

Relating to the Whole Community in Akan and East Asian Ancestral Traditions

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Abstract

Ancestors play crucial roles in the cultural consciousness of diverse traditions, many maintaining ritualistic practices related to commemorating the dead. Ancestor commemoration reinforces cohesion within traditional as well as modern societies, directing a group's focus to past accomplishments of its cultural heritage whilst providing a unifying narrative of the values that bring and hold a community together. The West African Akan tradition values those who honor their ancestors and, by leading a moral life, seek to become ancestors themselves: persons whose lives enjoy standing in the community beyond their own death. This short paper explores ideas about the role of ancestors as (symbolic) constituents of enduring moral communities by comparing traditional Akan belief to traditional East Asian conceptions of ancestors. The aim is to consider the metaphysical, social, and moral dimensions related to ancestors, highlighting continuity and communal concerns.

Keywords: Ancestors, Akan belief, East Asian ancestral rites, Ancestor veneration, Moral community.

Introduction

Ancestral commemoration – if not always understood in terms ancestral veneration or ancestral spirituality – plays a role in most, if not all, human communities, most prominently those that value kinship and the community as highly or more highly than the individual. Traditional cultures, those based on African religion and philosophy or East Asian traditions for example, codified the obligations owed to ancestors by means of rites and symbolic systems, which became foundational to communal, social, moral – and in the case of Confucianism, for instance, also political – identity. The present paper first considers the metaphysical and moral implications of ancestor veneration, specifically in Akan belief, and unpacks the values of venerating one's ancestors and living in such a way as to “becom[e] an ancestor” (MORGAN and OKYERE-MANU 2020,18; EPHIRIM-DONKOR 1998) – that is, leading a life of personal integrity and assuming familial as well as social responsibilities. The paper then compares these aspects of ancestral spirituality in Akan tradition with parallel functions of ancestors and ancestor veneration

in East Asian traditions, citing examples from traditional Chinese conceptions and Korean ethnographic accounts in which communal commemoration, giving ancestors their moral due, and acknowledging ancestors' enduring meaning for spiritual and moral guidance feature prominently in the continuation of community life, stability, and human flourishing.

By means of an exploratory cross-cultural comparison, which is not systematic but draws on selected elements in Akan thought also found in East Asian ancestor traditions that survive in some cases to this day, it becomes clear that while the symbolic and other functions of ancestors differ widely across traditions, from an ethnographic perspective, ancestral bonds are affective and can be endowed with meanings particular to an individual person or family¹; on another level, ancestors play a role in the moral and ethical formation of communities, whether the perfected elder or the master teacher himself (Confucius) – as do, to draw further comparisons, the saints of Catholic tradition, Jewish patriarchs, and, for Protestants, the ancestral exemplars of blameless living and faith in God from Abel to Christ.

Significance and Functions of Ancestors

In Akan tradition, becoming an ancestor means embarking on a path of enlightenment that requires virtuous conduct through ethical living marked, in particular, by generativity (EPHIRIM-DONKOR 1998), but also, according to Ephirim-Donkor, the acquisition of material wealth and status as an elder in the community (1998, 129-30). Thus, the pursuit of the status of ancestor itself is perceived as a contribution to societal functioning and cohesion. Moreover, as Wiredu explains with reference to the function of ancestors in African societies generally:

what death means is the departure of the animating spirit from the bodily frame. To the spirit itself, therefore, the death of a person, by definition, has no terrors. It leaves the body and betakes itself to a territory adjacent to the earth or underneath it where, in the capacity of an ancestor, it dedicates itself to a single objective, namely, the promotion of the well-being of the living.

... in African discourse [ancestors] are not only spoken of as 'persons,' but also as beings possessed of a moral maturity and spiritual power superior to that of mortals. Their manner of interacting with the living betokens these moral and spiritual qualities: they are

¹ Mbiti, for example, notes that in African societies generally, the spirits of the departed – the “living-dead” – continue to interact with their families in different ways, but only up to four or five generations, or until the last family member who knew them passes on. In other words, those acting as intermediaries between the spiritual world and the living are persons with relationships and emotional ties to the families left behind (1990, 82-3). As William Lakos explains, a similar process of ‘replacing’ the ancestors occurred in Chinese tradition: “Once the family shrine had accumulated too many ancestors (tablets) the oldest and least remembered would be ceremoniously disposed of – usually by burning or by moving to a clan or lineage hall or temple” (2010, 30).

widely believed to reward good conduct and punish bad conduct. (2012, 30)

Wingo, paraphrasing Wiredu, moreover, introduces the Akan ancestor as “the culmination of the process of becoming a person whose memory serves as a moral exemplar to the living that guides the moral journey of the Akan” (2017, Section 1.Para 14). ‘Memory’ is an important keyword here, since memory and honoring by recalling or commemorating, as understood in the context of this discussion have wider universal and historical application than ancestor ‘worship’² or the notion that ancestors intervene tangibly in the lives of their living relatives, which many traditions allow for, including within East Asian and African ancestral beliefs, but other religious traditions might deny or associate specifically with the occult.

African communitarian tradition sanctions the mutuality between individual identity and a person’s communal belonging rather than condoning the prioritizing of one to the exclusion of the other; mutual concern – including a consciously affirmed relationality between the living and the dead – perpetuates continuing linkages with elders, which in turn encourages “*paternal care* on the part of the ancestors and *filial piety* on the part of the living” (MENKITI 2004,130; qtd. in MORGAN & OKYERE-MANU 2020,28, *emphases added*). West African Akan ontology promotes moral action within the community by describing a hierarchy of beings according to which humans can, upon completing a morally virtuous life, become ancestors who continue their lives after death as spirits able to interact with the living (MORGAN & OKYERE-MANU 2020,15). The honor of “becoming an ancestor” is not universally bestowed but makes certain demands on the living; members of a given community are held to high moral standards, which in turn benefits both individuals and strengthens the communities they live in.

What then *is* an ancestor, according to Akan thought? Wingo, again referencing Wiredu, explains:

Those who become ancestors are those who, through their imagination, intelligence, and empathetic identification with their fellow human beings, excel not in spite of but because of all the challenges that are put before them. After having lived a full life, they obtain their ‘ticket’ (to use Wiredu's imagery) to the ancestral world and are reincarnated into service-ancestors. (2017: Section 1.Para 14)

Gyekye, who emphasizes the humanistic and human-centered genesis of African traditional thought, when acknowledging the religious dimensions of morality and its enforcement, also notes the practical functions of ancestors:

² Morgan & Okyere-Manu reiterate that “ancestors are not worshipped by African people. This is an error or misrepresentation by some scholars, Western and African alike. This error has been observed by the likes of Zulu, Wiredu, Dzobo and Sarpong. Zulu (2002, 476), for instance, remarks that ancestors are considered to be human beings, and Africans worship God alone” (2020, 16).

“because the ancestors (ancestral spirits) are also supposed to be interested in the welfare of the society (they left behind), including the moral life of the individual, religion constitutes part of the sanctions that are in play in matters of moral *practice*” (2011: Section 5.Para 12). In other words, ancestors play a practical moral, rather than merely spiritual or symbolic function, which can extend to the function of direct intervention in the business of the living through punishment or rewards for those ‘left behind.’

Ancestral Spirituality and Community Formation

No culture survives without some narrative contemplation of its past, a recalling of the foundational figures contributing to its self-understanding, and memory of the historical representatives – symbolic, legendary, or otherwise – of its essential values. While culture is in constant flux, crosses borders and is innovatively adapted and readapted by new bearers all the time, the common consciousness of a community relies on the acknowledgement of common ancestry; where new cultural resources are introduced, the identity-forming presence of ancestors cannot simply be erased. This is true, for example, in religious conversion, as one New Testament scholar, Edison Muhindo Kalengyo, points out when discussing the role of ancestors among Ganda Christians, insisting that Christians’ beliefs in ancestors “are not misguided and should not be judged or condemned as pagan” (2009, 49). In fact, suggests Kalengyo, biblical texts offer theological “parallels” to ancestor veneration in the Christian recalling of ancestors as spiritual examples or guides:

the principle of ancestorship in Christian theology does not contradict Jesus Christ – the Messiah. African Christians need not be ashamed ... for *it is impossible* (at least in the case of the Ganda) to disassociate ourselves from our roots – the ancestors. We need to identify with the ancestors in the expression and celebration of our Christian faith and life. (2009, 50, *emphasis added*)

Kalengyo points to the well-known “cloud of witnesses” in the New Testament epistle to the Hebrews as one example of “the presence of ancestors in Christian theology” (2009, 50) and documents how other African Christian traditions have incorporated mentions of ancestors, or “faithful ancestors,” in their Christian creeds or eucharist prayers. For Christians, in the celebration of the eucharist, so Kalengyo, Jesus is the “chief ancestor” (2009, 62-63).

The history of Christian mission is filled with diverse encounters and clashes between the westernized religion and traditional cultures that prize ancestral spirituality from contexts as intimate as the domestic sphere to ancestor worship in larger kin groups (see LAKOS 2010, 30) to the imperial or state cult. When European Jesuits and other orders sought to establish a Catholic presence in late Ming and early Qing dynasty China, the most famous aspect of this history of accommodation – or the failure of that policy – remains be the 17th to 18th-century Chinese Rites Controversy, still the

standard textbook example in the longstanding encounter between Chinese culture and the ‘foreign religion’ (*yangjiao* 洋教 in Chinese, an epithet by which Christianity is sometimes known in China even today, many centuries after its initial introduction into seventh-century Tang-dynasty China). The Rites Controversy involved such debates as which Chinese translation or transliteration to employ for Deus, or how to render “God” in equivalent Chinese terminology or concepts, and whether participation in the annual official temple ceremonies held in honor of Confucius conflicted with the new religious identities of converted degree-holding elites generally required to attend such ceremonies. However, the controversy also involved the more intimate question of family ancestral spirituality, and on this matter opinions also diverged. Chinese Catholics themselves became involved in the heated debates that ensued across enormous linguistic and cultural barriers. Nicolas Standaert has described the controversy from the perspectives of local Christians who became involved in the debates. Standaert highlights attempts by both Chinese converts and missionaries (those not opposed to the rites) to ‘ameliorate’ ancestral spirituality, to render it palatable to Catholic sensibilities, by addressing such ambiguities as the actual presence of ancestors in ancestral rites and determining that rites are carried out in respect of the deceased “merely “as if” (i.e., “as if” ancestors’ souls are present, although not really present)” (2018,63). Jesuits and other, though not all other, missionaries understood the centrality of such rites and the detrimental effects that the demand for wholesale abolition upon conversion would entail.

I mention these examples of the enduring significance of ancestors in the context of converted Christian communities so as to highlight their constitutive meaning for traditional societies beyond purely religious imperatives: ancestors are integral to the webs of meaning and relational morality formed within these communities, which in the case of many post-contact African traditions provide an all-important building block for developing full personhood³; this is true among the Akan, who constitute up to about 50% of Ghana’s population and roughly 40% of the population of the Republic of Côte d’Ivoire. In Akan belief, individuality and communality are closely interlinked and interdependent; ancestral spirituality illustrates this relationship, as Busia notes, by prioritizing the bonds of blood:

the blood relatives, the group of kinsfolk held together by a common origin and a common obligation to its members, to those who are living *and those who are dead* ...The individual is brought up to think of himself [*sic.*] in relation to this group and to behave always in such a

³ Note: On personhood and the communal, see Wiredu and Gyekye’s edited volume, [Person and Community]. While Gyekye does not hold, as does Wiredu, that personhood is something to be achieved throughout one’s lifetime rather than a quality that all humans, including newborn babies, possess, both thinkers hold that communality is an inherently human quality and that “a person is by nature a social (communal) being,” as Gyekye also concedes, notwithstanding his emphasis on other aspects that *also* constitute the nature of a person (1992, 106).

way as to bring honor and not disgrace to its members. The ideal set before him is that of mutual helpfulness and cooperation within the group of kinsfolk. (BUSIA, quoted in GBADEGESIN 2001,133, *emphasis added*)

In what follows, I will reflect on the metaphysical, social, and moral dimensions of ancestor veneration in Akan ontology and traditional (religious) conceptions and, along the way, try to compare these with some East Asian understandings of ancestors, highlighting shared concerns of continuity and communal responsibility which the homage paid to ancestors reinforces.

The Metaphysical Meaning of Ancestors: Relating to the Whole Community

Whether manifesting as prayers, libations or other ritualized enactments, the explicit acknowledgement of ancestors' ongoing spiritual presence within a community continues to play a meaningful role in communities shaped by post-contact African traditional ideals. Even among groups who have converted to other religions such as Christianity or Islam, ancestor veneration constitutes a powerful spiritual legacy that has outlasted colonization, political upheaval and religious change. One scholar of African Religious Traditions, Jacob K. Olupona, recalls a harvest ceremony in a Christian church in Nigeria that, during the singing of a familiar Christian tune, was marked by a "dull" atmosphere until the organist struck up a war song in honor of an ancestral lineage that the people knew well and identified with in that area (2001b, 68). This immediately struck a chord with those present: suddenly the congregation came alive, "the whole church just stood up in response and in respect to the lineage," and "everyone went wild in the church" (2001b, 68-69).

Whether in African or numerous East-Asian traditions, ancestors 'live on,' and they often do so recognized as spirits who are present and can interfere. While Morgan and Okyere-Manu clearly reiterate the point that "ancestor veneration" is not "ancestor worship" (2020,16), a distinction stressed by John S. Mbiti, who traces this obfuscation to early European anthropology (1990, 8), the spiritual and ontologically superior status of ancestors is not denied. At the same time, family relations are reenacted, and interconnections between the spiritual presence of deceased ancestors and their living descendants are shown to underscore the continuity and wholeness of a community, as Mbiti explained elsewhere:

the departed, whether parents, brothers, sisters or children, form part of the whole family, and must therefore be kept in touch with their surviving relatives. Libation and the giving of food to the departed are tokens of fellowship, hospitality and respect; the drink and food so given are symbols of family continuity and contact. "Worship" is the wrong word to apply in this situation; and Africans themselves know very well that they are not "worshipping" the departed members of their

family. It is almost blasphemous, therefore, to describe these acts of family relationships as “worship.” (1990, 8-9)

Morgan and Okyere-Manu introduce the place of ancestors in the Akan ontological hierarchy. Ancestors are grouped with beings directly below God, with “various kinds of spirits (smaller gods and the spirits of ancestors)” (2020,14). Spiritual beings care for the spiritual needs of human beings, who themselves are both spiritual and physical. Humans’ physical needs are met in turn by physical beings such as non-human animals, plants, and inanimate objects, which are below humans in the ontological hierarchy. Corresponding to the Akan embeddedness within the community of ancestors and their living descendants is thus a “metaphysical worldview” (2020,11) that establishes a hierarchy within which these various beings have their place and fulfill their familial and communal roles. The awareness of community as extending beyond the living to include, in particular, *morally exemplary*, ancestors is one that is at least distantly inherent in human cultures universally (EPHIRIM-DONKOR 1998, xi). However, spiritual alienation from ancestors, biological or otherwise, is a unique characteristic of modern life, as the German Christian theologian Jürgen Moltmann (1926-) has lamented:

In modern societies the individual consciousness of being oneself drives out the collective sense of existing within a succession of generations. This destroys all community with the dead. The dead are then ‘dead’ in the modern sense. That is, they no longer exist, they no longer have any significance, and are no longer perceived. We no longer take account of our ancestors. ...In this way, in modern societies the living have come to dominate the dead. (2004,131)

Traditional East-Asian cultures and philosophies value an ongoing connectedness with ancestors, as anthropologist Laurel Kendall has explored in her writing on Korean ancestor rituals. Much like the “community [embracing] both the living and the dead” (MENKITI 2004,130, in MORGAN & OKYERE-MANU 2020,28), “the dead” are still very much part of the community of the living in traditional Korean culture, which persists in the divided nation today. Whether they appear in dream or shamanistic rituals, ancestors may communicate with their living relatives in intimate, personalized ways: “That the dead feel, that they continue to express emotions appropriate to a mother, father, child, sibling, or spouse, is affirmed in stories, dreams, and séance appearances (KENDALL 2001,137). All this suggests a presence of ancestors that has tangible consequences in the lives of their living descendants. “Confucius,” so Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824 CE) in advocating recognition of mutual influence between Ruists and Mohists,

advocated that the performance of rites to ancestors should be done with reverence, as if those ancestors were present; he ridiculed those who

paid only lip-service when performing the rites. Isn't this acknowledging the existence of ghosts and spirits? (LI 2020, 68)

In these examples, the presence of ancestors connects the living with the dead in a community of shared kinship and relatedness that stretches beyond physical life and expands the community beyond its present-focused spiritual confinement. The inclusive outlook of the Akan with regard to the expansion of community beyond generational divides, a position irrelevant to future-oriented modern cultures, despite the modern emphasis on inclusivity, finds a parallel in the Akan embrace of the universal: "Humanity has no boundary," which, according to Gyekye, expresses the African perception of the unity of all human beings (2004, 17, 98).

The Social and Moral Functions of Ancestors: A Durkheimian Metaphor?

Confucius valued individual talent, and used virtuous conduct, speech, governance and culture to praise and direct students, and when a person died but their name was not celebrated this was considered shameful. Isn't this 'elevating the worthy'? (LI 2020, 68)

In his study on "Ancestors and Spirituality in African Society and Culture," Jacob K. Olupona asks why it is that "long after several ancient gods have disappeared from the African pantheon, ancestor beliefs are still as strong as they were in the distant past" (2001, 61). He posits that ancestral rituals constitute an important space linking past and present, connecting the cultures of independent African nation-states today with their pre-colonial histories: "often," Olupona writes, "ancestral ideology is invoked to legitimize ethnic identity reinforced by a bond of unity. Ethnicity and communalism ... have served as rallying points for collective community development at the grassroots level" (2001, 61). Faith in ancestors, Olupona maintains, has lasted and served not only as "the main source for cultural revitalization" in post-colonial African contexts, but also as a catalyst for social change. Why it is that ancestors have so tenaciously survived the ravages of past centuries? Indeed, if we think of Chinese or Korean ancestor worship and its longevity into modern and post-modern societies, we will readily turn to its social and political significance. "When formalized," Lakos notes with regard to China, for example, "ancestor worship leads to a bureaucracy. Ancestor worship explains the genesis of bureaucracy and its importance throughout Chinese history."

At this point, one might be tempted to invoke a Durkheimian understanding of traditional rituals connected with ancestors that explains these in terms of the need for social cohesion and coercion, religious practices as functioning within a society to address demands that are not inherently religious (see Kendall). But this functionalist view obscures the fact that ancestors do not merely fill roles within the given social order. Their meanings, as Kendall also points out, are "more particularistic"; the ancestors people

relate to after all are most often close relatives, those toward whom one might feel deep love, gratitude, guilt or any mixture of strong and complex, particularistic emotions (2001, 137).

The meaning of ancestors thus exceeds social functionalism. Indeed, as Morgan and Okyere-Manu point out, there is a powerful moral dimension to ancestor belief and veneration, and this moral dimension is relationally defined in terms of kinship. Moreover, ancestors in African traditions can directly interact with and disturb the lives of their living descendants. These interferences are again particularistic and relate to the specific situations and histories of individual families or clans. The moral demands placed on those seeking ancestry status in the Akan faith – the “moral undertones of the Akan belief in ancestors” are outlined as follows (2020,16ff.): first, “living virtuously before one’s death,” avoiding moral bankruptcy and being trustworthy (leading a “credible life” (2020,18). Moreover, a virtuous member of the community must build a moral legacy and pass this on to his or her children. To attain ancestor status, therefore, a person must have been married and parented children. An exception to this condition applies to those who die an honorable death defending their nation (in war, for example). Thirdly, a person must exhibit good health in life and, fourthly, not die as a result of illness or otherwise prematurely, such as by accident. Children cannot attain the status of ancestor if they die before reaching adulthood; the insane are excluded from this privilege. Overall, the person seeking to become an ancestor must be “hardworking, kind, loving, pacific, respectful, merciful, and a keeper of promises ... must keep the right sort of company, speak the truth and be someone who can be trusted to keep secrets” (2020, 22).

Moral blamelessness and a fortunate life come into play in East-Asian Confucian philosophical ancestor traditions, too. As Laurel Kendall has noted: “In the literature on Korea, there is a good deal of discussion on the distinction between ancestors and ghosts. The ancestors are said to be the proper dead who died after a full life and have descendants, and the ghosts are those who didn’t make it to a ripe old age, so they still rattle around and disturb the living.” Kendall also acknowledges, however, that the practical realities can be complex and involved: not all those dying young are denied the status of ancestor, while not all who reach old age are thus honored: “Reality blurs it, but the basic distinction is clearly there” (2001, 68).

Moral rectitude and ancestor reverence are closely connected in Chinese tradition in the concept of filial piety (孝). Parents expected their children to provide for them in old age as they had cared for their children, and as their lives depended on and descended from their ancestors. This reciprocity and recognition would become indicative of general well-being. As seen in one of the core Ruist (Confucian) texts, the *Classic of Rites* (禮記), filial piety, in its most intimate forms, and the wider peace are understood to be connected:

As the people are taught filial piety and brotherly love at home, with reverence toward the elder and diligent care for the aged in the

community, they constitute the way of a king; and it is along this line that states as well as families will become peaceful. (HSIEH 1968,182, in LAKOS 2010, 76)

Filial piety, in the form of reverence for and proper acknowledgement of ancestors and elders, is not merely a private matter relating to domestic harmony and relational stability within the family but has implications for society at large and the continuity of a community. It is, as Assmann notes with reference to other traditions reaching back to antiquity, a form of commemorating the dead “through which a group goes on living with its dead, keeping them present, and thereby building up an image of its own unity and wholeness, of which the dead naturally form a part (OEXLE 1983: 48ff, qtd. in ASSMANN 2012, 45)⁴.

Conclusion

From the above, it can be concluded that Akan traditional thought on ancestor veneration and its relevance for incentives that promote life- and community-affirming human well-being invites a humanist interpretation of ancestors and ancestor reverence (cf.MORGAN & OKYERE-MANU, 2020) that translates well into equivalent ways of relating and relatedness in other traditions. Wiredu and Gyekye in their debate on personhood in African beliefs have put forward different emphases on what constitutes a person, a question that goes to the heart of a humanistic understanding even of this debate because it relates to the question of humanity itself, which might be distinguished from personhood and again from the kind of person, as we have seen in this brief exposé, who might become an ancestor through diligence, living responsibly and being in a position to care for others and have a certain standing among peers. What is troubling in all of this is the question of what happens to those not able or fortunate enough to attain moral and societal prominence – whether the mentally immature, the abandoned, the barren or those killed by an act of nature.

Communal rituals that honor the dead as well as the drive to “become an ancestor” (MORGAN & OKYERE-MANU, 2020,18), can nonetheless be read in humanistic ethical terms. The need to relate to a community of shared and generationally sanctioned meanings beyond the fractured significances of individualistic concerns and existence, while universal, is expressed the world over in diverse ways of appealing and relating to a whole, or ongoing, community; the articulation of this tendency as a value-laden and value-promoting process that encompasses both individual identity (as individuals pursue the status of ancestor, taking responsibility for their own personal life

⁴ In his [Cultural Memory], Assmann divides “memory of the dead” into two kinds: “retrospective and prospective,” the second “consist[ing] in “achievement” and “fame” – the manner in which the dead have rendered themselves unforgettable” (2012, 45). While the first is noted as the more original form we have seen that the second is also universal, whether in Akan traditions at the level of kinship or Ruist ancestral spirituality.

choices as part of this pursuit) and communal continuity (since the goals of this orientation promote the harmony and welfare of the community) highlights aspects of shared humanity that future-fixated progress-thinking easily neglects.

That this vision of a shared community – inclusive of the old and young, living and remembered generations, the *whole community* in short – must not exclude the insane, the immature, or otherwise less privileged is another concern. Thus, the pursuit of ancestry by seeking moral perfection and status as outlined above warrants critique and a counter-emphasis on generativity, as highlighted, for example, in the ethical commitments described in Ephirim-Donkor's [African Spirituality] or Gyekye's vision of a "common humanity."

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