Divinities and Ancestors: A Preliminary Comparison between African and Confucian Cosmologies

DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ft.v11i1.14
Submission: November 12, 2021 Acceptance: January 25, 2022

Jiechen HU
Department of Philosophy & Department of History
Hunan University, Changsha
Email: hujiechen880831@hotmail.com
ORCID 0000-0001-9699-1539

Abstract
This paper reflects on two sets of terms in the field of religious studies, mainly through a comparative study with the divinities and ancestorship between African and Confucian cosmologies: the first one is the classification of monotheism, polytheism and animism; and the second is so-called 'ancestor worship'. I argue that the classification system of monotheism, polytheism, and animism is partially invalidated in both African religions and Chinese Confucianism. This is because in both traditions, even if there is a supreme or original being, it is on a continuum or spectrum with other divinities and even human beings, rather than an absolute Other. Similarly, the use of the simple word 'worship' to summarise ancestorship in African religions and Chinese Confucianism is actually a simplification of the relationship between the living and ancestors across both traditions.
Keywords: Cosmology, Ancestor, African religions, Chinese Confucianism

Introduction: The Limitations of Western Terminologies

A wealth of comprehensive studies has shown us the cosmology of African religions, in particular, the structure of the cosmos, the system of gods (including their classification, attributes, and similarities, as well as the differences between different regions) and the place of human beings in the African worldview (MBITI 1970; WIREDU 2012; KANU 2013). The study on Igbo Africans is one of the highlights, including the Supreme Being (EZEUGWU and CHINWEUBA 2018), conception of forces (IBEABUCHI 2013), living-dead ancestors (MEKOA 2019), etc. Inspired by this fruitful research, in this paper, I reflect on two sets of terms in the field of religious studies, mainly through a comparative study with the divinities and ancestorship between African and Confucian cosmologies: the first one is the classification of monotheism, polytheism and animism; and the second is so-called 'ancestor worship". "He who knows one knows none." Friedrich Max Müller borrowed this statement from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to describe a foundational approach to the 'science of religion' (MÜLLER 1882). Since then, many

scholars of religion have adopted it as a maxim, and comparative studies have remained an important foundation of religious studies. However, even after more than a century of development, some presuppositions about the Abrahamic religions are still present in the academic language of religion. The most typical is the type of deity referred to by the term monotheism. The strict usage of the term is to distinguish between the Abrahamic religions and the Greco-Roman religions and similar traditions to which 'polytheism' refers (LUDWIG 2005).

John S. Mbiti has convincingly argued that the hypothesis of 'animism → polytheism → monotheism' line of evolution proposed by E. B. Tylor is totally inapplicable to the interpretation of African religion and philosophy:

> (Tylor's) type of argument and interpretation places African religions at the bottom of the supposed line of religious evolution. It tells us that Judaism, Christianity and Islam are at the top, since they are monotheistic. ...We can only comment that African peoples are aware of all these elements of religion: God, spirits and divinities are part of the traditional body of beliefs. Christianity and Islam acknowledge the same type of spiritual beings. The theory of religious evolution, in whichever direction, does not satisfactorily explain or interpret African religions. (1970, 10)

In addition, Mbiti also mentions that since Herbert Spencer, many scholars have referred to so-called 'ancestor worship' in order to understand the libation and giving of food to the departed in African religions, but in fact, in the African worldview, this relationship with deceased family members is anything but a form of 'worship' (1970, 11–12).

In the face of such methodological dilemmas, perhaps two approaches can be taken. First, there is the need to redefine new boundaries for the old terminology through a thick description and analysis of some traditions. Second, a better understanding of the traditions represented by specific cases is required and asks for a careful analysis of the failures of the old terminology in specific cases. The following will be discussed in relation to the aforementioned research as well as some concepts of the Confucian system in traditional China. I argue that the classification system of monotheism, polytheism, and animism is partially invalidated in both African religions and Chinese Confucianism. This is because in both traditions, even if there is a supreme or original being, it is on a continuum or spectrum with other divinities and even human beings, rather than an absolute Other. Similarly, the use of the simple word 'worship' to summarise ancestorship in African religions and Chinese Confucianism is actually a simplification of the relationship between the living and ancestors across both traditions.

Monotheism, Polytheism, and Animism

The studies of Igbo Africans show that the Supreme One is also present in their religious beliefs, but not in the narrow sense of the monotheism found in Abrahamic religions (EZEUGWU and CHINWEUBA 2018). For example, Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, in his discussion of the attributes of God, clearly states:

> Among the Igbo, there is only one God called Chukwu, even though the nomenclature is contested, he is regarded as the God and creator of the whole universe. Thus, African Traditional Religion has come to be understood, though lately, as a monotheistic religion because it recognises only one God. (2013, 538)

At the same time, Kanu also introduces and analyses the different 'divinities' of African religions, including primordial divinities, deified ancestors, and personified natural forces and phenomena, as well as the similarities and differences between different regions and communities (2013, 539–550).

The ways the term 'monotheistic' is used by these African philosophy scholars (KANU 2013; METZ and MOLEFE 2021) is clearly distinct from Jewish, Islamic and Christian usage, but extends its conceptual boundaries to consider the existence of both 'God' and 'divinities', except here, 'God' is unique. More importantly, scholars have found that the Igbo had a well-developed concept of the Supreme Being prior and post western influence (EZEUGWU and CHINWEUBA 2018). It is, therefore, easy to see that the traditional, strict usage of 'monotheism' and 'polytheism' do not perfectly explain the example of African religions.

The same terminological dilemma occurs in the case of traditional China, albeit in a different form. In fact, in the early Chinese Confucian classics, the myth of creation was left in limbo, and people were more concerned with the birth of real cultural institutions:

> Anciently, when Pao-hsi had come to the rule of all under heaven, looking up, he contemplated the brilliant forms exhibited in the sky, and looking down he surveyed the patterns shown on the earth. He contemplated the ornamental appearances of birds and beasts and the (different) suitabilities of the soil. Near at hand, in his own person, he found things for consideration, and the same at a distance, in things in general. On this he devised the eight trigrams, to show fully the attributes of the spirit-like and intelligent (operations working secretly), and to classify the qualities of the myriads of things. (LEGGE 1963, 382)

Here, the creation or generation of the world is absent. The only character that appears is Pao-hsi, who is not a primordial god, but an ancestor in the traditional Chinese worldview.

In contrast, the neo-confucianist philosophers of medieval China consciously explored the more abstract idea of the creation or generation of the primordial world. A more representative one is Zhu Xi (1130–1200)[1]. In relation to Zhu Xi's cosmology, Thompson Kirill concludes that:

> Zhu Xi conceived the world as a patterned (LI) totality made up of a cosmic vapour (QI) that under various conditions condenses and solidifies into countless permutations, from the purest transparent YUANQI (primordial QI), to the YIN-YANG poles modulated by the primal TAIJI (supreme polarity) pattern, to the WUXING (five phases), each of which bears an identifying inner pattern and set of propensities (XING) that involve interconvertability and recombination with the other four phases, and finally to the phenomenal world: Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things. (THOMPSON 2021)

It is clear from this that the traditional terms 'monotheism', 'polytheism', or 'animism' do not quite encapsulate the world Zhu Xi imagined, and that the latter is even related to all three in some way. It is true that the generation of the world began with a certain transcendent being: it could be a 'primordial cosmic vapour' or the 'supreme polarity'. But it is not a personified god. However, this reality is not the Wholly Other to human beings and the world; after all, both abstract principles and embodied matter are derived from it. In this respect, it seems to be a particular combination of both monotheism and animism.

However, it is undeniable that the worldview constructed by Zhu Xi also accommodates other spiritual beings - 'ghosts and spirits' (*guishen*) - which, similarly, are not absolute Others to humans, but rather different manifestations of the cosmic vapour, which can be said to be on the same extended line of existence and therefore able to offer and absorb influence. Therefore, in Zhu's philosophical vision, the natural and spirit realms are intermingled and indistinguishable (GARDNER 1995).

The following case can well exemplify the peculiarities and subtleties in Zhu Xi's cosmology and his interpretation of the relationship between the nature and spirit realms:

[1] Zhu Xi was a preeminent Neo-Confucian (*daoxue*) master in medieval China. He is one of the most influential philosophers in Chinese history, considered second only to Confucius. The compendiums he compiled on the basis of the Confucian classics served as the basis for the Imperial Civil Examinations from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

> One of (Zhu Xi's) students asked, "There was a man in the village called Li San who became a malicious ghost after his death. Whenever there was a Buddhist ritual in the village, food and libation would be offered to him. On one occasion, the Daoist priests set up a Yellow Register Offering, but no food or libation was offered to him, so he defiled all the offerings in the ritual. Later, when someone set off a firecracker and accidentally burnt the tree possessed by him, he (perished and) never did any more evil." (Zhu Xi) says: "He died in an accident, so the cosmic vapour in his body did not dissipate but was finally shattered by the firecrackers. Moreover, the Offering ritual of Daoism, which is a sacrifice to heaven and earth, mountains and rivers, and to the gods and goddesses of heaven and earth, was actually defiled by a small ghost, which shows that this ritual of Daoism is not in accordance with the patterned totality of the cosmos. (WANG 1986, 38)

On the one hand, Zhu Xi fully acknowledges the existence of a world of ghosts and spirits and also believes that the two worlds are perfectly capable of influencing each other. The ghost can both interfere with the human world and be expelled by ordinary things in the human world – firecrackers in this case - without the intervention of religious experts or professional exorcists. The reason for this is that both the world of ghosts and spirits and the human world are transformed by cosmic vapour and follow the same principle, but their manifestations are different. On the other hand, Zhu Xi also incidentally criticises the prevailing Daoist rituals of the same period, arguing that the cosmological and divine concepts therein appear inconsistent with the patterned totality of the cosmos, and are therefore superstitious and useless.

Ancestor Worship

According to Mbiti, the departed person in African religion is not really dead:

> He is alive, and such a person I would call the *living-dead*. The living-dead is a person who is physically dead but alive in the memory of those who knew him in his life as well as being alive in the world of the spirits. So long as the living-dead is thus remembered, he is in the state of *personal immortality*. (1970, 32)

Therefore, 'ancestor' in African religion is not merely a dead forbear who has been defined by Western scholars for many years (MEKOA 2019, 99). A consequent problem is that the behaviour of the living towards the dead in African religions is not simply 'worship'. Mbiti has clearly stated that:

> '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'. (1970, 11–12)

Similarly, Kanu, in his discussion of the African concept of ancestorship, makes it clear that:

> They are honoured and not worshipped. The honour given to them is anchored on the principle of reciprocity and philosophy of reincarnation: having been honoured, they are expected to reincarnate and do for the living members what they did for them. (2013, 550)

The conception embodied in the term 'ancestor worship' therefore derives to some extent from a misinterpretation of the local culture by outsiders.

When the Jesuit, Matteo Ricci (1552–1610),[2] arrived in China, he had to face the problem of how to understand, from a Catholic perspective, the rituals of Confucius, historical sages and ancestors in the Chinese tradition. The conciliatory strategy he adopted was no doubt accompanied by missionary motives (TANG 2015). But similar questions have also affected, implicitly or explicitly, the way in which modern Western religious scholars understand this Chinese tradition.

Just as the term 'worship' demonstrates the misunderstanding of ancestorship in African culture by outsiders from the West, it also simplifies the Chinese tradition. What is hidden by the generalisation of 'ancestor worship' is the richness and diversity of religious experience.

The material evidence and textual documents that survive from early China provide a glimpse of a very diverse religious imaginary of ancestors, and the historical reality behind it may be a vast spectrum far beyond our current knowledge. In funeral customs, for example, the present-day archaeological evidence reveals a very diverse range of religious imagery. Some of it is based on the expectation that the buried ancestors could be divinised and enter the transcendent world of the dead (JIANG 2016). At the same time, there is the simultaneously soothing and suppression of the deceased to prevent them from harassing and harming the living (SEIDEL 1987). This is particularly true of the belief in 'killing spirits' (*yangsha*), which has been passed down through the centuries. Here, a dead relative will summon or transform into a demonic being on a certain day soon after death to harm or even kill those around the body (CHANG 2012). Thus, in early Chinese tradition, the imagery of dead ancestors could be both divine and demonic, and the accompanying religious rituals could

[2] Matteo Ricci was an Italian Jesuit priest. He might be the best known Jesuit missionary to China, in part because of the Christian-Confucian dialogue he initiated.

therefore be of a blessed, pacifying and repressive nature, a complexity far from being covered by the term 'worship'.

Moreover, the concept of ancestor in traditional China is also a broad one, encompassing ancestors by blood on the one hand and ancestors by culture, i.e. early sages, on the other. In the late imperial period, with the popularity of spirit-writing, deceased ancestors and sages were not only able to enjoy the sacrifices made by the living and return implicit blessings, but were even able to directly enlighten the living by revealing texts (GOOSSAERT 2015). In other words, in this period of popular Confucianism, practitioners were not content with the abstract cosmology and impersonal system of deities constructed by neo-Confucian philosophers but preferred to transform the abstract religious system of sages and ancestors into a more intuitive connection. In fact, in nineteenth-century south-western China, Confucius was not only a sage of Confucianism and a model for philosophers but also the supreme deity in the popular Confucian rituals for the dead and blessings. There is, therefore, no such thing as a completely unified concept of the divinities in Confucianism, where there is both an impersonal cosmology, represented by the philosophy of Zhu Xi, and a pantheon of personified primordial deities and divine sages.

Having outlined Igbo and Confucian traditions, we can find the following similarities and differences. In terms of similarities: Whether as 'living-dead' in African religions or as 'ghosts and spirits' (*guishen*) in Confucianism, the ancestors of both traditions are not categorised as the Other to the living, but rather, have a continuous relationship with them. In both traditions, therefore, the living do not simply worship their ancestors, but perform religious rituals in which they are seen as living beings (but in a different form) with whom they can have a connection. The difference is that ancestors in the Confucian tradition are not always protectors. They can also bring calamity and punishment to the living, and even make trouble for the unrelated living. As a result, attitudes towards 'ghosts and spirits' in Chinese religious traditions are also diverse.

Conclusion

Of course, it is impossible for me to give a complete picture of the different cosmologies of Confucianism over the past two thousand years in a short essay. I hope that this brief comparison will help us to better understand our own traditions and to reflect on the ways in which they differ from the traditional terminological framework set out by modern religious studies. One reason for the failure of these terms is that the God-human relationship in the Abrahamic religions is not applicable to many other cultures. In both African and Chinese religions, God and human are not absolutely Other to each other, but act on a dynamic spectrum. And the conception of ancestors in both African and Chinese religions constitute, to some extent, a kind of intermediary for observing the relationship between God and man.

In fact, the relationship between God and man is not only confined to the religion of one culture, but also constitutes a mirror image of other relationships, i.e. how one understands the relationship between God and man is how one understands the relationship between man and animals and man and nature. It is hoped, therefore, that this small paper will serve as a crude attempt to interest cross-cultural scholars in reconceptualising our relationship with the world using resources from cultures such as Africa and China.

Funding Acknowledgements
This publication was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation and the Global Philosophy of Religion Project at the University of Birmingham. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of these organisations.

Relevant Literature

1. CHANG, Chao-Jan. "Killing Spirits from the Dead: The Object of Exorcism in the Funeral Rites of the Way of the Celestial Master in Medieval China," [Fu-jen Religious Stuides], pp169–194, 2012. Vol 25.
2. EZEUGWU, Evaristus Chukwudi and Gregory Emeka CHINWEUBA. "The Supreme Being in Igbo Thought: A Reappraisal," [Philosophia], pp26–47, 2018. Vol 21.

3. GARDNER, Daniel K. "Ghosts and Spirits in the Sung Neo-Confucian World: Chu Hsi on *kuei-shen*," [Journal of American Oriental Society], pp598–611, 1995. Vol 115. No 4.

4. GOOSSAERT, Vincent. "Spirit Writing, Canonization, and the Rise of Divine Saviors: Wenchang, Lüzu, and Guandi, 1700–1858," [Late Imperial China], pp82–125, 2015. *Vol* 36. No 2.

5. IBEABUCHI, Obiajulu Mulumba. "The Theory of Forces as Conceived by Igbo-Africans," [Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion], pp289–314, 2013. Vol 2. No 1.

6. JIANG, Sheng. [Heritage of the Han Empire: Ghosts in Han China], 2016.Science Press: Beijing.

7. KANU, Ikechukwu Anthony. "The Dimensions of African Cosmology," [Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion], pp533–555, 2013. Vol.2, No.2.

8. LEGGE, James. (Transl.). [The I Ching], 1963. Dover Publication: New York.

9. LUDWIG, Theodore M. "Monotheism," [Encyclopedia of Religion, Vol.9, Lindsay JONES Ed.], pp6155–6163, 2005. Macmillan Reference: Detroit.

10. MBITI, John S. [African Religions and Philosophy], 1970. Anchor Books: New York.

11. MEKOA, Itumeleng. "The Living-Dead/ Ancestors as Guardians of Morality in African Traditional Religious Thought," [Global Journal of Archaeology & Anthropology], pp99–104, 2019. Vol 10. No 5.

12. METZ, Thaddeus and Motsamai MOLEFE. "Traditional African Religion as a Neglected Form of Monotheism," [The Monist], pp393–409, 2021. Vol 104.

13. MÜLLER, F. Max. [Introduction to the Science of Relgion: Four Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institute in February and May, 1870], 1882. Longmans, Green, and Co.: London.

14. SEIDEL, Anna. "Traces of Han Religion in Funerary Texts Found in Tombs," [Dōkyō to shūkyō bunka, Kanei AKIZUKI Ed.], pp21–57, 1987. Hirakawa Shuppansha: Tokyo.

15. TANG, Yijie. [Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity and Chinese Culture], 2015. Springer: Berlin, Heidelberg.

16. THOMPSON, Kirill. "Zhu Xi." [THE STANFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY, Edward N. ZALTA Ed.], N.P, Summer 2021. Accessed in November 2021. **https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/zhu-xi/**

17. WANG, Xingxian. (Ed.). [Zhuzi yulei], 1986. Zhonghua Shuju: Beijing.

18. WIREDU, Kwasi. "African Religions," [The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion Routledge, Chad MEISTER and Paul COPAN Eds.], N.P, September 2012. Accessed in August 2021. **https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203813010.ch3**