are truly members of the families on earth; but they are no longer of the same fleshy order as those who are still living in the flesh on earth. They are closely related to this world; but are no longer ordinary mortals. Because they have crossed the borderland between this world, and the supersensible world entering and living in the latter, they have become freed from the restrictions imposed by the physical world. They can now come to abide with their fold on earth invisibly, to aid or hinder them to promote prosperity or cause adversity.⁶

Supporting this view, Kwame Gyekye writes:

The ancestors are certain individuals of the past generations of a lineage who are said to have distinguished themselves in many ways and, in particular, to have led virtuous and exemplary lives worthy of emulation by succeeding generations of the lineage. Such individuals are regarded... as moral paragons.⁷

Udo Etuk also opines that the ancestors are revered consequent upon their affairs of their lineage and are believed to have a great deal of influence over their lineage and siblings. They also play a great intermediary role in between the physical and the spiritual world.⁸ The ancestors are believed to be quite near and present at every occasion, only a thin veil separates them from the living.⁹ In fact, the ancestors even at death can see, hear, feel and express emotions.¹⁰ Besides, ancestors are able to see and observe what is happening on earth, and they maintain the greatest interest in the affairs of mankind,

most especially those of their immediate family. No wonder, Mbiti refers to them as the "living dead" who keep constant and healthy communion with the living.

Ancestors have various names from locality to locality. The Yoruba call them "Baba nla" or "Babajide"¹¹ the Igbo call them "Ndicie",¹² the Ewe and Fon refer to them "Tovodu", and the Akan people of Ghana call them "Nsamanfo", or "Nananom Nsamanfo."¹³

Qualifications Of The African Ancestors

To the Africans, death is not the end of life, it is a continuum, as such the African dead are not totally cut-off from their descendants. As a matter of fact, the African dead have an endless fellowship with the living in the community. With this description, it thus informs us about Idowu's concept of partial reincarnation indicating that the "Baba nla" of the family never dies. Rather, death had given him more power and prestige to oversee man's mundane activities and at the same time, he also reincarnates.¹⁴

The qualifications of the ancestors are that: only those who have led a good life, lived to a ripe old age, died good death and accorded full burial rites.¹⁵ To the Africans, burial is very significant and symbolic. Thus, burial has theological, environmental and spiritual imports. Theologically, proper burial is the requirement for admission into the communion of the ancestors. People who are not properly buried revolve around. The fact is that if a man is not properly buried, it will have cultural and social stigma on his family. The spiritual level informs the fact that when the deceased are buried properly both the living and the dead live in peace. This burial goes beyond the physical realm, it has eschatological implication for the people.

It behooves us to address the various misrepresentations of the ancestors in African society. It was said by Idowu that African people, when venerating the ancestors, go beyond their boundaries. This propels observers to say that ancestors are worshipped.¹⁶ Also, Dopamu expressing this view on the African ancestors posits that ancestral veneration cannot be separated from worship.¹⁷ Contrary to these opinions, ancestors are not worshipped rather they are revered as a result of their great feat and influence on the affairs of their descendants and their cordial relationship with the supersensible world. Gyekye asserts that veneration does not amount to worship, rather it is African social behaviour¹⁸ bequeathed to the dead.

It is a manifestation of filial piety or "an unbroken relationship between the parent who has departed from this world and the offspring who are still here."¹⁹ Furthermore, ancestors live beyond the mundane and are subsequently approached by their siblings. This appreciation of the ancestors by their siblings is demonstrated in reverence. Agreeably, ancestors are included in the religious hierarchy of the Africans and are charged with the responsibility of acting as intermediaries between men and the supersensible world.²⁰

Therefore, they are not restricted to their mundane or social environment but have great flair for religious issues. As a matter of fact, ancestors maintain healthy and uninterrupted relationship with their immediate families which enable them to give consideration to human feelings. They get in touch with their siblings often and participate in everyday activities. Admittedly, the ancestors are constantly invoked, and they are not unaware of the actions, intents and feelings of their descendants who on their behalf are the temporary caretakers of lineage and prosperity.²¹ This also readily makes the ancestors' consciousness of their importance as central to the sustenance of their descendants. Without an equivocation, they help to project the yearnings of their descendants to the deity in a bid to secure relationships. With these potentials possessed by the ancestors, they are also capable of exploring these qualities against those still alive.²² Sometimes, in order to maintain the relationships, the spiritual head carries out rituals, and cannot take food in religious gathering or drink without first and foremost throwing out a morsel or pouring libation to the ancestors.²³ Likewise, it is believed among Africans that it is an abomination to empty their pots at night so that when the ancestors come, they can have a share from the remnant.

Some of these ancestors are celebrated with great festivals. For instance, in Yoruba Religion, these ancestors include: Egungun and Oro and they play prominent role in the socio-cultural undertaking of the people.²⁴ Idowu is apposite when he asserts that these two ancestors are means of demonstrating in a sure concrete way the belief that those who depart from this physical earth continue in existence in the world of the immaterial and actively involved with those who are still here.²⁵ Also, there are communal ceremonies in respect of the African dead. Among them are Mnuo in Igbo land, Aday ceremony among the Akan.²⁶ Not only that, Uda in Ekpoma, Obazu in Aoma are examples in Edo land. During these festivals, animal offerings are made to the ancestors and they are followed by prayers, and the Oriki praise names of the ancestors are chanted.

Veneration of Ancestor Among the Africans

These African ancestors were heroes in their lifetime. They had positively influenced lives, affected development, liberated people from imperialism, etc. Oftentimes, they could be remembered by building schools or erecting markets in their honour. Ancestors are also referred to as "moral paragons" because, they uphold morality and also, they are custodians of traditional morality. Awolalu and Dopamu capture their strong influence in the society.

Belief in ancestors supplies sanction for public morality. They are the guardians of traditional morality. They, therefore, demand a high sense of respect for the traditional law and custom. The living must live as they have lived. It is believed that just as the living parents have power to punish disobedience in the youth or dereliction of

filial duties so also the neglected or offended ancestors can punish their offspring for moral offences, and they can bring disaster upon the whole family.²⁷

In several cases, the ancestors also condemn and punish those who commit atrocities, such as murder, stealing, witchcraft, adultery, false oath, hatred, incest, bearing false witness²⁸ among others.

In fact, the communal ceremonies unify and consolidate the society, because it is generally believed that when people converge in public gathering, they express their feelings, emotions, even sentiments through singing, dancing, clapping of hands and expression of joy. Undoubtedly, this act of public gathering at which people or community meet to honour their ancestors is called festival. Festival promote social solidarity, communal order and, hopes of people are kept alive. Socially speaking, festivals virtually bring together whole community and provide an occasion for the renewal of strained relationship among of the community. Awolalu and Dopamu made this statement when they asserted that:

The coming together of the people is re-enacted and many people for the first time in the year meet on festival occasions. Men and women are brought together in one crowd and there is usually a sort of social re-union.²⁹

Through festivals, the life of community is revived. People are entertained and their tension find an outlet. As a matter of fact, human life needs some important festivals to give both solemnity and laughter.

The celebration of the festival in honour of the ancestors is wholly engulfed with a grandeur of rituals and people come out in their best attires and feast together. It is equivalent of Christmas. The chief priest and the Head of the community would sit in state and receive homage from the sub chiefs and subjects. The people see festival as the social safeguard of the basic needs of their existence and of the basic relations that make up their social order: land, rain, bodily health, the family, the community.³⁰ By and large, the people during this time help to foster the sense of identity and belongingness as well as solidarity. These are the integrative and cohesive factors upon which the survival and continuity of the community depends.

Religiously, the festival welcomes the ancestral spirits to human societies and renew their relationship. The religious values are repeated through communal festivals. To this end, Mbiti helps a great deal in summarizing the religious relevance in this paradigm:

People seize such occasion to solicit blessings from God or the departed, and there is a general feeling that the visible and the invisible worlds co-exist for the benefit of man who is at their centre. Rituals and festivals are religious ways of implementing the values and beliefs of society.³¹

Sequel to the above, ancestral celebrations are important in order to reaffirm and consolidate these religious values which are inherent and deep rooted among the people.

To this end, celebration of the ancestors is a common place rehearsal in African Religion. Thus, the celebration of the ancestors is a mark of honour and remembrance as well as the invocation of the African dead. Ancestral veneration aids adherents spiritually, especially as regards healthy and cordial relationship with the spirit world. Ancestral veneration is performed either annually, bi-annually, monthly, bi-monthly or anytime especially at the dictate of oracle divinity. Ancestral veneration in African Religion is conducted by either the heads of the immediate families, priest, priestess or clan heads as the occasion demands.

The Dilemma of the Ancestors in the Age of Modernity

It is apparent that African ancestors are the spirits of the departed who are remembered and honoured with great festivals. They participate in virtually all that is taking place in their immediate families in particular and the communities in general. They gained a high and spiritual status endowed with powers, which the living do not possess. Contrary to these positions, it is expedient to state that majority of the ancestors are not humane to their subjects. It is an obvious fact that the ancestors were despotic during their lifetime. This was obvious when the first missionaries came to plant Christianity in Africa. They worked through the Obas and others to forcefully convert their subjects because the missionaries believed that African Kings wielded more power to coerce their subjects. Some of the head chiefs "were known to have been tyrannical rulers who led morally unworthy lives. From the days when human sacrifice was practiced - always with the direct or at least the indirect involvement of the chief."³² Gyekye adds that the respect accorded the living chiefs today "is not necessary respect for the morally virtuous lives of living chiefs. Some chiefs in Africa today are morally corrupt."³³

Meanwhile, the ancestors are referred to as "moral paragons" in which case, they are custodians of public and traditional morality in their community. However, it is no longer true today that they are still virtuous. They are morally bankrupt as a result of the fact that some moral problems such as stealing, incest, sorcery, witchcraft, killings, maiming, disobedience, adultery, false oath, hatred and lots of others have assumed dangerous and unprecedented dimension. These moral problems which suppose to attract sanctions by the ancestors are allowed to soar and remained unchecked.

In point of fact, the ancestors are today blind to the endless challenges we face in the society. Looking at the role of ancestors, it is certain that much power has been given to them, as such we expect much from them. Today, the opposite is the case, because our lives are dependent on multifarious variables. These variables are both endogenous and exogenous in nature. It is

endogenous in the sense that the problems we cause for ourselves, emanating from the family or head of the family cannot be handled by the ancestors. The fact is that the ancestors cannot provide for all our material well-being. Similarly, exogenous problems, emanating from bad leadership, harsh economic reforms, political uprisings, social crises, among others, cannot be solved by the ancestors. Even when the so-called living are caught in the intractable web of these problems, they go scot-free without sanction from the "moral paragon."

In African religious belief, the ancestors are consulted through the oracle before any function is performed. Lately, human beings have taken over the position of the ancestor, they no longer consult the oracle so as to know the mind and choice of the ancestors concerning certain issues affecting the community. For instance, money is freely used in many communities to determine the next king of which the kingmakers are bought over and they speak their minds instead of the minds of ancestors. Where are the ancestors? If they are still the "living-dead", it means they are crying for justice, reinstatement and restoration. One would be compelled to agree with Kofi Awoonor that:

The gods are crying, my father's gods are crying for a burial... for a final ritual... but they that should build the fallen shrines have joined the dawn marchers singing their way towards Gethsemane... the gods cried, shedding clayey tears on calico; the drink offering had dried up in the harmattan and the fetish priest is dressing up for the Easter service.³⁴

The foregoing reveals that the ancestors are handicapped and men have taken over their position hence they are screaming for a burial consequent upon their abandonment. Gyekye posits that there is no real justification for unrelenting strictness to all features of the received culture and heritage. The ancestors do not expect their offering to make changes in their legacy for times change.³⁵ Judging from the magnitude and multifarious problems in the post colonial period of the African society, the place of the ancestors cannot be justified. Therefore, the ancestors should be made to perpetually rest in peace and be forgotten.

Concluding Remarks

Having extensively explored the African ancestors, their qualification, function, social and religious significance, coupled with their dilemma, it is appropriate to maintain that the ancestors can no longer occupy their hitherto pride of place. The current paradigms of the ancestors as well as their achievements indicate that they must be remembered, praised and celebrated, but cannot enjoy such powerful position and influence they once enjoyed. The post-independence terrain does not guarantee such a place anymore. To

this end, Kwame Gyekye again tells us what ancestors are not in contemporary African society:

But we must not expect them to bestow favor on their descendants. The post colonial problems of African clearly show that the ancestors cannot be helpful. The greatest reverence we, the descendants of the ancestors, can show to them is to let them rest in peace.³⁶

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