

MEMORIAL SERVICES AS CONTINUITY OF BELIEF IN ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN YORÙBÁLAND

Julius Sunday Adékòyà

Department of Religious Studies,
University of Ìbàdàn, Ìbàdàn, Oyo State, Nigeria
adekoyajululius@yahoo.com
+2348034888617

Abstract

The Yorùbá are said to be deeply religious and belief in Ancestors as one of the major features of African Indigenous Religion (AIR) that they practice. Belief in Ancestors is hinged on African unified view of reality, their sense of community, the idea of human earthly life and afterlife. This paper seeks to demonstrate that memorial service in churches is indicative of the enduring continuation of belief in ancestors in AIR. It explains the concept of religious change and the multi-causal theoretical framework for religious change. Using AIR in Yorubaland as a case study, the paper found that ancestral faith is rooted in the cosmology of the people, and that this faith is an enduring conviction that cannot be extirpated despite the onslaught of Islam, Christianity, western education and other foreign agents of social change. Of course, there is hardly any religion that does not believe in life after death. Rather than total discontinuity of the belief in ancestors in Yorùbáland, the paper demonstrates that it has been modified into memorial services by Islam and Christianity, whether the practice was part and parcel of Islam and Christianity or not. Since belief in ancestors is similar to belief in saints and caliphs in Christianity and Islam respectively, the paper recommends that people should respect the religious beliefs of others, and be open to knowledge of other religions in order to appreciate their beliefs as they respect their own.

Keywords: Ancestor worship, Christianity, Memorial Services,
Yorùbáland

Introduction

Change is constant in life, including in the religious sphere. Religious change follows the same process of cultural change¹. There are many religions in the world, with the dominant ones trying to displace others (following the partial demise hypothesis) or extirpate other

religions (following the total demise hypothesis). Islam and Christianity though foreign have certainly caused the displacement of African Indigenous Religion (AIR) and the situation meets the partial demise hypothesis criteria, even though not the total demise hypothesis criteria. Partial demise hypothesis implies religious change. It was found, and it is obvious that the onslaughts of Islam and Christianity against AIR in Yorùbáland have caused some elements of AIR to be modified while some others are retained.

Among the world religions, Abrahamic religions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are more impactful on other religions. Anywhere the missionaries go, they cause religious crisis, trying to take-over the religious spaces through converting people, and eventually the host religion becomes something other than what it was, somehow.² This transformation or change can take several forms. Sometimes, the change can occur through inculturation, that is adoption of certain elements of the host religion and its transformation to fit the practice of the foreign religion.

The advents of Islam and Christianity in the geographical area called Nigeria have affected several indigenous beliefs and practices. The onslaughts of the two religions have undermined African religion and culture³. Islam has been described as more friendly to Nigerian indigenous beliefs than Christianity. This is because Islam shared similar beliefs with indigenous religions specifically in the areas of polygamy, non-separation between the physical (secular) and spiritual (sacred), and in approval of benevolent African magic and medicine. One area where both Islam and Christianity seem to agree with African belief system is the belief in ancestors (long or recent living dead).

In AIR, like in Christianity and Islam, life does not end with death, but continues in another realm. Death is perceived as a transition to the great beyond. This is expressed in the concept of belief in ancestors/ancestresses (the “living dead”, meaning people who have died but continue to “live” in the memory and life of their peoples, and in continuous communication with their families. Death, although a dreaded event, is perceived as the beginning of a person’s deeper relationship with God and all of creation. It is the complementing of life and the beginning of the communication between the visible and the invisible worlds⁴. The goal of life in AIR is to become an ancestor or ancestress after death. Hence a person must strive to live a memorable life. In Yoruba worldview, funeral rite is not what takes a person to the ancestral world, but *ìwà* (good conduct, right behaviour and attitude). Of course, some have argued that

every dead person must be given a “correct” funeral, supported by a number of religious ceremonies, and that unless this is done the dead person may become a wandering ghost, unable to “live” properly after death and therefore a danger to the living. It is argued further that “proper” death rites are more a guarantee of protection for the living than to secure a safe passage for the dying⁵. There is ambivalence about attitudes to the recent dead, which fluctuate between love and respect on the one hand and dread and despair on the other, particularly because it is believed that the dead have power over the living.

On another note, Mbiti avers that a belief in the continuation of life after death for African peoples does not constitute a hope for a future and better life. According to him, to live here and now is the most important concern of African religious activities and beliefs. Even life in the hereafter is conceived in materialistic and physical terms. There is neither paradise to be hoped for nor hell to be feared in the hereafter⁶. Some Yoruba traditional songs contradict this position of Mbiti. For instance, *Emá ãkà láyè nitorí àti ròrun. Bẹ ẹ dé bode, ẹ ó rojò* (Do not do evil in this world, for fear of going to heaven. When you get to the border – between heaven and earth, you will be judged).

It is claimed by some writers that African peoples believe that rewards and punishments come to people in this life and not in the hereafter, and that in the land of the departed, what happens there happens automatically, irrespective of a person’s earthly behaviour, provided the correct burial rites have been observed. That can only be far from the truth, if only because humanity generally distinguishes between good and evil.

Another claim by some writers is that if a person is a wizard, a murderer, a thief, one who has broken the community code or taboos, or one who has had an unnatural death or an improper burial, then such a person may be doomed to punishment in the afterlife as a wandering ghost, and may be beaten and expelled by the ancestors or subjected to a period of torture according to the seriousness of their misdeeds, much like the Catholic concept of purgatory⁷. Like in most parts of the world, African peoples believe that witches and sorcerers are not admissible to the spirit world, and therefore they are refused proper burial even here; sometimes their bodies are subjected to actions that would make such burial impossible, such as burning or cutting into pieces and feeding to hyenas⁸. Among the Africans, to be cut off from the community of the ancestors in death is the nearest equivalence of hell. But nothing decides that more crucially than *ìwà* in Yoruba belief.

Originally, Nigerian aborigines both worship and venerate their ancestors⁹. Today, change of religion due to the influence of Islam and Christianity, among other factors, has produced discontinuity in the original or aboriginal belief in ancestors. Although to a large extent there is discontinuity in the worship of ancestors, there is continuity in their veneration. Continuity in the veneration of ancestors is evident in Islam and Christianity today in the way that practitioners of these religions celebrate the remembrance of their dead fathers, mothers, or loved ones even decades after their demise. This paper examines ancestral belief in Yorùbáland with a view to demonstrate its continuity in the forms of memorial services, memorial lectures, and the like, that are now common with Muslims and Christians in Yorùbáland. One's assumption in this paper is that memorial services are an aspect of religious change.

Religious change in Yorubaland

Religious change refers to the process of displacement of a less dominant religion by a more dominant one in such a way that the influence of the religions on each other makes certain elements of each of the religions to become modified while others are retained. Africa is a melting pot of different religions. This is partly because AIR is friendly and accommodative. AIR recognises other cults and divinities (of other religions) as parts of the whole Ultimate Reality¹⁰. Casting aspersions on AIR, the duo of Islam and Christianity scrambled for converts from among traditionalists and won many; and thus causing religious change in Yorùbáland. Yorùbá worldviews and values were affected by colonialism, Christianity, Islam, and Western education¹¹.

Islam and Christianity are two rival religions in Yorùbáland. The two are hostile to AIR, which on the other hand, is very open-minded and accommodative to all religions¹². Though distrustful of each other, Christianity and Islam have worked so much to extirpate AIR. Dopamu rightly notes that the two foreign religions have succeeded in forcing AIR to modify itself a great deal, through condemning all its practices, only to turn round and takeover those practices and be competing among themselves to market the practices, while continuing to use derogatory terms to describe AIR adherents.¹³ In other words, they have been afflicted with the "plaque" that they dreaded, which resulted in religious change affecting both AIR and the invading religions.

Religious change usually takes two forms: adhesion and conviction¹⁴. Adhesion implies the mixing of two or more different religious belief systems which usually result in syncretism. On the other

hand, conviction implies a passage from unbelief to belief, or a transition from syncretism to full commitment to a particular religious belief system.

Theoretical frameworks

There is no mono causal factor for religious change. In other words, religious change is due to poly-causal factors. The theories of religious change are many; each with its own strengths and weaknesses¹⁵. Three of them that are germane for this paper are dualistic typology (also called dominant/dependent model), social process approach and cultural lag theory¹⁶. Dualistic typology states that religious change is due to the displacement of a dependent indigenous religion/structure by a dominant religion/structure¹⁷. Social process approach states that religious change is due to a number of social processes such as industrialisation, urbanization, commercialization, literacy expansion, occupational mobility, and so forth¹⁸. Cultural lag theory states that religious change is due to differential rate of displacement of material aspect of culture over non-material aspects of culture¹⁹. Putting them together, religious change in Yorùbáland is due to historical factors (colonialism, Islam, Christianity, western education, and so forth), economic factors (industrialisation, urbanization, commercialization, literacy expansion, occupational mobility, and so forth), and spiritual conviction. The foregoing factors are religious and non-religious in nature.

Basis for Belief in Ancestors in Yorùbáland

Five elements that characterise AIR, according to Bolaji Idowu, are God, divinities, spirits, ancestors, magic and medicine²⁰. Understandably, magic and medicine are not religious, but scientific elements. Of course, AIR is locally rooted in Yorubaland, and so is belief in ancestors. Generally, ancestors were historical figures, whether heroic or ordinary, who, through their lifestyles command worship and or veneration from their offspring after death.

The Yorùbá cosmology is illustrative. Cosmologically, the Yorùbá people conceive the world in three parts: *Ìkòlè-òrun* (skye heaven), *Ìkòlè-ayé* (earth) and *Ìwàlèàṣà* (underworld). Though distinct, the three parts are related. There is close communion among the three realms. *Ìkòlè-Ayé* (inhabited by men and nature spirits- of the sky and the earth including witches and familiar spirits) is constantly in communion with *Ìkòlè-Orun* (abode of Olódùmarè-God Himself) and the *Irúnmòlè* (the primordial divinities), while *Ìwàlèàṣà* is the abode of the ancestors, which in turn has influence on *Ìkòlè-ayé*. Ancestral belief is also anchored on Yorùbá

theogonical conception of spiritual entities in the foregoing realms. Theogonically, and apart from relating with nature spirits of the sky and earth and malevolent spirits like witchcraft and familiar spirits, mankind in *Ìkòlé-Ayé* also relate with *Olódùmarè*, *Irúnmọ̀lẹ̀* (otherwise called *Oríṣa*) in *Ìkòlé-òrun*, and ancestors in *Ìwàlẹ̀àṣà*. These relationships are sustained by offering of *adúrà* (prayer), *ẹ̀bọ* (sacrifice), *ètùtù* (appeasement offering), *ìpèsè* (offering, oblation), *iyánlẹ̀* (libation).

Belief in divinities and spirits provides another springboard for discussion on ancestors. The divinities are also spiritual beings, of course. Some of the natural world spirits are benevolent while some others are malevolent. A dead person becomes a spiritual being, and joins the spiritual realm. Generally, ancestors are regarded as benevolent spirits²¹. Both the benevolent and malevolent spirits may be placated via sacrifices and or magic²².

Ancestors are viewed as custodians of morality²³ and dispensers of justice²⁴. To that extent, ancestors are construed as good people who departed this life after a fruitful sojourn, blessed with age, and, according to Ejizu, have been accorded full traditional burial rites²⁵. In Yoruba belief, “burial rites” do not decide who becomes an ancestor or ancestress, but, as earlier noted, *ìwà rere* (good conduct, behaviour and attitude) while on earth.²⁶

Respect for elders is another string attached to ancestral worship and veneration. Hence in Yoruba worldview, becoming an ancestor or ancestress is not so much about age or any other consideration, but *ìwà rere*. As spirits of the underworld, ancestors and ancestresses are considered to be members of the supra-sensible domain and the physical world at the same time. They are transcendent²⁷. One would agree with Ejizu that ancestors and ancestresses are revered and worshiped via sacrifice²⁸, and that they in turn give their blessings in form of protection of their offspring from evil forces and prosperity of their offspring, but not that the ancestors reincarnate as babies born to their offspring²⁹. The belief of the Yoruba is that God is the maker of children (*Olórún níí ṣ'ómọ*), and not that an ancestor or ancestress has the power to decide to reincarnate. As a matter of fact, the belief in ancestor indicates African belief in afterlife. A person who has fulfilled his or her destiny and dies is believed to return to the afterlife for judgement. If he or she had lived a good life, admission into the circle of the ancestors/ancestresses is certain. Otherwise, he or she would be rejected and may become a wandering spirit, or go to a town of potsherd (where wicked dead people go).

Based on the belief in transcendence, the ancestors are regarded as living dead by Africans. Along that line, the traditional Yorùbá, like the other Africans usually recognise the spiritual existence and presence of the ancestors/ancestresses at all times. They are thought to be very much alive though spiritually and constantly observe the actions and inactions of their wards on earth. In AIR, generally, the ancestors/ancestresses are regarded as ethical spiritual guards. Fear of the ancestors is still the beginning of wisdom, because failure on the part of the living offspring to do their moral will usually attracts penalties, such as sickness or failure in life.

In sum, belief in ancestor is hinged on Yorùbá unified view of reality; their sense of community, idea of human life and after-life. Unified view of reality, as explained above, means life is dualistic but not necessarily contradictory. Life has both physical and spiritual dimensions. Just as the sky, earth, and underworld are related so also is the human world, animal world and vegetable world. The sacred and profane spheres of life are inter-connected. Attitudes emanating from this kind of inter-connectivity include use of material objects as symbols of the supernatural; use of oracles and divination to solve mysteries, and use of totems, trees, places, and so forth³⁰. With particular reference to ancestorship, *Egúngún* (masquerades) as symbolising the ancestors readily comes to mind. The outing of *Egúngún* during and outside of festivals is seen as visit of the ancestors to their people on earth. Masquerading is a religious culture of celebrating the re-union of the ancestors with their families.

The Yorùbá strong sense of community is another basis for ancestor belief and worship. The philosophy of “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am”³¹ characterise Yorùbá people like other Africans. To them family incorporates the physically living members, the departed (ancestors), and the yet to be born members³². There is a strong sense of belonging. One of the practices emanating from the sense of unity, with particular reference to ancestorship is burial of the dead right inside of family house or compound. The idea of burying the dead in the cemetery is a Christian culture.

Memorial Service as Continuity of Ancestor Veneration vis-à-vis Islam and Christianity

Islam and Christianity have influenced each other and jointly influenced AIR to a greater degree and it has in turn influenced them back even if it is to a lesser degree. Although relationship between Islam and Christianity remain competitive yet there are areas of cooperation among

these triadic religions in Yorùbáland. Specific areas of cooperation, according to Dopamu, include village communal work, extended family system, religious festivals, trade, associations, education, government, politics, industries, and so forth³³. They interact at the levels of dialogue of life, social engagement, religious experience, and intellectual/theological discussions.

These areas of interaction among other things have made a great deal of inter-religious borrowing possible across board. In other words, AIR has influenced these new religions even if in form of borrowing of certain practices, as in divination, and expressions, as in prayer, songs, etc that lead to syncretism. Dopamu notes that some independent churches have adopted elements of AIR, such as belief in spirits, cosmic forces, witchcraft, sorcery, *Ogbanje* (familiar spirits), ancestor veneration, reincarnation, and so forth³⁴. But of course, belief in such forces is not peculiar to traditional Africans. They are of international experience, found also in the Bible and ancient history of the Church.

Inevitably as a natural reality, many Yorùbá people have come to hold dual affiliations: they are Christians or Muslims as well as attachment to some aspects of AIR and association with African traditionalists. Some avowed Yorùbá Muslims or Christians are known to patronise African traditionalists, albeit secretly, thus displaying the phenomenon of “the endurance of conviction”³⁵ in AIR. Along that line, traditional belief in ancestral worship and veneration among other practices, persist with many professing Yorùbá Muslims and Christians³⁶.

It can thus be said without any fear of contradiction that some elements of AIR have been adopted by Islam and Christianity, however indirectly. Examples of elements of AIR borrowed from AIR by Islam and Christianity, according to Dopamu, are Muslim divination, and sacrifice (called *sàráà* or free offering); drumming, singing, clapping, and dancing in churches; use of traditional materials (like alligator pepper, kola nut, bitter-kola, water, honey, red-oil) in most Christian naming ceremony; patronisation of Yorùbá magic and medicine by both Muslims and Christians (*thaumaturgical*- “miracle/wonder working” response), acceptance of chieftaincy titles by Muslims and Christians, and celebration of this in church or mosque; participation in some AIR festivals, and observation of ‘Remembrance Day’ for the dead³⁷. Again, not all of the practices mentioned by Dopamu are peculiar to AIR. For instance, breaking and sharing of kola can be taken as no more than replacing breaking and sharing of bread as in Judaeo-Christian tradition. On the whole, there is hardly anything that does not cut across human cultures in

one form or another, even though that is not to rule out obvious Africanization of Christianity and Islam, as a form of natural inculturation.

More and more Christians and Muslims seem to now regard ancestral cults as something similar to their own “saints” (Christianity) and the “*Wali Allah*” (Islam)³⁸. Memorial services held in church or mosque are in recognition of the fact of the importance of ancestors/ancestresses. Nabofa not only mentions memorial service as a manifestation of cult of ancestors but also compares ancestor to saints in Christianity and Caliphs in Islam³⁹. Ancestral cult, in other words, cannot be said to have been eradicated with the expansion of Islam and Christianity, given the Christian and Muslim memorial services.

Observation of ‘Remembrance Day’ for the departed ancestors/ancestresses by both Muslims and Christians in Yorùbáland is indicative of their strong belief in, and respect for the ancestral cult, even if they have their own terms and expressions for the similar practice of venerating the faithful departed. Funerals in Yorùbáland are community affairs in which the whole community feels the grief of the bereaved and shares in it. The purpose of the activities preceding the funeral is to comfort, encourage, and heal those who are hurting. Prayers are said for the dead and honoured posthumously.

One would think that the adoption of memorial practices, posthumous awards/services/lectures in honour of the dead or the departed in the way it is done nowadays in Yorùbáland, with pomp and pageantry is, to some extent a religious borrowing from AIR. Regardless of religious affiliation, of course, Yorùbá people acknowledge the negative spiritual and physical consequences of infidelity to the ethical will of their ancestors and ancestresses. On another front, the practice of spending huge amounts of money on burial and related advertisement of the remembrance of the dead on radio, television, and print media can be termed as modernisation of the AIR practice of elaborate and financially expensive celebration of the ancestors and ancestresses. In such remembrance adverts, the offspring address the dead as if he or she is watching and listening to them. In fact, such adverts are direct communication between the living and the dead as offspring use the opportunity to pray to their ancestor or ancestress for protection, and prosperity. When a Christian or Muslim does that, it can be regarded a religious borrowing from AIR, which further supports the fact that modification with adaptation (and not extinction) is what is happening to AIR.

Discontinuity in Ancestral Belief

It is apt to cite a few areas of discontinuity in ancestral belief in Yorùbáland due to religious change. Three of the areas are listed as follow:

1. Rejection of ancestor worship: Muslims and Christians with strong convictions in Islam and Christianity, respectively, reject ancestral worship, equating it with idolatry, even though they accord next to God honour to some of their dead and living leaders.
2. Non-participation in traditional Egúngún (Masquerade) festival: Muslims and Christians with strong convictions in Islam and Christianity, respectively, dissociate themselves from participating in Egúngún festival, which is basically dedicated to ancestral worship.
3. Disregard for divinities and ancestors: Muslims and Christians with strong convictions in Islam and Christianity, respectively, derogate divinities, ancestors, and anything to do with AIR.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the cult of ancestors/ancestress has only been modified into memorial activities and services rather than total discontinuity of the belief in ancestorship in Yorùbáland. The paper found that the ancestral phenomenon is manifesting among Christians and Muslims in the form of “outing”, memorial service, and or lecture. It is evident that Islam and Christianity have only modified or adapted the AIR practice of ancestral worship and veneration, but not jettisoned it. Despite the onslaughts of the two foreign religions, ancestral worship and veneration have survived in one form or another, in the same way that the existence of the faithful remnant of adherents of AIR is an attestation to its endurance and continuity. Shared ethical values, such as the mutual respect for ancestors and ancestresses could foster unity at local and international levels, across religions. Based on the foregoing, this research recommends that people should be open to knowledge of other religions, in order to appreciate the shared values that are embedded in them.

Notes and References

1. B.F.Ryan, *Social and Cultural Change* (New York: The Ronald Press Co., 1969), v.
2. W.R. Bascom and Herskovits (Eds). *Continuity and change in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 3.
3. E. Ikenga-Metuh (Ed). *The Gods in Retreat: Continuity and Change in African Religions (the Nigerian Experience)*, (Jos: Fourth Dimension Publishers), 134. C. Ejizu, *Continuity and Discontinuity in Igbo Traditional Religion*, 1986.
4. E.W. Fashola, The Ancestors: Worship or Veneration. *Sierra Leone Bulletin of Religion*, 1, 48.
5. O.U. Kalu, Precarious Vision: African Perception of His World. *Readings in African Humanities*, (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers), 42.
6. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*. 2nd Ed. (Oxford, England; Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1991), 4-5.
7. Fashola, E.W., 48.
8. O.U.Kalu, 42.
9. E.W.Fashola, 48.
10. Ade. Dopamu, Traditional Religion, Islam and Christianity in Yorubaland: Patterns of interaction. In E. Ikenga-Metuh (Ed). *The Gods in Retreat: Continuity and Change in African Religions (the Nigerian Experience)* (Jos: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1986), 108.
11. C.Ejizu, 135.
12. Ade Dopamu, 109.
13. Ade Dopamu, 109.
14. Ikenga-Metuh, Emefie. Introduction. In E. Ikenga-Metuh (Ed). *The Gods in Retreat: Continuity and Change in African Religions (the Nigerian Experience)* (Jos: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1986), xi.
15. Ogbu U. Kalu. The Gods in Retreat: Models for Interpreting Religious Change in Africa. In E. Ikenga-Metuh (Ed). *The Gods in Retreat: Continuity and Change in African Religions (the Nigerian Experience)* (Jos: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1986), 1-20.
16. Ogbu, U. Kalu, 4.
17. Ogbu, U. Kalu
18. Ogbu, U. Kalu, 6.
19. Ogbu, U. Kalu, 6.
20. E.B.Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press Ltd. 1973).

-
21. C. Ejizu, 135.
 22. Ibid, 138.
 23. S.U. Erivwo, 1986. Traditional religion and Christianity among the Urhobo. In E. Ikenga-Metuh (Ed). *The Gods in Retreat: Continuity and Change in African Religions (the Nigerian Experience)* (Jos: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1986), 23.
 24. Ibid, 24.
 25. C.Ejizu, 140.
 26. P. O. Abioje. 2022. *African Ancestral Heritage in Christian Interpretations* (Ilorin: Rajah Dynamic Printers Ltd.), 21.
 27. P. O. Abioje, 140.
 28. P. O. Abioje, 140.
 29. Ejizu, C. 153.
 30. J. S. Mbiti, 23.
 31. Ibid, 137.
 32. Ade. Dopamu, 128-129.
 33. Ade. Dopamu
 34. Ade. Dopamu, 130.
 35. M.O.A. Abdul, Yoruba Divination and Islam. *Orita: Journal of Religious Studies*, (1970), 4(1): 17.
 36. Ade. Dopamu, pp. 128-131.
 37. The term “Wali Allah” literally means “protector or preserver of (the words of) Allah”and not really the same thing as a Catholic saint. The Arabic word “Wali” is most often translated into English as “custodian”, “protector”, or “preserver”. In Islam, a “saint” is only someone who has displayed remarkable piety and profound insight into the words of Allah. There is no formal institution to appoint “saints” in Islam, and as such there are some that are revered locally/regionally, and some that are more widely recognised across the Ummah.
 38. M.Y. Nabofa, M.Y. Religion and Culture. In Thompson, L; Adelugba, D And Ifie, E (Eds). *Culture and Civilization* (Ibadan: Africa-Link Books, 1991), 76-91.