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ANCESTRAL VENERATION IN AFRICAN RELIGION AND AN AFRICAN INDIGENOUS CHURCH: A FOCUS ON CELESTIAL CHURCH OF CHRIST

ALAMU, A.G*

INTRODUCTION

African people possess a rich religious heritage, which they display in communion and in communication with the divine. This religious observance is pivotal and fundamental with them and always with them. Thus, African people are worshipping beings; they either worship the Supreme Being, the divinities, or the ancestors. The act of worship is demonstrated through prayers, rituals and dance as a mark of honour or reverence to the supersensible world. Thus, this demonstration that serves as schema of religious ceremony is not restricted to African Religion alone, it is also obtainable in an African indigenous church with special reference to Celestial Church of Christ.

As a matter of fact, we have benefited immensely from the various works of scholars like E.B. Idowu, J.O. Awolalu, Ade P. Dopamu, J.S. Mbiti, among others. They have all done invaluable works on ancestral veneration. Idowu for instance observed that ancestral veneration in African religion is the reverence bequeathed to the ancestors who have acquired a prominent status for themselves at death.¹ In the same vein, J. O. Awolalu corroborates what E. B. Idowu had previously posited as honouring the deceased spirits who stand in close relation to the family as well have enhanced prestige.²

In another development, Akin Omoyajowo, Deji Aiyegboyin and S. A. Ishola, A. U. Adogame, among others have also written on African indigenous churches, especially with reference to Celestial Church of Christ and its beliefs. In their works, it was discovered that ancestral veneration is a common practice in Celestial Church of Christ, which in a way negates the church's table of tenets of faith. In addition, ancestral veneration is being construed as African Religion. It is the intention of this paper to use both literary and oral sources to explore ancestral veneration in African Religion and an African indigenous church- Celestial Church of Christ, with a view to comparing and contrasting ancestral veneration in both religions.

Understanding The Concept of Ancestral Veneration in African Religion.

In attempt to grasp the concept of Ancestral Veneration in African Religion, it will be appropriate to briskly give an account of African Religion. There is no society that is bereft of religion. Religion at all times plays intricate role in shaping the history of humanity, place, time and society. In other words, Religion is co-extensive with life of the people, and it is vital in understanding of nature. Thus, Afrel is an autochthonous religion of the African people. To the Africans, it was religion at the beginning, and it shall all be religion³ at the close of age. In essence, Africans started off with religion; march alongside with religion and subsequently arrive at religion. African Religion plays a vital role in understanding God, divinities, ancestors, spirits, among others and their relationship with human beings. Dopamu sincerely attests to the fact that African Religion (Afrel) embraces all aspects of life. Hear him:

African do not know how to live without religion. They celebrate life religiously and they never embark on anything without bringing in religion.⁴

The above reveals that Africans are uncompromisingly religious. Africans strongly believe in the almightiness of God as the creator of the universe; the divinities as the spark of God, the ancestors as emanating from the supersensible world of the Africans. All these and others are the attributes of the Supreme Being as aptly described by Awolalu and Dopamu in

their work⁵. The Africans regard the supersensible world as intangible. This immaterial phenomenon makes Africans real and unique.

The root of religion is the absolute dependence of human beings upon the intangible powers capable of aiding mankind. The essence of this makes Africans believe that they can commune with their kinsmen in the unseen world, who have enhanced powers associated with their new status and particularly as intermediaries between man and Supreme Being.⁶ This informs the belief in the ancestors and their attendant importance.

Ancestors are the departed spirits who are honoured as a result of their long, good spectacular and extra ordinary lives they lived here on earth, and at death are being remembered with great festivals. Thus, E. B. Idowu stoutly describes ancestors as:

...the deceased (who) are truly members of the families on earth; but they are no longer of the same fleshly 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 folk on earth invisibly, to aid or hinder them, to promote prosperity or cause adversity.⁷ Supporting this view Udo Etuk writes: ...they are revered and are believed to have a great deal of influence over the affairs of their lineage, and to play a great intermediary role in their lives with respect to their relationship with the spiritual world. The ancestors are believed to be quite near and present at every occasion; only a thin veil separates them from the living.⁸

In fact, the ancestors even at death can see, hear, feel and have human emotions.⁹ Not only that, 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, J. S. Mbiti refers to them as the "living-dead"¹⁰ who keep constant and healthy communion with the living.

Therefore, ancestral veneration, though used interchangeably with ancestor, worship refers to respect or honour bequeathed to some of the African dead. This honour is also extended to ancestors and saints of varying fame and influence. To Awolalu, "Veneration means the highest degree of respect and reverence, a feeling of sentiment excited by the dignity, wisdom and goodness of a person, or by the sacredness of his character"¹¹. It is generally believed that veneration is rendered to superiors, and "sacred" is dedicated to Supreme Being, divinities or ancestors. However, there are some erroneous expressions that ancestral veneration is African religion per se, coupled with the fact that ancestral veneration is equivalent to ancestor cults, which the people worship in form of personage. Contrary to these opinions, ancestors are not worshipped rather they are revered as a result of their great deal of influence over the affairs of their lineage¹² and their cordinal relationship with the supersensible world. In addition, it is manifestation of filial piety or "an unbroken relationship between the parent who has departed from this world and the offspring who are still here"¹³. It is as a result of this respect that people accord their reverence ancestors that makes some people to classify them as ancestor worship.

In another development, ancestors live beyond the mundane and are subsequently approached by their siblings. This hyper – appreciation of the ancestors by the siblings is demonstrated in reverence. Admittedly, ancestors are included in the religious hierarchy of the Africans and are saddled with the responsibility of acting as intermediaries between men and the totally supersensible world.¹⁴ Therefore, they are not restricted to the mundane and social enclave, but have great flair for religious issues around their environment.

As a matter of fact, ancestors maintain healthy and uninterrupted relationship with their immediate families that enable them give consideration to human feelings within their

immediate environment. Arising from these emotional feelings, they get in touch with their siblings often and participate in the day-to-day affairs. On this note, 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.¹⁵ Descriptively therefore, this invocation of the ancestors paves way for blessings, prosperity, protection, mediation, and the averting of impending calamities. This also readily alerts the ancestors' consciousness of their importance as nucleus to the sustenance of their siblings. In a nutshell, they help to project the yearnings of their descendants to the deity in a bid to securing unimposed association and relationship. With these potentials possessed by these ancestors in linking men with the supersensible world, they are also capable of exploring these qualities against those still alive.¹⁶ In other words, ancestors are not only benign, but are also benevolent protectors of their descendants. They are sometimes believed to be the source of trouble where they might have been offended. For this purpose the spiritual head responsible for the rituals cannot take food in religious issues or drink without first and foremost throwing out a morsel or pouring a few dregs on the grounds for the ancestors to partake.¹⁷ These atavistic tendencies thus make people to be intimate with the ancestors always as house in-between houses.

Some of these ancestors in Yoruba Religion for instance are Egungun and Oro, and they play prominent roles as ancestors.¹⁸ E. B. 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 are actively involved with those who are still here.¹⁹ In sum, Egungun and Oro used to operate as instruments of discipline and execution in the Yoruba government of the olden days, coupled with the obvious fact they are twin brothers.²⁰

In the Edo Religion, Ekpoma and Aoma to be precise, Uda²¹ and Obazu²² are also prominent ancestors. Uda for instance is venerated among the Esan people consequent upon emancipating them from Benin imperialism. As a deified hero, a festival is annually held in his honour, at which the 'Onogie'- Oba of Ekpoma sacrifices through this ancestor and he receives blessings, protections, healing and fruitful harvest for his people. Moreover, Obazu is prominent among Aoma people in Owan West Local Government Area of Edo State. He was famous among his people and influential in helping his people against external attack and he was known as 'rainmaker'. The people seek for his help before the planting season. A festival is annually held for Obazu before cultivation. However women are barred from watching Obazu as a result of abuse. In fact, the motif was that women were previously allowed to venerate Obazu while their menfolk were indoor throughout the period it lasted. This continued over a long period, till the womenfolk started allowing their men counterpart to peep through the wall. When it was discovered, they were barred and the menfolk took over.²³ Thus, women are not permitted to be communicants.

Ancestral veneration is a commonplace rehearsal in African Religion. Thus, this ancestral veneration in African Religion is part of reverence, and as a remembrance and consequent invocation of the African dead. Ancestral veneration aids adherents spiritually, especially as regards healthy and cordial relationship with the spiritual world. Ancestral veneration is performed either annually, bi-annually, monthly, bi-monthly or anytime especially at the dictate of oracle divinity. To this end, ancestral veneration in African Religion is conducted by either the heads of the immediate families, priest, priestess or clan heads as the occasion warrants. Ancestral veneration in African Religion remains unhindered and assertive. Thus, these ancestral qualities help in promoting constant and healthy nexus and communion with their folk living invisibly. This is indispensable for sustaining social intercourse social solidarity, and cohesion. It promotes prosperity and at the same time averts calamities.

Background To African Indigenous Churches: Celestial Church of Christ

The twentieth century up to this period has witnessed the evolution and growth of the African indigenous churches as a new form of Christianity. Special feature of these churches is

their African outlook. These African indigenous churches differ widely in style, attitudes, and organization.²⁴ Thus, it suffices to mention Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), Cherubim and Seraphim (C and S), Church of the Lord (Aladura) and Celestial Church of Christ (CCC) as some of the African indigenous churches in Nigeria.

Akin Omoyajowo enunciates that one of these churches "began as an indigenous church ... founded by an indigenous person and is run under indigenous leadership".²⁵ The CCC is an African indigenous church founded by the late Prophet S. B. J. Oschoffa. Originally founded in Porto-Novo in the early 50's, it got spread like whirlwind across Africa and abroad. After its establishment in Porto-Novo, it gained prominence in Nigeria and attained worldwide fame.²⁶ Today, the CCC can well be referred to as an international church. It has been depicted as one of the most attractive, embracing, influential and flourishing indigenous churches in Africa.²⁷ The late Dr. Tai Solarin, in his lifetime described the influential nature of the church. According to him, "the church is fascinating to the incredulous, inviting to those with problems and a haven from the billows of life".²⁸ CCC is a church where spiritual trances are prevalent. The attraction of the church to many is the promotion of African credentials.

Ancestral Veneration in Celestial Church of Christ

The issues of ancestral veneration within the CCC could be said to be quite controversial. This is so because the first article on the church's table of tenets of faith vividly states that members are forbidden to engage or participate in any form of idolatry, fetish ceremony or cults, black magic and charms. Yet, it should not be misunderstood that some of the practices observers could consider as fetish are actually events that assist the adherents spiritually, especially with regard to relationship with the sacred.²⁹ Among the copious practices is Amissa service.³⁰

This ancestral veneration within CCC is regarded as Esin Amissa or Amissa service.³¹ The Amissa worship is an "invocation of the soul of the dead"³² performed annually where capable spiritual leaders are devolved to conduct the service. Be that as it may, the way Amissa service is conducted leaves one with the impression that it is a ritual for the dead other than a memorial service, which the CCC faithfuls claim it to be. Ogunewu helps in no small measure to highlight materials needed for the Esin Amissa. These include:

- a) Corn pap (koko) and bean cake (Akara) to be prepared in abundance;
- b) Seven types of fruits;
- c) Nine sticks of candle for deceased adult and two for deceased, juvenile;
- d) Incense;
- e) Other sacred things, and
- f) A Catafa (the replica of a coffin draped with black and white cloths)³³

All these compulsory materials would have been provided by the families of the deceased. The order of service commences with prayer at the church entrance before the procession. The spiritual leader is essentially meant to offer fervent prayers of mercy, sanctification and remission of sins for the deceased, as well as on behalf of the children, family, and relations of the deceased, which he/she has left behind.³⁴ Special prayers are specifically rendered for the deceased, as the spiritual leader kneels down behind the Catafa- the coffin draped with black and white cloths. He then calls out name (s) of the deceased over the Catafa as incense is continually burnt and members sing rhythmically in a solemn mood.³⁵

As earlier stated, the CCC referred to this as a memorial service for the dead. The attitude of the people towards remembrance of the deceased or the veneration and appeasement of ancestors is obviously evident in this memorial service or Esin Amissa. Further to that is the fact that Esin Amissa is linked with the doctrine of the saints in Catholic Communion, with special emphasis on Holy Mary being invoked as a means of veneration to plead on behalf of sinners, which also has a replica in CCC.³⁶ It is the belief of CCC that the holy dead can assist the living to accompany their purpose as a result of their varying influence. Corroborating this assertion Oosthuizen writes:

Thus, indigenous African churches take more to Old Testament scripture. Old Testament ritual, which is usually no longer adhered to by Christian has been revived in these churches, as is the case with the use of ashes as a sacrifices, (ancestral veneration) and some rites of avoidance.³⁷

The position here attempts to depict that Amissa service is reminiscent of the Old Testament ritual of the yore (Lev. 3:5-17, 16:2ff, Exo. 29:36-40), which again has been revamped in the Celestial Church of Christ.

It is in the light of the above that we can draw a link that Amissa service is conducted in order to maintain constant and uninterrupted intercourse with the departed "saints". It is thus a halfway between the physical and spiritual world. This helps in gaining spiritual insight into the cause or causes of any calamity in order to predict or assist the type of ritual actions that are likely to effect solution of the problems. In the same vein, Amissa service is also conducted to solicit for remembrance and appeasement and avoidance of impending doom. This ritual action demonstrated during Amissa service is believed to be efficacious, in giving and granting request with the remembrance of the dead; and also capable of dealing with the spiritual anxieties. This invocation of the dead in CCC thus maintains a modicum if not all of what obtains in African ancestral veneration.

Ancestral Veneration in African Religion and CCC Compared

Ancestral veneration in its proper and elaborate form as it obtains in African Religion can be said to be similar to the CCC. As a matter of fact, the rituals involved in the veneration of the ancestors in African Religion are offered in the cults. Likewise, there are sacred places in the CCC such as the mercy land where rituals are performed. The altar is also a sacred place inside the church building, while the mercy land is outside the building usually within the church premises.³⁸ The mercy land is a place where both corporate and individual rituals can be performed. Meanwhile, the ritual practices in the CCC are referred to as "Ise".³⁹

On the other hand, the church cannot be said to owe allegiance to any of the divinities that are revered in African Religion.⁴⁰ Yet, various ritual practices that are prominent and common, some of which can be described as being similar to the African religious practices in one way or the other. According to A.U Adogame, there seems to be some resemblance and affinities between the CCC and the indigenous religion of the people. He further buttressed that CCC in Nigeria is a distinctive form of Christianity that bears imprint of traditional religious system. It thus appears to owe much to traditional religion such that they are easily taken as practising "heathenism" with merely borrowed or "corrupted" Christian veneer.⁴¹ Of course the CCC interprets Christianity in the African set up, as combining the two fundamental elements of Christianity and African culture in a way that expresses Christian intentions without undervaluing African credentials. This religious piety in the CCC is the belief in a combination of series of prayers and ritual actions, which are regarded as "Ise" though not as elaborate as it exists in African Religion.

Also, the various purposes of ancestral veneration in African Religion and the Amissa service in the CCC are geared towards protecting adherents from evil, enhancing uninterrupted social intercourse among the descendants, and granting favour and help before the deity. In essence, the ancestral veneration in African religion is hinged on long, good, spectacular and extra ordinary life here on earth, and they are remembered with great festivals, while in the CCC, it is only held for the dead irrespective of the status. In other words, ancestral veneration in African Religion is accorded with the deceased adult only, while in the CCC, it is conducted to both deceased adult and juvenile.

Furthermore, ancestral veneration in African Religion is held any time of the year as the occasion arises, while in the CCC, it is only held annually. Again, ancestral veneration in both religions enhances adherents spiritually as well as uninterrupted relationship with the supersensible world of the Africans. The dead are being remembered and revered because of their fame and influence. In fact, they are both African in outlook. They stand to promote

African credentials and traditional values. These various African credentials expressed in religious ceremonies unify, reunite, and consolidate an already existing relationship with the supersensible world. The ancestral veneration in African Religion and the Amissa service in the CCC are both African worldview. No doubt, our comparison of ancestral veneration in African Religion and the CCC has illuminated our understanding of the African ancestor worship with the doctrine of the saint or invocation of the dead.

Thus, as a way of combining African worldview and Christianity together in respect of rites without undervaluing African credentials, ancestral veneration gives the adherents a breakthrough and solution to all problems of life. Also, people find the indigenous religion and the Celestial Church of Christ as an outlet and a leeway or safe haven from their anxieties.

Conclusion

The paper has examined ancestral veneration in African Religion and the CCC. Ancestral veneration in its proper form is an integral part and important religious feature in both African Religion and the CCC. The practice is common to both religions and fulfils the same purpose in the lives of their faithfuls. Ancestral veneration is observed virtually in all African nations. So also it is demonstrated voluntarily by the various adherents of African Religion and the Celestial Church of Christ as a mark of appreciation and remembrance.

However, with the CCC, the practice is not as elaborate and engulfing as it is in African Religion. Yet, something similar does exist between them. For example, the Amissa service in the CCC is also compared with ancestor veneration in African religion. Also, just as materials of various kinds are used for ancestor veneration in African religion, the same way, materials of various types abound in the ritual practices in the CCC. In fact, the purpose of ancestral veneration in African Religion and Amissa service in the CCC is intended to enhance communion with the departed ones; to foster symbol of concentration, and to protect adherents from evils, coupled with favour before the Deity.

Similarly, system of value as it obtains in African Religion is also a common practice in the CCC. Adherents are essentially pre-occupied with obtaining blessing through corporate, concerted and elaborate "Ise" performance and activity.

This Ise performance is paramount in the minds of the adherents, which enables them embark on this alternative ritual activity in order to achieve these same "good things" as desired in traditional religious arena. To this end, it may be observed that the CCC is a church in-between two worlds, viz-the world of traditional religion and the world of Christianity.

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6. E.W Smith, *African Ideals of God*_(London; Edinburgh House Press, 1960) p.26. for details, also J.O. Awolalu, ,63.
7. E.B Idowu,184
8. U.Etuk, *Religion and Cultural Identity*_(Ibadan; Hope Publication, 2002),33.
9. Awolalu,62

10. J.S Mbiti, *Introduction To African Religion and Philosophy*_(Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1992), 143.
11. Awolalu, 63.
12. Etuk, 33.
13. E.B Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*_. (Nigeria: Longman, 1996) p.207 see also J.O Awolalu, 63.
14. Awolalu and Dopamu, 64
15. A Shorter, "Conflicting Attitudes to Ancestor Veneration in Africa" *AFER* No XI, Vol. 1, 1969 p.29. See also J.O Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites* ,62.
16. E.B Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*_.207
17. Etuk, 33.
18. E.B Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* 207
19. Idowu, 208.
20. Idowu, 208-209
21. Uda is a deified ancestor in Eesan Land of Edo State, Nigeria. People show their respect for him. Uda helped to emancipate Eesan people from Benin imperialism. A festival is held annually in his honour consequent upon his exploits. His protection and fortune are being sought today during the festival.
22. Obazu is also a deified ancestor venerated by Auma people in Owan-West Local Government Area of Edo State. A festival is annually held before the rainy season sets in. meanwhile they venerate the ancestor for a successful agricultural year.
23. Interview held with Pa. Sunday Alamu, 77 years in Iybiadohen, Owan-West Local Government Area of Edo State.
24. D. Ayegboyin and S.A. Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches; An Historical Perspective*_(Lagos: Greater Height Publications 1997), 97.
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26. A.U Adogame. *Celestial Church of Christ*, (Frankfurt: Peterlaund, gmbh, 1999), 1.
27. D. Ayegboyin and S.A Ishola. p.97
28. Ibid p.97
29. A.U Adogame, p.140 see also M.L Ogunewu "Sacrifices in the African Traditional Religion and African Indigenous Church" *Seminar Paper Presented at the Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, September, 2002*. p.26
30. D. Ayegboyin and S.A Ishola, p.101
31. M.L Ogunewu, "Sacrifices in the African Traditional Religion and African Indigenous Churches" p.27
32. D. Ayegboyin and S.A Ishola, p.101
33. M.L Ogunewu, p.27. see "CCC order of service" p.72
34. Ogunewu
35. Ogunewu, 28.
36. This information was provided by a senior Evangelist in the CCC, but he preferred to be anonymous.
37. G.C Oosthuizen, *Post-Christianity in African: A Theological and Anthropological Study* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1968) p.173
38. D. Ayegboyin and Ishola, 104
39. "Ise" is the technical term used to describe the many ritual practices of the CCC. For detail, See M.L Ogunewu, 21
40. Adogame, p.140