

# Ancestors in the african context religion essay



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In Africa, the world was believed to be inhabited by beings both visible and invisible. Among the visible beings were humans, animals and plants. The invisible things included deities, divinities and ancestors. The belief remains that there is an interaction between the invisible and visible worlds (2007; 377).

In this essay we will focus on ancestors (the “ living-dead”) and its role in South Africa and the role of the Church. We will also look at reasons behind the strong presence of ancestor practices within Africa.

## Ancestors

Wikipedia defines an ancestor as: “...a parent or (recursively) the parent of an ancestor (i. e., a grandparent, great-grandparent, great-great-grandparent, and so forth)” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ancestor> , 17 March 2011). In other words, an ancestor is a person who is deceased and of whom you are a descendent. An ancestor is also someone who is remote or distant.

Using online resources like <http://www.ancestor.co.za> or <http://ancestry24.com> a person can explore the history of ancestors. It’s possible with the use of medical DNA tests to reveal links to ancestors, much like it is used today to relate relatives.

Some ancestors are considered to play an active role in the lives of the living and are therefore called the living-dead. In this essay we will focus solely on this “ type” of ancestor group.

## Ancestors in the African context

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One of the main reasons why ancestor practices play such a prominent role in African religions is because Africa languishes under the yoke of the fear of spirits. Their views of the spirit-world is contrasted in many aspects against the New Testament teachings. In the African spirit world for example, spirits appear rather as disorganised and competitive (2007; 397). This is contrasted against the highly organised view in Ephesians 6. In fact, the authorities and cosmic powers in the Pauline letters allude to the way in which supernatural beings, as it were, incarnate themselves in structures. Whether it be a political, religious or intellectual structure. These structures are there for holding man in bondage but over which Christ has triumphed and which he now wants to employ in his service on earth. In traditional Africa however, ancestors are never referred to, nor considered, as evil spirits

In these religions there is also the concept of a God, or Supreme Being, although it cannot be proved conclusively in all cases. Although there is the concept of evil forces, it's not the same as the Christian view in the sense that there exists a single-ruler over all evil powers. In Christianity this single ruler is called Satan, among other names. In the Bible God's angels are depicted as creatures, holy and uncorrupted spirits with a free will, and therefore not necessarily impervious to temptation and sin (1999; 68). There are also scriptural indications of an angelic fall, under the leadership of Satan. Good angels are portrayed as powerful agencies for the carrying out of God's will, there is also a well orchestrated army of evil agencies who counterfeit the activities of those good angels (1999; 69). Satan is the evil one which represents the embodiment of antithesis to the will and purpose

of God (1999; 71). The book of Revelation is notable for its presentation of the absolute power which God exercises over the world and restriction of evil (1999; 72).

In the African religions there is also those who are called divinities who play the role of mediators between ancestors and the living. Anderson (2007; 326) correctly observes that one of the functions of a diviner is to determine the identity of, and exorcise 'evil spirits'.

A belief in ancestral spirits seems to be the most prominent feature in the African traditional religion because it always resurfaces in one way or another (2007; 327). This indicates the significance that ancestral belief plays in the African world-view. Ancestral worship is a two-way relationship, in contrast to the cult of the dead which is one-way (2007; 328). It is believed that the interaction between the living and living-dead is possible because there is no difference in kind between worlds (2007; 329).

As Africans are generally community-oriented people, it is understandable that the relationship between the living and the dead is appreciated and if at all possible maintained (2007; 329). It is believed that a person who is sick for a long time has been chosen as an instrument through which ancestors want to communicate. On the other hand, the ancestors also depend on the living in a sense that only if they are remembered, only if attention is paid to them through veneration and the offering of sacrifices, will they exist as ancestors (2007; 329). The tendency in South Africa is ancestors pass to linear time (2007; 330). The ancestor is supposed to have an existence for a period (the linear model), but he or she does not return to have further

human existence. The cyclic model assumes the possibility of a reincarnation of the ancestor as a newborn. The reincarnation of the ancestors in newborn babies is foreign to most of the peoples of Southern Africa.

People who die a premature death cannot be categorised as ancestors (2007; 330). The ancestor is expected to must have lived a morally worthy life, a virtuous life. The gender of the person makes no difference whether a person can be an ancestor or not (2007; 331).

The communication with ancestors is a dynamic one whereby they still relate to the living and still influence the lives of the living (2007; 331). The living communicate with the dead by regular ritual sacrifice and invocation, the priest or officiant at which is the family head, or the senior group representative where ancestors of larger groups are being addressed (2007; 332). In return, the ancestors reveal themselves through dreams by stating their names or through calamity, sickness, barrenness or bad luck, and so forth. If the living fail to understand the message of the ancestors, they employ the services of a diviner or isangoma who, as a link between the ancestors and the living is able to interpret the message of the ancestors for the living (2007; 332).

The general belief is that ancestors are nearer to God and have mystical powers (2007; 333). The living expect help of the departed in the fight against the evil forces that pervade the world and threaten them at every turn (2007; 333). As keepers of law and order, the ancestors act as representatives of ethical values, traditions and activities (2007; 333). The role of ancestors are basically protective, corrective and aimed at the

welfare of the family (2007; 333). The special role of the ancestors is generally considered as that of being intermediaries between God and the humans or between the spirit world and the world of the living (2007; 334). Having passed through death, the ancestors are considered as able to communicate with God more effectively the needs of those alive. Though the ideal of mediation is crucial to the understanding of the role of ancestors, it is something that is still imperfectly developed in the African religious thought.

It was believed that if someone in the community had caused a breakdown of the balance of relationships with an ancestor, the ancestor could respond by invoking occurrences as prolonged rain or drought, epidemics or earthquakes. In that case, diviners would be consulted to investigate who among the members of the community had caused a breakdown. For restoration, diviners would recommend the appropriate remedy, a offering of sacrifice, punishment to guilty individuals, or otherwise (1999; 72). The Zulus believed that the Supreme Being was in a sense unreachable, so that there was a need for ancestral mediation (1999; 73). Therefore the ancestors acted as a supportive and protective network (1999; 75).

The ancestors communicate with the living through various ways. In some African Initiated Churches, prophets can be used as a medium channel connecting the living and the dead. But the accepted norm is that the ancestors use dreams to communicate with the living. Ancestors may also manifest themselves to the living by animals, particularly snakes (1999; 75).

In other cultural contexts, some people seek providence from their deceased ancestors; this practice is sometimes known as ancestor worship or, more accurately, ancestor veneration. We will now look at the difference between ancestor worship and ancestor veneration.

#### Ancestor veneration or worship

The struggle of the African with the idea of the veneration or mediation of the ancestors is both historical and universal (2007; 382). Another reason why ancestor practices are common is to endure the hardship of life and to intellectually cope with existential crises and the frustrations that confound them. In Christian churches, this could often lead to a dual-life or split-level Christian. Such a person does not fully understand the sufficiency of Christ and needs to mature in faith.

The relation of the living people to their living dead has been described by scholars in various ways. Nyirongo (2007; 334) explains the relationship between the living and their dead as “demonic illusions” because, according to him, it is impossible for the living to commune with the dead. He goes so far as to say that it is the demons which masquerade as ancestors. Some scholars think that it is more of veneration than worship, because the issue at stake, example with the Oruano Movement, is not worship but veneration because “the ancestors are not gods and they never become gods.” (2007; 335). Among the Zulu the ancestors are considered as mediators (between the Supreme Being) and nothing more.

The Nigerian theologian, Idowu, states (2007; 335): “Certainly, the cults of the ancestors do not constitute African traditional religion; and it is a gross

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error to equate them with religion ... Thus the cults are a means of communion and communication between those who are living on earth and those who have gone to live in the spirit world of the ancestors". Ela indicates that the offerings for the ancestors are " signs of respect", " symbols of the continuity of family", and " simply a command of the love of children" towards parents. In Ela's opinion, these offerings are " only an ' anthropological reality" and not related to religion at all. Triebel argues that (2007; 336), " if one interprets African religion as theistic, centered on the belief in the one God, one cannot accept that the ancestors have their own independent religious function".

Khatide (2007; 336) is of the opinion that although most Africans prefer the usage of " veneration", to " worship", when it comes to ancestral belief, there are still practices that may tilt the argument to worship. He uses the example of the building of altars upon which sacrifices are offered to the ancestors and that at such a ritual ceremony, there can be no doubt that the ancestors are invoked; they are the addressees of these prayers and the invocation of God is missing. A very important point raised by Khatide, is that of the dependency these people have on the ancestors as the guarantors of life. Another intriguing aspect in those involved in the ritual sacrifice is their tendency to say that they are praying to God and their ancestors. By these actions, ancestors appear to attain a new status equal to that of the Supreme Being. It is for this reason that many missionaries in the past and in the present have regarded ancestor veneration as the centre of African traditional religion and as something in serious conflict to the worship of the true God.



It is clear that the tendency in some churches is to incorporate the ancestral belief in the doctrine of the Communion of Saints (2007; 337). According to Mbiti, there is a difference between veneration and worship in the sense that naming the dead in prayers and performing rituals show respect for the living-dead but “ this does not and cannot mean that they are worshipped”. African theologians and churches are still struggling how to respond appropriately and biblically to the issue of ancestral practices, especially among Christians (2007; 337).

The practice of witchcraft have existed among African Christians because of their spiritual needs. A part of the cause of this is the inadequate western presentation of the gospel in the African context (2007; 341). Witchcraft is described as the human embodiment of evil (2007; 344), and the witch takes the place of the devil. In Africa, witchcraft is considered as anti-social and as something that systematically contradicts all the values of society. It is something to be eradicated at all cost. In the African context, whatever the ‘ rational’ explanations that the sophisticated may find for witchcraft, we cannot remove the fact that such beliefs express a very real human experience of the dreadful mystery of evil present and active in their midst in a very real way. Witchcraft is the enemy of life (2007; 347). Maghbouleh (2007; 349) makes an interesting observation that witchcraft is nowhere associated with the devil or Satan in the canonized Jewish texts. But, having stated this, it should also be mentioned that a survey of the New Testament reveals references to uncanny powers and magical arts that are condemnatory, and link such activities with the devil. People resort to diviners and healers to supply them with protective objects against witch

attacks (2007; 350). The rationale behind this is that the good use of magic will counteract the evil use thereof, if the user's medicine is more powerful than that of the enemy.

For the church there is a general feeling that the people have not been sufficiently armed to fight against witchcraft and sorcery in spite of many Christian teachings that have been thought (2007; 351). Most of the mainline churches are well aware of this need and that the current teachings are not fully adequate in assisting them to deal with witchcraft and the fear it brings. Christians who decide to stay within the mainline churches, especially where ministries of healing, deliverance and exorcism are lacking, tend to lead a "split-level" Christianity (a dual life). Given the range of skills and aptitudes available to Christians as found in the Bible, this type of life need not be (2007; 352).

Mbiti observes (2007; 365) that ancestor possession occurs in one form or another in practically every African society. Spirit possession by the living-dead is commonly reported. Spirit mediums or diviners in Africa are believed to be possessed by ancestors to communicate with the living. Daneel (2007; 366) says that during the possession trance, the family may discuss their problems with the possessed medium; for they are actually talking with the ancestors. This is common among the Shona and AmaZulu people. The desire of an ancestor to possess someone is usually signalled by a long illness, with the host beginning to grow delicate and eccentric, dreaming numerous dreams about wild beasts and serpents and also hearing voices telling the person what to do and where to go. The African people consider

this experience not be harmful or diabolical; they are rather seen as friendly and welcome the spirit to remain briefly.

### Missionaries from the West

There have been mistakes in the past when it came to evangelising the African continent. Had a proper theological dialogue taken place between the missionaries and the people, undoubtedly the African Christian church scenario would have been different (1999; 77). There are similarities in the spirit world between the first-century New Testament communities and those of Africa, which makes possible some form of dialogue and a background for study (2007; 377). When the missionaries came to Africa they displayed a spirit-world denying attitude to their audience. The western world-view was not just spiritually communicated, but also by political and even military action (2007; 385).

In the African traditional religions, ancestors were never considered demonic or as part of evil spirits (2007; 383). By this label serious damage was done to the gospel in Africa. This left the African people with the idea that God could not handle the hostile spirits that attacked people on a daily basis.

The belief in missionaries was that the converts to Christianity, after attaining some (western-based) education and religious instruction, would simply outgrow the idea of the existence of the spirit world, but this endeavour did not fully realize under the people for the past two centuries (2007; 370). The evangelical movement in Africa declared Christ's sovereign rule over the spirits, but prefers to say little about the spirit world and

concentrating rather on the salvation of the individual's soul. The hope was that the experience will be a "cure-all" for all other problems (2007; 371).

The missionaries were met with a "split-level" or "dual system" response. The missionaries left no room for supernatural realities such as earthly spirits and spirit possession, witchcraft, ancestors and magic. These were ridiculed as fairy tales and belief in these was labelled as barbaric and primitive (2007; 372). Missionaries coming out of such a world-view, who brought the gospel to Africa, preached a message that left Africans with a perception that the God of the Bible could not supply them in all their spiritual needs. This caused many African Christians to return to traditional ways of resolving issues.

When early missionaries came to bring the gospel to Africans, it is clear that they might have believed that over time the African spirit world was hopefully going to dissipate if Africans were given more education and religious instruction (2007; 375). Such thinking was to be expected from people (missionaries) who had been born and bred in a world-view that sought to explain life in rationalistic and scientific ways rather than spiritual ones. Although African scholars have done some work of the highest of quality in terms of the concept of God in Africa, not much research has gone into other spiritual entities and realities of the African people.

What does the Bible teach about ancestors and the sufficiency of Christ

In the Bible, there is near total absence of reference of interventions by the dead in the affairs of the living. Neither by means of communication, harm nor blessings in both the Testaments are found (2007; 381). There is a view

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that states that ancestors are demonic manifestations meant to derail the faithful (2007; 383). Another view are that ancestors are co-mediators with Christ. The putting of Jesus Christ in the same category as ancestors as mediators between God and humanity, compromises the absoluteness and uniqueness of Christ (2007; 373). This is however in contradiction with the Bible. It is clearly pointed out that the only valid mediator is Jesus Christ: “ Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (Joh 14: 6). The Lord is there and we should call upon him (Jer 33: 3): “ Call unto me, and I will answer thee, and shew thee great and mighty things, which thou knowest not”. God is not distant like some would believe.

There are references in the Bible that prohibit the contacting of the dead (Dt 18: 11). The Bible does show that it is possible for the dead to contact the living but may be unique cases. An example being the transfiguration of Jesus on mountain accompanied by the spirits of Moses and Elijah (2007; 382).

In Acts we have the account of salvation and the burning of evil books in public: “ And many that believed came, and confessed, and shewed their deeds. Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all men: and they counted the price of them, and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed” (Act 19: 18-20). God is concerned with all aspects of salvation (Luke 5: 23), not just with the spiritual. This includes the removal of negative things (such as disease, demons and sin). Satan and all that he rule has been defeated by Christ (Luke 11: 22).

In Matthew 22 Jesus explains that the two main reasons that the people stumble is because they do not know the scriptures (something the missionaries tried with limited results) nor the power of God: “ Jesus answered and said unto them, Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven. But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. And when the multitude heard this, they were astonished at his doctrine.” (verses 29-33)

God has provided ways of dealing with evil spirits. One of the abilities or gifts of the Holy Spirit is to discern or see the activity of spirits in the unseen realm (1999; 82). Exercising discernment, is an act of the will and an act of faith. This gift is of absolute necessity to the body of Christ because it helps to keep the truth and avoid the destructive lies of evil.

A second way of dealing with evil spirits is by means of exorcism. The gift of casting out devils is a precious endowment to the church (1999; 83).

Exorcism in the New Testament context is the act of deliverance of a person or institution or society from its bondage to evil. The cleansing of the Temple by Jesus is an example of collective exorcism.

In I Corinthians 10 we learn that idolatry is the same as devil-worship, and one should therefore be careful not to make ancestors bigger than they are: “ What say I then? that the idol is any thing, or that which is offered in sacrifice to idols is any thing? But I say, that the things which the Gentiles

sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils, and not to God: and I would not that ye should have fellowship with devils. Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils: ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of devils" (verses 19-21).

A great truth of God's providence is found in Php 4: 6-9: " Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you".

It is at the cross of Christ, an eternal sacrifice for us, so that our sin might be forgiven and that Satan might be utterly defeated (1999; 81). In Col. 2: 14 - 15 it is written: " Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them in it."

## Conclusion

Faith in God as the all-powerful, all-merciful father, as creator and foundation of all being, has dethroned the ancestors from the human-made pedestal (2007; 334). Our only true mediator is the Eternal High Priest, Jesus Christ. It <https://assignbuster.com/ancestors-in-the-african-context-religion-essay/>

is through God and the strength that he provides that we can face the “waters and fires” of this life, and be fully prepared for every good work. He is the Comforter and promised to never leave or forsake us. We are now in a new family, a godly family with a heavenly Father. Satan tries to deceive us as an angel of light. But God is almighty and limits evil and their activities (2007; 379).