

Between Veneration and Condemnation: How Christianity and Islam Reconfigured African Ancestral Beliefs in West Africa.

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Abstract

The introduction of Christianity and Islam in West Africa between the 14th and 20th centuries sparked controversy over the right and wrong within the tenets of African Traditional Religion. A segregation of thoughts occurred within the African communities, with many of the new religion's converts adopting fully the principles of their new faith. In contrast, others would syncretize elements of Islamic, Christian and ancestral traditions together. The encounters between the Islamic and Christian religions in West Africa led to significant cultural and theological reconfigurations. For instance, ancestral veneration in West Africa was outrightly condemned by European Christian missionaries. The study observed that while Christianity condemned Africa's ancestral practices as being polytheistic, Islam was subtler in theological submissions, given the connection between certain practices of the religion and ancestral traditions. Based on theological and ethnographic discourses, the study argues that ancestral veneration is fellowship, a form of honour or encouragement to ancestors to continue playing their good parts in the earthly realm, and thus, room should be left for each religion to understand their principles and debate the need for syncretism or separation of practice.

Keywords: *Ancestral Veneration, Islamic, Christianity, West Africa, Ancestral Condemnation, Religious Syncretism*

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Introduction

Ancestral veneration occupies a central place in West African cosmology. The belief that the dead remain active participants in the lives of the living, offering guidance and interceding with higher deities, was, and is still for many, a cornerstone of indigenous spirituality. However, the arrival of Christianity and Islam introduced competing eschatologies that frequently framed these practices as incompatible with monotheistic orthodoxy.

The evolution of the Christian religion in Africa, for example, brought by the European missionaries to Africa, saw these Europeans denigrating the African Traditional religious beliefs, calling them fetish, superstitious, heathenism, and a form of idolatry. (Justus Okah Ovae n.d). However, some of the traditional beliefs of the African people that fell under the categorisation of the European missionaries failed to appreciate the ingenuity of some of these beliefs, which were rooted in a clear culture and a social system that had informed the daily living of the people, benefiting them in marriage, business, family relations, and others.

Ancestors are seen as the departed people, who are yet living in the minds of people; or other times, are perceived to still exist within their communities, acting as deities in the world of the dead, which (Tertsea Ikyoive, 2014) argued that their transformation to deities act as a communication intermediary between the world of the dead and the living. This earns them the respect due to them by their communities, and in other cases, their families.

The complication of ancestral veneration lies in the traditions and rituals, including specific offerings or sacrifices made to them, which (Afeke and Verster, 2004) opined was a form of worship rather than veneration. This is the plot of the argument between veneration and condemnation, which (Mbiti John, 1975) challenged, arguing that offerings to the ancestors are just a symbol of remembrance and fellowship, and not worship.

Michael Lang attributed the condemnation of ancestral veneration, amongst others, by the early missionaries to cultural ignorance and, more so, racial arrogance. The refusal to understand the genealogy of Africans and the guiding beliefs of their ancestors was a critical error that ultimately hindered the progress of Christianity in Africa. Africans, first and foremost, are religious people who have their own concept of God.

Thus, introducing a new religion to them, either in the form of Christianity or Islam, should have been one that builds on Africa's original concept of God, their ancestral veneration, and others. Thus, a problematic clash occurred between African religious traditions and the religious traditions being introduced, where the Christian religion attributed Africa's ancestral beliefs to worship rather than veneration or respect. Opportunities for negotiations, understanding, and dialogues were abdicated for utter condemnation of ancestral veneration as devilish, satanic, and purely evil. This created a new form of African Christian converts who followed the

missionaries' trail to condemn ancestral veneration. Meanwhile, other Christians and non-Christians, plagued by the complexities, resisted the urge to condemn such veneration.

One of such ancestral veneration is the Wannabe ancestral practice of the Tikar community within the Bambui province of Cameroon. The wannabe ancestral practice is a part of their Finge religion where deceased paternal grandmothers are venerated in order not to make their spirits aggrieved (Michael Lang, 2018). This is due to the belief that the paternal grandmother intervenes daily in their lives in the aspects of well-being, family, respect, and honour. Moreover, for them to maintain these perks, they must continue venerating the dead grandmothers, giving them honour and respect. This practice has been labelled antithetical to the Christian faith. However, many of the Christians and Muslims within this province still practice it as a form of fringe religiosity.

Interestingly, unlike Christianity, the Islamic religion took a more nuanced approach towards ancestral veneration in Africa. The Arabic influence that spread across the continent did not outrightly condemn the practice but instead established a different dynamic. For instance, in West Africa, Islamic communities emerged under the teachings of Mohammed, blending existing ancestral beliefs with Islamic principles. This fusion resulted in unique communities that upheld both traditions, albeit with specific adjustments.

The Islamic religion in Africa did not seek to eradicate ancestral veneration but rather integrated it into its religious practices. This integration was not without challenges, as some aspects of ancestral beliefs didn't align perfectly with Islamic teachings. However, over time, a harmonious coexistence developed, showcasing the adaptability and inclusivity of Islam in diverse cultural settings.

Regardless of the nuances and articulations of ancestral beliefs in the Christian and Islamic religions, the thought remains that some schools of thought consider their ancestors as gods and worship them. In contrast, others venerate them, showing respect or honour towards them. These schools have created an imbalance that either questions the veneration of worship or totally condemns the practice of ancestral beliefs in West Africa.

Expanding on this, in some communities in West Africa, the concept of ancestor worship goes beyond mere reverence. It extends to offering sacrifices and prayers to deceased family members as if they were divine entities. For example, in certain traditional ceremonies, individuals may invoke the spirits of their ancestors to ask for guidance or blessings in various aspects of life. This practice is deeply rooted in cultural traditions and is seen as a way to maintain a connection with the deceased and seek their protection.

On the other hand, some groups view ancestor veneration as a form of respect and gratitude towards those who came before them, without attributing divine qualities to their ancestors. They honour their lineage through rituals and ceremonies that aim to preserve the memory and teachings of their forebears. This approach emphasizes the importance of familial ties and the wisdom passed down through generations.

The debate surrounding ancestral beliefs in West Africa highlights the diversity of perspectives within the region. While some argue that ancestral worship can be a source of spiritual guidance and cultural identity, others criticize it for potentially overshadowing the core tenets of organized religions such as Christianity and Islam. This dichotomy underscores the complex interplay between tradition and modernity in African societies, where age-old practices coexist alongside imported faith systems. Ultimately, the interpretation of ancestral beliefs varies significantly among individuals and communities, shaping the religious landscape of the region.

This study aims to evaluate the impact of Christianity and the Islamic religion on ancestral beliefs in West Africa, with an overview of different debates on ancestral veneration and/or condemnation. What is the thin line between veneration and worship, and what is the acceptable practice as it regards the Christian or Islamic faith in West Africa

Pre-Colonial West African Ancestral Cosmologies

Various belief systems existed within the pre-colonial West African ancestral cosmologies, which were centred on the relationship between persons living and those who were dead. The major of this belief was the role ancestors played in the daily lives of their community members, especially as it concerns their well-being in marriage, childbearing, farmlands, and also in maintaining social order (Chuks, 2021). These cosmologies were dynamic in their nature, based on ethnic groups, and they focused heavily on ancestor veneration, spiritual realms, and the incorporation of sacrifices, divination and rituals to navigate both the spiritual and the physical worlds.

Ancestral Veneration

This is one of the fundamental pre-colonial West African cosmologies, where persons who have died become entities or, at other times, deities in the spirit realm, espousing great power that is outside of the bounds of natural comprehension. This power enables them to have a channel of access to the earth realm, where they still have control over events, residing in family homesteads and sacred groves according to (Chuks, 2021). Thus, within the West African contexts, these ancestors become guardians of stability, morality, communicating with the living through dreams, visions, and truth-tellers (Mbiti, 1975). In the Yoruba culture of Nigeria, the belief in Orishas as intermediaries between humans and the divine is deeply rooted in the intricate spiritual hierarchy present in ancestral cosmologies (Ikoye, 2017). Orishas are revered as powerful

deities who govern various aspects of life, such as love, fertility, and prosperity. For instance, Oshun is worshipped as the goddess of rivers and love, while Ogun is honoured as the god of iron and war. These Orishas serve as conduits through which individuals can communicate with the spiritual realm and seek guidance or blessings (Ikoyiove, 2017).

Furthermore, the Yoruba people engage in elaborate rituals and ceremonies to pay homage to the Orishas and seek their favour. These rituals often involve music, dance, and offerings of food and other items. During festivals dedicated to specific Orishas, devotees come together to celebrate and express their devotion through colourful processions and heartfelt prayers. These communal gatherings strengthen the bond between the human and divine realms, reinforcing the interconnectedness of all beings.

Chiroazzi, (2015) believed that ancestors could not be attributed to deities, that there is a thin line that exists between ancestors and deities. However, the author agreed that ancestors have high powers that can bestow fortunes and good tidings to humans within their homes or communities, and thus Africans in the pre-colonial era honoured them in exchange for what they represent in Traditional African spirituality.

The misinterpretation of ancestral veneration by Christian missionaries has historically led to the detrimental characterization of this rich and significant cultural practice as either fetishistic or demonic. This misunderstanding persists despite the observation of many congregants within the church who engage in these rituals. These ancestral reverences are not merely superstitions, but profound expressions of respect and connection to lineage and heritage. However, the eminent theologian Mbiti offers a more nuanced and insightful perspective, positing that ancestral veneration embodies a relationship that transcends mere remembrance; it is a heartfelt homage to those who have come before, serving as both a form of respect and a vital part of the community's identity and continuity. In the Christian faith, this can be attributed to the recognition or veneration of Abraham in the bible, the father of faith, as our ancestor.

Mbiti's assertions, grounded in a deep understanding of African spirituality, have garnered substantial support in recent years from scholars like Ukpabi (2011) and Hassan (199), who eloquently argue that the vehement denunciation of ancestral veneration by many Christian leaders arises from a problematic confluence of arrogance, ignorance, and the enduring effects of colonial ideology that still permeate the doctrines and perspectives of church leadership. This critique invites a broader discussion about the implications of such dismissals, as they often overlook the intricate cultural narratives and spiritual significance attached to ancestral worship.

In this light, the practice emerges not as a mere relic of the past but as a living testament to the values, beliefs, and histories that continue to shape

the identities of many individuals and communities today. Such considerations compel us to engage with ancestral veneration not only as a cultural practice but also as a vital paradigm through which we can understand the complexities of faith and tradition in a rapidly globalizing world.

The Worship of Spirits

This is one of the ancestral cosmologies in West Africa, where followers of traditional African religion pray to many spirits, which could even include animal spirits (Willie, 2001). Some of the spirits have been claimed to inhabit objects or natural elements on the earth, such as trees, stones, and others. This is exemplified in the Nkisi Nkondi, a class of objects called nkisi in the Congo Basin, an object believed to be inhabited by spirits. This is also a form of ancestral worship, where some of these ancestors are made to become mini-gods and spirits existing in the afterlife. The Mawu-Lisa is one of those spirits that exists as a dual god and goddess (Rogers 2009). However, many African cultures only pray to a single god known as a supreme being such as the Chukwu, the Ngai, Olodumare, or Nyame.

Rituals, Sacrifices, and Ceremonies

The cosmologies often emphasized the importance of honouring and appeasing the ancestors through rituals, ceremonies, and sacrifices. These practices were believed to maintain harmony between the physical and spiritual realms, ensuring the well-being of the community. In the Akan society of Ghana, libation ceremonies were a common way to communicate with the ancestors and seek their guidance and protection (Olupona, 2014). The ancestors, or spirits, are honoured through various means, including animal sacrifices, cooked food, the gifting of precious stones, and libations - the pouring of wine.

On the other hand, the pre-colonial West African cosmology manifests in ancestral ceremonies or divination, where community members go into trance following rhythmic displays of singing or drumming. The people of Cameroon and Gabon, for example practice the Okuyi, where community members embody an ancestor or a deity with transference of energy through the force of instrumental rhythms; dancing and manifesting the outcome of specific situational issues in their daily lives that they want solved (Karade, 1994)

Transitioning to the cosmological understanding of the universe, many West African societies viewed the world as a complex network of interconnected forces and energies. This holistic approach to cosmology influenced various aspects of life, including governance, healing practices, and agricultural rituals. For instance, the Dogon people of Mali had a sophisticated knowledge of astronomy, reflecting their deep understanding of the celestial bodies and their significance in the cosmological system.

Early Islamic Encounters with African Ancestral Beliefs

The Islamic religion encountered firstly the West African population around the 9th century through the Arabs and the North African Berbers. This was a result of the transatlantic trade and the conquest of the Arabs around that time. This encounter spread from the Northern part of West Africa to its Southern regions during the 18th and 19th centuries following the Jihad war. In Nigeria, for example, Islam emerged within the 14th century in the Northern part of Nigeria through the Wangarawa from Mali (Al-Hajj CFMA 1968).

At this time, as well as within the 18th and 19th centuries, the ancestral traditions and belief systems of the West Africans were a deterrent for the Islamic movement, especially in Nigeria. This was as a result of the strong foothold of the African traditional religion in Nigeria, as well as in many other West African countries. However, a syncretism emerged between Islam and the ancestral beliefs, as Islamic traditions bore a resemblance to the ancestral traditions. West Africans could adapt to Islam more quickly due to the religion's tolerance of their ancestral beliefs. In Nigeria, the Hausa Kings incorporated their ancestral beliefs into the Islamic religion, as they continued in the practice of ancient rites and sacrifices (Mazrui 1986).

The Christian Missionaries and Their Theological Oppositions to Ancestral Beliefs

The Christian religion, like the Islamic religion, encountered African traditional religion in West Africa in the 15th century through European missionaries (Crowder, 1968). However, by the 19th century, the spread of Christianity was overwhelming across many parts of West Africa; from Mali to Northern Nigeria, Northern Ghana, Senegal, and Northern Sierra Leone. At this time, the Islamic religion has already spread widely, also within some of these regions (Crowder, 1968). However, unlike the Islamic religion, which tolerated some of the ancestral beliefs of the West Africans, the Christian religion posed condemnation to all ancestral practices, naming them as evil pagan practices.

This condemnation led to many ancestral worshipers converting to the Christian religion, albeit retaining many of their ancestral beliefs secretly. The declaration of being a Christian was just an act to seem sophisticated, borrowing the white-man's religion. However, in the dark, many Africans still upheld their ancestral practices, rituals, and ceremonies. In fact, many adopted some of the ancestral beliefs into the Christian religion, the new religion they now profess. For example, the early Native African Churches were established around prophecies, interpretation of dreams, African instrumentation and music, which was exemplified in the funeral ceremony of King Prempeh 1 in Kumasi, Ghana (Nwanju, 2005). In Nigeria, many churches adopted certain principles of the Ogboni confraternity in their practices.

African Perspective on Ancestor Veneration

Firstly, the anthropological submissions of many African scholars on who their ancestors are, or what qualifies one to be an ancestor, open up the conversation on ancestral veneration. According to (Mbiti, 1975), ancestors are different from living dead spirits, which (Ushe, 2001) further expressed that what qualifies a dead person to be ancestor is based on what good deeds the person did when alive, the nature of the person's death, the death being at an ancient age, had moral attributes, and raised respectable children, among others. Based on these factors, they become ancestral spirits that live in the afterlife in the minds of their community and families. They are believed to be intermediaries between the Supreme Being 'God' and the living they left behind.

In the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria, there is a belief that anyone who dies joins the realm of the ancestors (Ikoye, 2017). Also, the Agikuyu people in Kenya call their ancestors 'ngomi', who are revered within the communities, occasioned by sacrifices and pouring of libations (Kamuyu, 1988). In Cameroonian culture, the belief surrounding death goes beyond mere physical passing. For the Cameroonian people, those who pass away are not just individuals who have left this world; they are revered ancestors who transition between the realm of the deceased and the world of the living. These ancestors are seen as powerful entities that play a significant role in the lives of the living. They act as intermediaries, interceding on behalf of their communities, meting out justice to wrongdoers, and bestowing blessings upon those who uphold the values of the community.

The presence of ancestors in Cameroonian communities is deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric, shaping beliefs and practices. For instance, when a community faces challenges or conflicts, it is not uncommon for the members to seek guidance from their ancestors through rituals and ceremonies. These rituals serve as a way to communicate with the ancestors, seeking their wisdom and intervention in resolving issues.

Moreover, the ancestors are believed to influence various aspects of life, including fertility (Kane, 2018). In Cameroonian communities, fertility is not solely seen as a biological process but also as a spiritual one, influenced by the blessings of the ancestors. Couples seeking to conceive may turn to ancestral practices and traditions to seek the favour of their ancestors for a successful outcome.

The list is exhaustive. However, some of the roles of these ancestors serve as a platform for their veneration. According to Turaki (1999), the ancestral spirits also play a crucial role in the existence of man; this is usually by way of reincarnation, where some of these spirits come back as children to earth. This is another aspect of the ancestors' high-power nature that makes for their veneration—an honour, not a worship, as it has been understood within the Christian circle. Mbiti alludes to this, while stating that the act of offering food or drinks, or animal sacrifices to the

ancestors, viewed by Western Christians as worship, is not, but an act of fellowship and remembrance.

As Nyamiti (1997) aptly puts it, where there is an ancestral practice, it is where the persons believe that their ancestors are involved in their daily lives, blessing and bringing good fortune to them. It must thus be constantly encouraged through veneration to continue.

Syncretism of Ancestral Beliefs with Christian and Islamic Religions
Christianity, introduced by Europeans, faced condemnation for ancestral worship practices, unlike the Islamic religion, which presented its faith to West African traditional religion worshipers with subtlety. In fact, it has been discussed that most of the traditions of the Islamic were at par with certain beliefs of the ancestral traditions, and thus it was easier for Islamic converts to amalgamate both.

However, in response to the European missionaries' condemnation of ancestral beliefs as evil, mundane, and heathen, scholars such as Bediako (2000) highlighted the connection between African theologies of ancestors and the Christian theology found in the Old Testament. The Old Testament had observed specific ancestors of the Israelites, who would eventually be the carriers of the gospel in the New Testament, as those who venerated their ancestors: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, including David, from whose lineage Christ came. This journey in the Christian holy bible, which sees modern Christianity venerate the Abrahamic ancestral lineage, discounts the logic of the early missionaries condemning veneration.

Therefore, in Aben's (2008) study, highlights of certain African theologians and even politicians, such as Kwame Nkrumah, Leopold Senghor, Julius Nyerere, and others, showed that the Western condemnation of ancestral veneration was a racial arrogance. These African politicians and theologians called for the reinstatement of African Christianity against the Western form of Christianity, where forms of Christ or God worship, songs, liturgy, and theology would synergise with African Traditional Religion's heritage.

According to Aben, these theologians believed that a syncretism of the Christian religion and the African Traditional Religion would make the gospel of Christ more appealing to the West Africans, and is most suited for African Christian theology. This was also agreed to by (Ntetem, 1997), who frowned at ancestral condemnation, and acknowledged the incorporation of certain ancestral beliefs and practices into Christianity. This, however, was frowned on by (Byang 1991), who was resolute on the hypocrisy of the infusion of ancestral beliefs into Christianity. The Islamic religion can more easily syncretise with ancestral traditions because any case of hidden worship of an ancestor aligns with Islam's worship of its founder, Mohammed.

Conclusion

Summarily, ancestral veneration or condemnation is a practice torn between the three most common religions in West Africa: the African Traditional Religion, Christianity, and Islam. Ancestral veneration, a significant aspect of West African peoples' spirituality, is not entirely condemned by the Islamic religion. During their 18th and 19th century encounters with West African countries, the Islamic religion recognised some ancestral practices and ceremonies as comparable to their own traditions. In contrast, the Christian missionaries from Europe outrightly condemned ancestral beliefs and traditions as barbaric, evil, and a pagan practice that is not in line with the Christian bible.

Based on doctrinal, theological, and ethnological studies in this paper, it can be deduced that ancestral veneration is not worship of an ancestor, but a form of fellowship, honour, or encouragement, as emphasised by Mbiti (1975). Mbiti's assertions, rooted in a profound comprehension of African spirituality, have garnered considerable endorsement in recent years from scholars such as Ukpabi; and Hassan (2011), who articulately contend that the vehement repudiation of ancestral veneration by numerous Christian leaders emanates from a troubling amalgamation of hubris, ignorance, and the lingering repercussions of colonial ideology that continue to permeate the doctrines and perspectives of ecclesiastical leadership.

Therefore, despite the opinions of many scholars and African theologians advocating for the syncretization of the three religions, it is safer to maintain a distinction between them, with Christian practices standing alone alongside Islamic and/or African practices. Nevertheless, ancestral veneration should be what scholars have called it: honour given to the departed souls, and nothing more. This is evident in the Abrahamic faiths, where the Old Testament ancestors are venerated, not worshipped. In the case of hidden worship of African ancestors, one can correlate the easy superimposition of the Islamic religion with ancestral beliefs, even if its worship, as Mohammed is being worshipped by its followers.

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