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THE ANCESTORS AS PROMOTERS OF FERTILITY IN AFRICAN RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the ancestors as promoters of fertility in African religious thought. The paper argues that the ancestors promote fertility through reincarnation believed to be a vehicle through which they physically re-enter the human world, as a new born to perpetuate their lineage. The paper argues that as spirit he possess inherent power to reincarnate any part of his body, leg, hand, feet, nose, etc. The paper also argues that they have multiple locations retaining their existence in the material tangible world while in the ancestral world; this explains why the ancestors reincarnate in several people at the same time. The study adopted secondary sources (published materials). The study also adopts phenomenological approach to interpret and describe how the ancestors promote fertility according to African traditional belief. Findings reveal that the place of the ancestors in African religious thought is so very important; hence the continuity of the lineage depends on them.

Keywords: Ancestors, Promoters, Fertility, African Religious Thought, Re-incarnation.

Introduction

According to African traditional belief, the ancestor occupies an important place in the life of the African peoples. For the Africans, the ancestors are regarded as those who lived a very good life while on earth. This however, explains why they are cherished and venerated by their living descendants. Although, one does not become an ancestors just by mere fact-rather one must meet certain qualities. Here, it is believed that one muse live according to the moral code of his society, died a good death which must occur natural and by extension accorded proper burial rites to guarantee his entrance into the ancestral abode of the good departed.

This essay, therefore, intends to examine who the ancestors are according to African traditional belief and to see how they can promote fertility according to African religious thought.

Who are the Ancestors?

J. S. Mbiti (1969), sees the ancestors as the deceased members of their families who are still remembered and venerated by members of their families. Any wonder, he describes them as the "Living dead" (P.83). In much the same vein, Tasie (2009) also sees the ancestors as those who lived a very good life while on earth and died "good death" at a ripe old age and were accorded burial rites befitting their status (P. 43). According to Anyacho (1994), "the ancestors are those who are believed to have acquired extra-human powers in the afterlife which enables them to intervene in the lives of the living members of their families" (P.257). Thus, they are regarded as the benevolent for fathers; the nearest and closest to man (Ugwu and Ugwueye, 2004, P.46). Also the deceased departed are considered to have keen interest in the affairs of their living descendants which is why they are regarded as the watch -dog of their families or lineages (Benjamin, 1976, P.126).

For Madu, (1964), the ancestors were human beings, who, having lived in this world, experienced the sufferings of humanity and died. By virtue of their death, according to Madu, they were ushered into the land of their forebears by full burial rites accorded to them here on earth, having suffered with humanity on earth, and having entered into the blessedness of the ancestral land, he is in better position to appreciate the suffering of man (P.66).

According to Owete and Iheanacho (2009), ancestors are the departed members of the family who still maintain close relationship with their survivors. Though, no longer physically visible, yet their participation in family and patrilineage matters of the group are practically felt (P. 120). According to them, there are two categories of ancestors in West Africa namely, the living dead and the ghost. The former, according to them, are the group of departed members of the family and kin unit members that can be remembered vividly by their survivors. They are normally numerous; yet, they are remembered by their names and physiognomy identity while the latter, according to them, are the departed people, whose identity is in the fast fading memory of the living, or even forgotten. Those who know them have equally died. The names of this category of ancestors as they further noted can be remembered, but their physique cannot be inferred or described (P.121).

As for their qualities, it is not all who have departed become ancestors rather, there are qualities or attributes that qualify the departed to be an ancestor. To become an ancestor first, one must have children (i.e. parenthood), for Owete and Iheanacho, this is important because it is the children that perpetuate the 'existence' of the father, grandfather, great-grandfather, etc. According to them, it is not even merely having children, but at least a male child. This is why procreation as they further noted are almost norms for actualizing man's physical essence, union and fulfillment in group life – family, kindred and community. According to them, perpetual bachelorhood is discouraged, abhorred and looked upon with disdain, as a condition that is capable of facilitating the extinction of a kin group and, an ancestral lineage (p.121).

Following closely is advanced age. For Owete and Iheanacho (2009) the departed man must have lived a long life. Such longevity according to them is believed to be a manifestation of the individual's good relation with the gods of the land. For them, this is against the background of the people's beliefthat does not ordinarily strike, especially with the young people as its victim. Death at such stage of live according to them, come as a result of sin

committed against supernatural beings, or as a result of sorcery, and evil hands at work. Therefore, for one to live to an advanced age, as they further noted portend that he has not committed offence (s) against supernatural beings, and by extension is in good terms with his neighbours (Pp. 121-122).

In addition to this is performance of burial rites. The funeral rites that precede ancestorhood, according to Owete and Iheanacho (2009), are in two phases; those performed before interment and the post interment rites, popularly called 'second burial.' For them, all are required for ancestorhood status. According to them, it is a common belief among West African societies that it is the full performance of the second burial rites that send the departed 'home', and in dignified peace.

Following this is good life. For them, this is important because a man who lived a bad life is not given not only normal and decent funeral rites, but also not propitiated as such. But in recent time, this factor according to them is somehow being played down on, as a result of modern influences as the wealthy is always remembered and propitiated by his children, irrespective of his life. Even at that, it is the good according to them that is more often remembered and propitiated by the entire ancestral lineage, especially in the group and community assembly. In many West African societies, an ancestor as they further noted must not therefore, die of mysterious disease, suicide and many other circumstances that are abhorred by the given community. Above all, a complement to good life as they finally noted is 'good death' (Pp. 122- 123).

With regard to their relationship with the living, they are believed to be closely related to their families and kindred, retaining their status and responsibilities as heads and parts of the institutions as they were while living as human beings on earth. Here, it follows that death is conceived as a mere extension of live on earth, to the hereafter as spirit. In this new state, communication and communion, with the ancestors are only possible at the spiritual realm; while in the spiritual world, the ancestors still show concern and interest in the affairs of their living members. Equally, the living members still see them as older people from whom their life on earth began and have meaning. Also, the ancestors are not only close to their relations, they are also aware of things that will bring progress to their people and those that could be in the contrary. Here, the new state of being, place the older relatives who have departed, closer to God and other spiritual entities. Here, the living use them, and they readily act as intermediaries between them (the living), and the spiritual world which embrace all spiritual forces including God.

Ancestors also feed the living back with information from the unseen supersensible world. The departed are therefore the closest link the living people have to the network of communication at the spiritual level of man's absence. In addition to giving the departed full burial rites, the living relations, try to appease and heed to their instructions. Yet, they are remembered and invited at gatherings, to come, share, and commune with the living, especially when the summon is at the ancestral shrine while the living try to know from them the 'state of things' through divination, the forebears could seized, somebody to prophecy their wish and resolve on family or kindred issues. They also reveal themselves through other manifestations and signs, like in dreams and totems. Some medicine man claim to have received knowledge of medicine and healing from ancestors through this process (Owete and

Iheanacho, 2009, P.124). As for their names, they are called different names in different African societies. They are called *baba-nla* in Yoruba, they Igbo called them *ndi-iche*, and they are called *samanfo* in Akan (Ghana). Also in Kalabari they are called duen and in Ashanti of Ghana, they are known as *asamanfo*. For the Isoko they are known to be *esemo* (Tasie, 2009, P.43).

As for whether the ancestors are worshippers or venerated, here, they are not worshipped, rather they are venerated. To the West African people, the reason for this is that death is not the end of one's interaction with his relatives, rather it is a change to "another being" different from the living, yet, maintain, participate and share in the activities of their kins-family and kindred. They have departed, yet, are "practically felt" by their survivors. It is in this light that ancestors are recognized, respected, and venerated. As for the reason for the veneration of ancestors, here, the veneration of ancestors among West African societies encourages and strengthens unity among the living members of their families and patriline kingship group. For instance, one's ancestral lineage, according to Owete and Iheanacho, (2009) is a binding force. For them, people born to such kin group are "brothers and sisters" . No matter the degree of quarrel between members of a kindred, assembly before their ancestral shrine as they further noted can never be affected. Explaining further, people under one ancestral lineage as they noted share in common – legends and myths; sacred days; totems; agricultural seasons; as well as land and timber (pp.128-129).Apart from this, the annual sacrifice (obligatory sacrifice) to commemorate the beginning of the ancestor festival in many West African communities brings kinsmen and relations together for a re-union. To the living, sharing the flesh of the annual sacrifices together for them is like being fed by one mother with one dish and spoon.

Kinsmen in the diaspora, those at home, and the departed as they noted come together this day, at the ancestral shrine. Having come together, dialogue is possible as the living dialogue amongst themselves on one hand while the living join voice to speak to their departed members on the other hand. This flow of communication is characterized by recall of memorable events, and reference to the life and history of the lineage, in which both the living and the departed are embraced. In addition, the blood of the sacrificial victims poured before ancestral shrines which is a symbol of bond reaffirms the living's commitment to maintaining the values of the lineage. Thus, it also serves as renewal of covenant – of cordial relationship between the living and the departed (Owete and Iheanaacho, 2009 Pp. 128-129).

An Analysis of how the Ancestors Promote Fertility

The ancestors, as noted earlier, are those who have died physically, have reached the spirit land, and now dwell in the abode of the good departed. There, they enjoy a social and political life which is in many respects, a replica of that which they enjoyed in the land of the living. Though the ancestors are dead and gone, they still interest themselves in the affairs of their living descendants. As for how they promote fertility, for the Africans, the ancestors are believed to be spirit and no longer humans. To this end, they are believed to possess certain qualities or attributes. As a sprit, he has overcome the limitations imposed by mortality (death). Also, as spirit he possess inherent power to reincarnate any part of his body, leg, hand, nose, feet, etc. Thus, they have multiple locations; retaining their existence in the material tangible world while in the ancestral world. This, however, explains why the ancestors can reincarnate in several people at the same time. Here, reincarnation therefore,

becomes a vehicle through which the ancestors physically re-enter the human world as a new born to perpetuate their lineage.

This explains why belief in re-incarnation is fundamental and strong among the Africans. This also further explains why re-incarnation for Tasie and Amadi (2013), " is an important element of traditional African belief, used especially to assert and deny death; and to explain what happens to the dead in the hereafter" (P.88). According to Tasie, in Isiokpo theology, everybody is entitled to re-incarnate. Here, the young and the old, the poor and rich, the good and bad according to him can re-incarnate; but whereas, good people will better their present condition of life, in their next incarnation, while hardship, and disabilities becomes the lot of the evil doer, in his or her next round of existence. That is why Tasie argues that the ethical character of a person's actions determines his mode of existence in his next re-incarnation. He further argues that whatever one does in this world, he will reap in equal measure in his next re-incarnation (Tasie, 2013, P.14).

Apart from this, the Isiokpo, as Tasie further explained also believe in bad and good re-incarnation. For him, bad re-incarnation is attributed to one's evil misdeeds in his previous life. *Ogbanje* (born – to – children), here is a telling example. According to Tasie, there are many variations in the idea of what constitutes *ogbanje*. One school of thought according to him, believes that *ogbanje* spirits are a group of adventurous evil spirits, who are on a visit to the human world. They arrive in the human world via earthly parents. These spirits for Tasie are under a pact, as to how long each of them will stay on earth. They come, raise the hope of their parents, and depart. The time of their departure, as he further noted is usually one of transition, from one stage of human development to another. While some for him prefer to return to the spirit world when they have cut their first set of teeth, others choose their exist when they become able to run errands for their parents. Yet others wish to die when they have attained school age. The extremely wicked among them, as he noted raise their mothers' hopes and convince everyone that they have come to stay and then suddenly, on the eve of their marriage or during child birth, they die. Another school of thought according him argues that *ogbanje* is a wicked spirit that enters the womb of a pregnant woman only to die soon after death (Tasie, 2013, pp.5 and 6). Whereas good re-incarnation according to Tasie is one in which a cherished departed member of the family is reborn for the continuation of his good deeds. According to him, it is believed such a person must have been free from all disabilities, have lived an exemplary life and have died a good death; hence he defines, re-incarnation as the belief that after physical death the soul of the deceased returns to earth in successive new forms (Tasie, 2012, p.6).

Conclusion

This essay focuses on the ancestors as promoter of fertility in African religious thought. According to African religious thought, the ancestors are believed to promote fertility, since it is a means through which they physically re-enter the human world as a new-born to perpetuate their lineage. This, however, clearly affirms the people's belief in the continuation of life after death.

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