



Memorial Services a Contemporary Method of Ancestral Worship in Yorùbá Society

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Abstract

Africa is a melting point of many religions. Yoruba people are deeply religious people. Religion is their existence and existence are their religion. The belief in ancestor is one of the marks, features, and characteristics of African Indigenous Religions (AIR), which is, however, locally rooted. Belief in ancestor is hinged on Yoruba unified view of reality, their sense of community, idea of human life and After-life. This paper seeks to demonstrate that memorial services in Churches and Mosques are indicative of the enduring continuation of belief in ancestors in African Indigenous Religions (AIR). It explains the concept of religious change and the multi-causal theoretical framework for religious change. Using Yoruba AIR as a case study, the paper reveals that ancestral faith is rooted in the cosmology of the people; and that this faith is an enduring conviction that cannot be extirpated despite the onslaught of Islam, Christianity, western education and other agents of social changes. Rather than total discontinuity of the belief in ancestor in Yorubaland, the paper demonstrates that it has been modified into memorial services by Islam and Christianity. Since belief in ancestor is similar to beliefs in saints and caliphs in Christianity and Islam respectively, the paper recommends that people should respect the religions of others, and be open to knowledge of other religions in order to appreciate other people's beliefs as well their own.

Keywords: Ancestor, Religious change, Memorial Services, Yoruba Society

Introduction

Change is a constant thing in life. Change is inevitable in every sphere of life, religion inclusive. Religious change follows the same process of culture change (Ryan, 1969, v). There are many religions in the world. The dominant ones try to displace other religions (partial demise hypothesis) or extirpate other religions (total demise hypothesis). The onslaught of immigrant religions of Islam and Christianity has certainly caused the displacement of African Indigenous Religions (AIR) and thus justifies partial demise hypothesis rather than total demise hypothesis. Partial demise hypothesis implies religious change; hence, the paper contends that the onslaught of Islam and Christianity against AIR in Yorubaland had caused some elements of AIR to be modified while others are retained.

Among the world religions, Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Islam and Islam are more impactful on other religions. Anywhere they go, they cause religious clash and eventually modified or transformed the host religion (Bascom (Eds), 1959, 3). This transformation or change can take several forms. Sometimes, the change can occur through enculturation, that is, adoption of certain beliefs of host religion and its transformation to fit the practice of the invading religion.

The comings of Islam and Christianity in the geographical area called Nigeria have affected several indigenous beliefs and practices. The onslaught of these religions has undermined African religion and culture (Ejizu, 1986, 134). Islam has been described as more friendly to Nigerian indigenous beliefs than Christianity. This is because Islam shared similar beliefs with indigenous religions specifically in the areas of polygamy, non-separation between the physical (secular) and spiritual (sacred), approval of benevolent African magic and medicine. One area where both Islam and Christianity seem to agree with African belief system is the belief in ancestors (long or recent living dead).

In the religions of Africa, life does not end with death, but continues in another realm. Death does not alter or end the life or the personality of an individual, but only causes a change in its conditions. This is expressed in the concept of "ancestors", people who have died but who continue to "live" in the community and communicate with their families. Death, although a dreaded event, is perceived as the beginning of a person's deeper relationship with all of creation, the complementing of life and the beginning of the communication between the visible and the invisible worlds (Fashola, 1980, 1, 48). The goal of life is to become an ancestor after death. This is why every person who dies must be given a "correct" funeral, supported by a number of religious ceremonies. If this is not done, the dead person may become a wandering ghost, unable to "live" properly after death and therefore a danger to those who remain alive. It might be argued that "proper" death rites are more a guarantee of protection for the living than to secure a safe passage for the dying (Kalu, 1978, 42). There is ambivalence about attitudes to the recent dead, which fluctuate between love and respect on the one hand and dread and despair on the other, particularly because it is believed that the dead have power over the living.

Mbiti avers that a belief in the continuation of life after death for African peoples

does not constitute a hope for a future and better life. To live here and now is the most important concern of African religious activities and beliefs. Even life in the hereafter is conceived in materialistic and physical terms. There is neither paradise to be hoped for nor hell to be feared in the hereafter" (Mbiti, John S. 1991, 5).

Most African peoples believe that rewards and punishments come to people in this life and not in the hereafter. In the land of the departed, what happens there happens automatically, irrespective of a person's earthly behaviour, provided the correct burial rites have been observed.

But if a person is a wizard, a murderer, a thief, one who has broken the community code or taboos, or one who has had an unnatural death or an improper burial, then such a person may be doomed to punishment in the afterlife as a wandering ghost, and may be beaten and expelled by the ancestors or subjected to a period of torture according to the seriousness of their misdeeds, much like the Catholic concept of purgatory (Fashola, 1980, 48)). Among many African peoples is the widespread belief that witches and sorcerers are not admitted to the spirit world, and therefore they are refused proper burial, sometimes their bodies are subjected to actions that would make such burial impossible, such as burning, chopping up, and feeding them to hyenas (Kalu, 1978, 42). Among the Africans, to be cut off from the community of the ancestors in death is the nearest equivalent of hell.

Originally, Nigerian aborigines both worship and venerate their ancestors. Today, religion change due to the influence of Islam and Christianity, among other factors, has produced point of continuity and discontinuity in the original or aboriginal belief in ancestors. To a large extent, there is discontinuity in the worship of ancestors whereas there is continuity in their veneration. Continuity in the veneration of ancestors is evident in Islam and Christianity today as practitioners of these religions remember their dead fathers, mothers or loved ones even decades after their demise. This paper considers ancestral belief in Yorubaland with a view to demonstrate its continuity in the forms of memorial /services and lectures in today's Nigerian Islamic and Christian community. Hence, the assumption of the paper is that memorial services is one of the manifestations of religious change.

Religious change

By definition, religious change refers to the process of displacement of a less dominant religion by a more dominant one in such a way that the influence of the religions on each other makes certain elements of each of the religions to become modified while others are retained. Africa is a melting point of many religions. This is partly because AIR is friendly and accommodative. AIR recognises other cults and divinities (in other religions) as parts of the whole Ultimate Reality (Dopamu, 1986, 108). Casting aspersions on AIR, the duo of Islam and Christianity scrambled for converts among traditionalists and won many; and thus, causing religious change in Yorubaland. Yoruba cosmology and values were battered by agents of forces of socio-religious change specifically, Islam, Christianity, western education and colonialism (Ejizu, 1986, 135).

Islam and Christianity are two rival religions in Yorubaland, though the former predated the latter. These two religions are hostile to AIR, which on the other hand, was very open-minded and accommodative to all religions as viewed by (Dopamu,

1986, 109). Though distrustful of each other, yet both conspired to extirpate AIR. Though fond of fighting each other, these two religions usually collaborate in fighting AIR. Their joint hostility to AIR made him, (Ade Dopamu) to assert that they operate in 'joint institutions of collaboration'. Both condemned AIR and used derogatory terms to describe its adherents. However, they have succeeded in modifying AIR a great deal, which in turn have influenced them somehow; thus, resulting in religious change.

Religious change usually takes two forms: adhesion and conviction (Ikenga, 1986, xi). Adhesion implies the mixing of two or more different religious belief systems which usually result in syncretism. On the other hand, conviction implies a passage from unbelief to belief, or a transition from syncretism to full commitment to a particular religious belief system. Adhesion further suggests the continuity of some aspects of religious belief systems in the adherents whereas conviction suggests discontinuity of all aspects of previous religious belief system by the adherents.

Theoretical frameworks

There is no mono causal factor for religious change. In other words, religious change is due to poly-causal factors. The theories of religious change are many; each has its strengths and weaknesses (Ogbu, 1986, 1-20). Three of them which are germane for this paper are dualistic typology (also called dominant/dependent model), social process approach and cultural lag theory. Dualistic typology states that religious change is due to the displacement of a dependent indigenous religion/structure by a dominant religion/structure. Social process approach states that religious change is due to a number of social processes such as industrialisation, urbanization, commercialization, literacy expansion, occupational mobility, and so forth. While cultural lag theory states that religious change is due to differential rate of displacement of material aspect of culture over non-material aspects of culture (Ogbu, 1986,6). Putting them together, religious change in Yorubaland is due to historical factors (colonialism, Islam, Christianity, western education, and so forth), economic factors (industrialisation, urbanization, commercialization, literacy expansion, occupational mobility, and so forth), and spiritual conviction. The foregoing factors are religious and non-religious in nature.

Basis for the Beliefs in Ancestors in Yorubaland

Yoruba people are deeply religious people. Religion is their existence and existence are their religion. Five elements that characterised Yoruba religion, according to (Bolaji Idowu, 1973, 46) are God, divinities, spirits, ancestors, magic and medicine. AIR is locally rooted and so is the belief in ancestors. Generally, ancestors are historical figures, whether heroic or ordinary, who by their lifestyle and death command worship or veneration from their offspring. The belief in ancestor is one of the marks, features, and characteristics of AIR. African cosmology (that is, their cosmogony and theogony) is the basis of the belief in ancestors.

The Yoruba cosmology is illustrative. Cosmologically, Yoruba Africans conceive the world in three parts: *Ikole Orun*- skye heaven, *Ikole Aye*-earth, and *Iwaleasa*- underworld. Though distinct, these three parts are related. There is close communion among the three realms. *Ikole Aye* (inhabited by man and nature spirits of the sky and earth, including witches and familiar spirits) is constantly in communion with *Ikole Orun* (abode of *Olodumare*(God, and *Irunmole*- specifically, primordial divinities)and *Iwaleasa*(abode of the ancestors)which in turn can influence *Ikole aye*. Ancestral belief is also anchored on Yoruba theogonical conception of spiritual entities

in the foregoing realms. Theogonically, and apart from relating with nature spirits of the sky and earth and malevolent spirits like witchcraft and familiar spirits, mankind in *Ikole aye* also relate with *Olodumare*, *Irunmole/Orisa* in *IkoleOrun* and ancestors in *Iwaleasa*. These relationships are sustained by offering of *Ebo*, *etutu*, *ipese*(sacrifice), and *Iyanle*(libation), *Adura*(prayer) and so forth.

Belief in divinities and spirits provides another springboard for belief in ancestors. There are several divinities and spirits in Yorubaland: some are benevolent while others are malevolent. A dead person has become a spirit, and thus has joined the spirit realm. Generally, ancestors are regarded as benevolent spirit. Both the malevolent and benevolent spirits may be placated via sacrifices and magic (Ejizu, 1986, 135-138). Ancestors are both revered and worshiped via sacrifice. They are viewed as custodians of morality and dispensers of justice (Brivwo, 1986, 23).

In this regard, ancestors should be construed as spirits of good men of any particular lineage who departed this life after a fruitful sojourn, blessed with age, and have been accorded full traditional burial rites. Respect for elders is another string attached to ancestral worship and veneration. Another is respect for the dead. This is why it is unethical to speak ill of the dead in Yoruba land. As spirits of the underworld, ancestors are nevertheless considered to be members of the super sensible domain and the physical world. Ancestors are both revered and worshiped via sacrifice. In turn they give their blessings in form of reincarnation in their offspring, protection of their offspring from evil forces and prosperity of their offspring (Ejizu, 1986, 140-141). In fact, belief in ancestor indicates Yoruba belief in After-life. After-life is a strong belief in Yorubaland. A person who had fulfilled his destiny and died returned to the ancestors for judgement. If he had lived a good life, he would be admitted to rest with the ancestors. If not, he would be rejected and may become a wandering spirit, or go to a town of potsherd (where the wicked dead go).

The belief in ancestors is also anchored on African cyclical eschatology. Africans believe that when old people die, they go the world of the ancestors (the underworld) from where they are prone to returning to their family or family of their choice. The decision to return is also conditioned by constant remembrance and veneration of them by the family on earth. This belief in the return of a dead parent to his/her families on earth through another birth is called re-incarnation, which makes Yoruba African eschatology cyclical in nature. A good/righteous dead may either repose with the ancestor or be re-incarnated in his children and descendants.

Generally, Yoruba cosmology provides for the belief in dualism, duplication of any entity into physical and spiritual. Everything in nature has physical and spiritual dimension. To any physical reality is also a spiritual duplicate. Hence, every person has a spiritual duplicate. In the first instance, man is dualistic in Yoruba theogony. Man has spirit/soul and body and personal guidance spirit (*Ori*), hence, a fixed destiny. Man's life is sacred and interminable, as it flows in a cycle of birth, naming ceremony, puberty rites, marriage, initiation into ascriptive and achieved statuses, adult roles to ancestor-hood, of course, with a possibility of reincarnation. One's status in the physical world is equivalent to his status in the underworld, thus, the human world is a mirror of the spirit world and vice versa.

Based on this belief, the ancestors are regarded as living dead. Yoruba African usually recognises the spiritual existence and presence of the ancestors at all times. They are thought to be very much alive though spiritually and constantly observe the actions and inactions of their wards on earth. Originally, Ancestors are regarded as

ethical deities. But now, due to religious change, they are more or less ethical spirits. Nevertheless, the fear of the ancestors is still the beginning of wisdom because failure on the part of the living offspring to remember or venerate them or do their wills in other matters usually attracted penalties, sufferings, and punishments.

In sum, belief in ancestor is hinged on Yoruba unified view of reality, their sense of community, idea of human life and After-life. Unified view of reality, as explained above, means life is dualistic. Everything exists in duplicate. Life has both physical and spiritual dimensions. Just as the sky, earth, and underworld are related so also is the human world, animal world and vegetable world. The sacred and profane spheres of life are inter-connected. Attitudes emanating from this kind of inter-connectivity include use of material objects as symbols of the supernatural; use of oracles and divination to solve mysteries, and use of totemic birds, trees, places, and so forth (Ejizu, 1986, 152-153). With regard to ancestor, *Egungun* (masquerades) as symbol of the ancestor readily comes to mind. *Egungun* symbolise the return or visit of the ancestors to the human families on earth. It is a religious culture of celebrating the re-union of the ancestors with their families.

Yoruba strong sense of community is another basis for ancestor belief and worship. The philosophy of "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti, 1991, 23) characterised the Yoruba people. To them family, family incorporates physically living members, the departed (ancestors) and the yet to be born members (Mbiti, 1991, 137). There is strong sense of belonging. Attitude emanating from this, with regard to ancestor, is burial of the dead right inside of the rooms where they lived while alive, or in front or back of their houses. The idea of burying the dead in the cemetery is rather a western innovation.

Concept of human life is another basis for belief and worship of ancestor. Sanctity and dignity of human life informs respect for human life in general and respect for the elders and ancestors in particular. Continuity of human life after death informs their belief in and worship or veneration of ancestors.

Memorial Services as Continuity of ancestor belief in Islam and Christianity

Islam and Christianity have influenced each other and jointly influenced AIR to a greater degree which in turn has influenced them to a lesser degree. Although relationship between Islam and Christianity remain competitive yet there are areas of cooperation among these triadic religions in Yorubaland. Specific areas of cooperation, according to (Ade Dopamu, 1986, 128-129) include village communal work, extended family system, religious festivals, trade, associations, education, government, politics, industries, and so forth. They interact at the levels of dialogue of life, social engagement, religious experience, and intellectual/theological engagement.

These patterns of interaction, among other things, have made a great deal of inter-religious borrowing possible/exchange possible. In other words, AIR has continued in form of syncretism. For instance, some independent churches have adopted elements of AIR (such as beliefs in spirits, cosmic forces, witchcraft, sorcery, *Oghanje* (familiar spirits), ancestor veneration, reincarnation, and so forth). Today, many Yoruba people hold dual affiliations: they are Christians or Muslims as well as traditionalists. Moreover, some avowed Yoruba Muslims or Christians secretly

patronise traditionalists, thus displaying the phenomenon of 'the endurance of conviction' (Dopamu, 1986, 130) in AIR. In fact, traditional belief in ancestral worship and reincarnation, among others, still persist among many professing Yoruba Muslims and Christians (Abdul, 1970, 4 (1), 17).

The foregoing indicates the fact that some elements of AIR have been adopted by Islam and Christianity. Examples of elements of AIR borrowed from AIR by Islam and Christianity, according to (Ade Dopamu, 1986, 128-131) include Muslim divination, and sacrifice (called *sàràà* or free offering); drumming, singing, clapping, and dancing in churches; use of traditional materials (like alligator pepper, kolanut, bitter-kola, water, honey, red-oil) in most Christian naming ceremony; patronisation of Yoruba magic and medicine by both Muslims Christians (*thaumaturgical* response), acceptance of chieftaincy titles by Muslims and Christians and celebration of this in church or mosque, participation in some religious festivals believed to be strictly cultural, and observation of 'Remembrance Day' for the dead.

More and more Christians and Muslims have regarded ancestral cults as something similar to saints of Christianity and the caliphs of Islam. Memorial services held in church or Mosque are in recognition of this fact. (Nabofa, 1991, 76-91) not only mentioned memorial service as a manifestation of cult of ancestors but also compare ancestor to saints in Christianity and Caliphs in the Islam. Ancestral cults, in other words, have been substituted with Christian memorial service or Muslim *fid au*. Observation of 'Remembrance Day' for the dead or departed (ancestors) by both Muslims and Christians in Yorubaland is indicative of their strong belief in and respect for the ancestors.

Huge money is spent to give the dead a befitting burial. Many African burial rites begin with the sending away of the departed with a request that they do not bring trouble to the living, and they end with a plea for the strengthening of life on the earth and all that favours it. African funerals are community affairs in which the whole community feels the grief of the bereaved and shares in it. The purpose of the activities preceding the funeral is to comfort, encourage, and heal those who are hurting. Prayers are said for the dead. Sometimes, the dead are honoured posthumously.

In *Ifa* religious tradition, both the living parents (*Eguneniyan*) and dead parents (*Egunagbelesin*) have the status of *Orisa* that can accept sacrifice (*Ebo*) from their offspring. But, *Egunagbelesin* (one's dead father or mother) aptly qualifies as ancestor. Sometimes, the solution to a client's problem is to offer sacrifice to *Egunagbelesin*. As *Orisa*, *Egunagbelesin* accepts sacrifice. Since sacrifice is a form of worship, hence, ancestors are both venerated and worshipped in *Ifa* religious tradition. Failure on the part of offspring to sacrifice to their ancestors (as prescribed by *Babalawo* via *Ifa* divination) usually attract serious negative consequences.

Adoption and approval of the practice of honorarium and memorial service/lecture in honour of the dead is a religious borrowing from AIR. Regardless of religious affiliation, Yoruba people acknowledge and recognise the negative spiritual and physical consequences following neglect of ancestors or their wills by their offspring. This attitude is evident in the practice of spending huge amount of money on burial and subsequent advertisement of the remembrance of the dead on electronic (radio and television) and print media (newspaper). In such Remembrance adverts, offspring address their dead as if he or she is watching and listening to them. In fact, such adverts are direct communication between the living and the dead as offspring use the opportunity to pray to their ancestors for blessings, protection, and

prosperity. But it is a religious borrowing from AIR, which further supports the fact that modification with adaptation (and not extinction) is what had happened to AIR

Discontinuity in ancestor belief

It is apt to cite a few areas of discontinuity in belief in ancestor in Yorubaland due to religious change. Three of them are listed as follows. 1. Rejection of ancestor worship, Muslims and Christians with strong conviction in Islam and Christianity respectively have rejected ancestral worship equating it with idolatry. 2. Non-participation in traditional Egungun festival. Muslims and Christians with strong conviction in Islam and Christianity respectively have dissociated themselves from participating in *egúngún* festivals. 3. Disregard for divinities and ancestors. Muslims and Christians with strong conviction in Islam and Christianity respectively have general disregard for divinities and ancestors.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has demonstrated that cult of ancestors is being manifested in the church and Mosque in the form of outings and memorial services. It is thus evident that Islam and Christianity only succeeded in modifying or adapting other African religion but not in extirpating it. Despite the onslaught of immigrant religions, the existence of faithful remnant of adherents of AIR is an attestation to its endurance and its continuation for now and in the foreseeable future.

We, therefore, recommend that people should adhere to shared moral values on ancestral belief could foster unity at local and international levels. People should respect the religions of others, and be open to knowledge of other religions in order to appreciate other people's beliefs as well their own. There should be no compulsion in religion. Expensive burial, in times of economic recession, should be discontinued. Fear of the ancestors should be inculcated in people from childhood.

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