



THE ELUSIVE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF THE ANCESTORS

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Abstract

One of the phenomena considered a reality in African societies is ancestorship. It is considered a reality because it follows the pattern of whatever that is under the scope of reality. This paper attempts an investigation into the ontological status of the ancestors. It argues that, since it has been observed among those who lay claim to the existence of the ancestors that they appeal to the memory and consciousness of their survivors, the ontological status of the ancestors is questionable. It concludes, therefore, that their ontological status is elusive, since the memory of the succeeding generations remains their supportive pillar for them to be remembered.

Keywords: ancestors; survivors; personal immortality; collective immortality; ontological status

Introduction

Two (physical and non-physical) modes of reality are highlighted and made case for, especially, in African thought. They have equally been established to include the fact that they both interact. It is on this basis that ancestors can be said to be real and their interactions with their progenitors and survivors are also possible. This paper departs a bit from this and examines some other implications this might have. Logically, the idea of reincarnation should not be brought into this discussion. This is because discourse about reincarnation is counter-supportive to the discussion and establishment of ancestorship. If not, one will be going against the law of thought of $P \sim P$. For this not to be committed, it will be assumed that a Babatunde, for instance, will no longer be an ancestor. Except if one of the criteria of ancestors indicates that they can live in two worlds physically and simultaneously, which is hereafter and the mundane world. The hereafter will be a possible world, a possible place of abode for the ancestors. It is a place that can neither be proven nor disproven.

This paper shall argue that although Africans believe strongly in ancestorship, the ontological status of the ancestors is elusive. The claim is premised on the assertion that their place of abode can neither be proven nor otherwise. It is grounded on the fact that at a point, ancestors are completely out of the consciousness of the survivors. This is because it is claimed that a sixth, and possibly fifth, generation from them will no longer have the knowledge of their existence, whether faintly or accurately.

The Possibility of Ancestorship

To avoid the fallacy of hasty generalization, too few examples for that matter, it is better that most African societies strongly believe in ancestorship. This is founded on the belief in the immortality of the soul. This latter belief is also founded on the African supposition about reality. This is a common feature world-view; it pictures their sense of reality (Oladipo, 2002: 155) which is most times communalistic and pluralistic. Africans believe strongly in the dual nature of reality. For them, it is both physical and non-physical (Ekanola, 2006: 75). The physical is unarguably too obvious to debunk, since it is not with the intention of engaging



some philosophical rigour. The non-physical is within the purview of serious philosophical discourse. For the Africans, both are pragmatically important for the purpose of existence and survival. In other words, existence, for them, is “partly physical and partly spiritual” (Ekanola, 2006: 75). Ekanola (2006: 75-76) opines that Africans “accept the reality and intrinsic interrelationship of both a sensible (perceptible and physical) and non-sensible (non-perceptible and spiritual) aspects of reality.” The reason for this acceptability is nothing but their strong belief in the workability of both for the sake of existence and survival.

Immortality of the soul is premised on the African belief in the dual nature of reality. This is also in consonance with the notion of ancestorship. Immortality of the soul can be viewed from, at least, two perspectives. The first one is that souls of the dead continue to exist elsewhere, which is not verifiable; while the second one is belief in reincarnation. The latter will not be a tenable ground for the focus of this paper. It is true that reincarnation is an attempt to make case for the immortality of the soul, for belief in it also presupposes that souls of human beings are immortal. This is because it is assumably believed that the giver of the souls is an immortal being. As Segun Gbadegesin (1998: 154) will argue, attempt to deny the fact that the very nature of the human soul is eternal implies a denial of the eternity of the giver. If the nature of the soul of the giver is eternal, it logically follows that that of human being will be eternal because, its existence is derived from that of the giver. This implies that at any point, the soul of humans enjoy the immortal nature of the soul of their creator. Hence, this makes the soul indestructible.

Reincarnation is, however, not a tenable way of reasoning for ancestorship. Reincarnation, simply put, is “the notion that the soul survives the death of the body and begins a new life in a new body...” (Adebawale, 2012: 169). This belief is not without its problems. One of such is that of identity that questions how a reincarnated being can be identified with the same features through time. What is questioned really is persistence (Adésuyi, 2014: 70). The other question is that of memory, which is also, in a way, an aspect of identity. This questions the ability of the reincarnated being to recollect what s/he has learnt in his/her previous life (Adésuyi, 2014: 70). The concept of reincarnation does not fit into this, not because of some of the problems identified above, but because it does not serve the purpose at hand. An ancestor is not expected to be Babátundé, for instance. Although, in a sense, the claim is often justified; if for instance, the ‘reincarnate’ begins to remind his survivors of some of the warnings he gave in his previous life. This still does not arguably justify being ancestor. In fact, that he is back nullifies his status of ancestorship. It is expected that ancestors are remembered but not reminded (Dalfovo, 1997: 487).

At least, two implications can be drawn from the above. First, reincarnation is not to be confused with ancestorship. Second, ancestors are not expected to live physically among their people. It is logically impossible for a person to occupy two places simultaneously but not respectively (Oluwole, 1990: 17). Therefore, an ancestor is that being who resides in the spiritual realm. This is not to confuse it with the fact that “the ghost of a dead man or woman is, in a sense, still close to the living for anyone who shared a relationship with the deceased (Burton, 1978: 606). It is believed that the relationship established is cordial (Onunwa, 2011: 44).



Discussing ancestorship in Africa appears to be uniform in a way. Many of the tribes share some strong affinities in discussing ancestorship. They all believe that ancestorship is premised on death. In other words, one cannot become an ancestor while still alive (Kopytoff, 1971: 129). There is, however, a clear difference between the cult of the ancestors and that of the dead. There should not be any misconception as regards this. It has been pointed out earlier that belief in immortality of the soul has two legs; one in reincarnation and the other in the fact that souls of the dead continue to exist elsewhere. This is to further buttress the point that African conception of reality is that of dualism; both physical and non-physical.

Any attempt to refute this imports more problems into the hope and aspiration of the people who believe this. It may be argued that only the physical, which is verifiable, at least, in principle, is real. If one asserts that the only thing that is real is the physical and that the non-physical is not real, then, the claim that there are ancestors is defeated *ab initio*. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that the only mode of reality that is true is the physical, then, a sizeable aspect of human life is gone and rendered useless. It cannot be denied that life the experience of human beings falls within these two modes of reality. A common example to buttress this point is dream. Descartes has raised the conscious awareness of his readers to the fact that events that occur in dreams could be pseudo. This may also not go well with the logical positivists, since, it is a contradiction of their position on the truth validity of any proposition. By implication, the proposition that X has dreamt of Y may not be acceptable because, it does not fulfil the verification criterion of meaning (Hempel, 1950: 41-63).

It may also be argued that one needs not take the logical positivists seriously, because the issue at hand is not within their scope of discourse. It must be remembered that for them, metaphysical issues and propositions are not to be reckoned with in the strict sense of it. Belief in ancestor is purely metaphysical. Therefore, discarding logical positivism is a better alternative. Dream then remains a viable illustration for now.

An analogy of dream and ancestorship should not be confusing having settled the fact that reality is both physical and non-physical. Although, both are not identical, nevertheless, they share some considerable similarities; that of being physical and non-physical phenomena and of extremely subjective phenomena. For the former, one can relay the experience of a dream and having it being manifested in real life. It means that it cuts across both physical and non-physical realm. For the latter, it is only the individual that experiences it can relay it to others. This is similar to the belief in ancestorship.

The intent of the above is to show that Africans believe in the non-physicality of dream and take into cognizance whatever they experience. It may not be necessary to make use of another non-physical phenomenon that transcends to physical and affects human lives, which is revelation. It must be born in mind that it may quickly be pointed out that revelation and dream have some features in common. While revelation will not be acceptable here is the fact that it is more of religious and, as a result, may not go well with non-religious people or those who do not believe in revelations. Another problem is that a revelation from an individual of a certain religion may not be accepted to a fellow of another religion.

The case of dream is not the same. One must be conscious of a serious hasty generalization fallacy now, assuming that some few people have not reported the case of dreams, then,



everybody has dream experiences. It is not the case that dream is not part of human life. It can be doubted if there is any individual of a particular culture that does not have the experience of dream. It can be established that dream, a physical and non-physical phenomenon, is real, which the logical positivists, having being relieved of their philosophical enterprise (as opined by David Hume), can also lay claim to. It means reality as both physical and non-physical will be tenable. The tenability of dream as both physical and non-physical provides the ground for the possible tenability of ancestorship as a reality among those who believe in it.

Conceptualising Ancestor

According to Simon Blackburn (2005: 15), “an ancestor is a parent, or a parent of a parent, and so on”; a relation that stands to another as ancestor of stands to ‘parents of’. In this regard, some conditions are met; if X is an ancestor, then, X is a member of a family which is an initial condition and the closure that all parents of members are members (Blackburn, 2005: 15). By implication, there are predecessors and successors. A clearer understanding of it, as suggested by Kwame Gyekye (2003: 162) is that “they are certain individuals of the past generations of a lineage. These individuals are said to have distinguished themselves in many ways and, in particular, to have led virtuous and exemplary lives worthy of emulation by succeeding generation of lineage.” In other words, they are regarded as “moral paragons” (Gyekye, 2003: 162). This implies that ancestorship is not accorded to the departed arbitrarily. It is also not the case that every member of the lineage will qualify as an ancestor.

While discussing ancestors, the discussion is analogous with that of self and others. In this regard, the survivors are considered self and ancestors others. While that of self and others can easily be described, that of survivors and ancestors is not easy to describe. This is because the discussion is founded on ancestrally-oriented systems of belief (Burton, 1978: 602). The system suggests that there is a serious relationship between the ancestors and those he has left behind. It is believed that they are former occupiers of the land that have begotten the present generation (Dalfovo, 1997: 488). As a matter of fact, they still mingle with their successors and relate with them (Teffo and Roux, 2005: 200-201).

This is, perhaps, the reason John Mbiti (1969: 83) qualifies them as being bilingual. For him, they speak the language of the spirit world as well as that of their initial (mundane) world. It is claimed that they are still part of members of the family (Ehrenfeld, 2009). For this, it can be said that they share dual ontological positions. This makes it difficult to separate the ancestors and their survivors the way it can be done for self and others. This is because of the strong affinity that binds them together.

Mbiti (1969: 83) has described the ancestors as living-dead, because of their ontological positions. Gluckman (1937: 125) has earlier described them as:

Long deceased human beings, not in any direct sense links between the material and ideational world; nor is physical death co-terminous with psychic non-existence since ghost of the ... deceased remains cognitively and physically associated with the living.

This means, following John Burton (1978: 602), it can be said that they belong to the context of immortality called social immortality. As it shall be discussed later, this social immortality



is pregnant with problems. That it is problematic does not mean that the belief does not subsist among those who believe it. They strongly believe that those who have left the world still have interest in the affairs of the survivors (Hallgren, 1988: 55). *Egúngún* is said to be a proof for reincarnation. This has already been discarded earlier. It must, however, be pointed out that belief in *egúngún* as a way/practice is an attempt to argue, at least, by those who hold onto the belief, that it is an attempt to show the diminishing power of death (Morton-Williams, 1960: 37). Hence, the masquerade integrates death and the dead with life and living. Existence is made boundless and unlimited (Hallgren, 1988: 56). Therefore, there seems to be a reciprocal dependence between the living and dead which consists of “a fulfillment of duties which is said to be necessary for the survival of society and the continuity of life” (Hallgren, 1988: 56).

The problem with reference to *egúngún* is the fact that among the Yorùbá where this is practised, not all societies have this practice. For instance, the Oba-Ile people in Akure North Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria do not have this practice (Olu-Aderounmu, 1994: 57-58). Another instance is the Agbeyangi community in Kwara State. The practice of *egúngún* is forbidden in these, and many other, parts of Africa. Does it then mean that there is no other means through which the ancestors relate with survivors? John Burton (1978: 606) opines that “the encounter with the living-dead occurs most often in a dream.” It must be born in mind that the phenomenon of dream has been earlier said to be a reality for Africans. Granted, therefore, that ancestors are conceived as being in existence; hence, they relate with the survivors. Their relationship can summarily be described as that “the past is seen as continuous relationship with the present and as influencing the future, a phenomenon which makes the dead perpetually significant” (Burton, 1978: 604). They are those individuals who have made important contributions to the cultural heritage of subsequent generations (Gyekye, 2003: 104).

Qualification for Ancestorship

An important question that needs to be responded to is that of qualification. At what point does one qualify to become ancestor? Albert T. Dalfovo (1997: 487) is of the view that one does not become an ancestor immediately after the person’s death but only sometimes after it. This may be after the burial and funeral rites of the departed have been performed. This means that the dead becoming an ancestor is conditional. Apart from the general assumption that he must have survivors, the process of incorporating them into ancestorship will be done by the survivors of the deceased through burial and funeral rites. The problem inherent here is that if it is granted that burial rites are compulsory, does it mean that funeral rites are also compulsory? They must not be confused. For instance, the Yorùbá have distinct and separate terms for both. Burial rites will be *isínkú*, while funeral rites will be *òkú sísẹ*. *A Dictionary of the Yorùbá Language* (2006: 79 [Eng. to Yor.]; 26 [Eng. to Yor.]) does not take into cognizance the distinction between these two concepts; hence, they are interpreted to mean *isínkú*.

Before now, these were usually separated; but now, both are most times performed together. It, however, does not mean that they are not distinguished from one another. First the burial rites, followed by the funeral at a later time. If the children or relations of the deceased decide that only burial rites will be done, with no plans of having the funeral rites, perhaps, owing to financial challenges or any other reasons, it means that their dead parents have been denied



the eternal opportunity to be among the ancestors. Some Africans believe that what is required of a person to become an ancestor is not necessarily moral but ritual (Obi, 2004: 55). For instance, in some parts of Igbo, “if any man dies (during the week of peace) he is not buried, but cast in the evil forest” (Obi, 2004: 56). This suggests that even if the person is a good man, once he is not given appropriate burial rites to prepare him to join his ancestors, it is an automatic exclusion from ancestorship.

Another consideration for one to qualify for ancestorship is age. In this regard, ancestorship and followership are often related. Key elements to ancestorship may be age, maturity, ancientness, eldership and authority (Kopytoff, 1971: 136). It must be noted that some of these may be discarded or fused together because they overlap. It is not in all cases that age is considered. The young may be an elder in this sense, while the old will not be. This kind of eldership is hereditary or by appointment. For instance, somebody who is made to occupy the vacant position of his father becomes an elder. There are instances to buttress this point. In some parts of Africa, once an individual is made a monarch, he becomes an elder irrespective of his age. In fact, it is forbidden to call him by his first name. It, however, does not mean that he will not be tutored, guided and monitored by some other ‘more elderly’ ones.

What is not clear here is the death of the young individual, who has attained the status of eldership. Will his departure be described as joining the ancestors or joining his ancestors? There seems not to be problem if he is said to have joined his ancestors. In this regard, he has not become an ancestor but with the ancestors. If, on the other hand, the former is meant, will he be an ancestor for his procreator? There is an African (Yorùbá) saying that *kò ní burú fún bàbá k’ò ní ó d’òwọ́ ọmọ ọ̀un tí ó wà l’orun* (The difficulties of life cannot force a surviving father to venerate his deceased child). This may be difficult to unravel.

David Faure (2007: 77) strongly disagrees with this. He opines that no young one can become ancestor because ancestors are referred to as “great grandfather, great-great grandfather.” In his view, the status of ancestorship is reserved for their emperors. This is as a result of their contributions to their communities (Faure, 2007: 45). For instance, they contribute to the building of such communities, as some of the communities are named after them (Faure, 2007: 55). In another case, chieftaincy titles are given after them. Sometimes, the death-days commemorating the death of the ancestors are celebrated often times. Although, not common, those of their births are also celebrated. These celebrations have brought about festivals in their respective communities. This kind of qualification has nothing to do with the elements mentioned earlier like age, ancientness, maturity etc. however, it may suffer the kind of defeat like the previous one. If the earlier ones expounded are facing some challenges, then another one has to be considered.

A basic feature that qualifies one to be an ancestor is having children/descendants (Gyekye, 2003: 162). Hence, a man who dies at the age of 100 but without any child will not likely qualify as ancestor. Whereas, a man that dies at the age of 35 but is survived by children already qualifies to be an ancestor. The other aspect of this will be characters. It can further be restated that an individual will qualify as an ancestor if and only if he has survivors and good characters (exemplary life). A question that will come to mind is what if one of these conditions is missing, for instance, that of exemplary life? If a wicked man has survivors and they see him as their ancestors, is he not qualified already? Are there no individuals who



become ancestors because of a chieftaincy title? In some parts of Africa, family chieftaincy titles are hereditary. Many individuals are given because their people fear that they may harm them if they are not considered.

This may be a contradiction of the position of Michael Kirwen (1987) who has argued that an ancestor is “an example of a wise, fully mature and perfected human being” (Kirwen, 1987: 113). The characters of the individuals become yardstick for attaining the status of ancestorship. If there is the need to go by Kirwen’s position, it means these conjunctive criteria can be rephrased. Instead of conjunctive analysis, it can be changed to a disjunctive one. In this case, it will be either the individual to become ancestor has descendants or he is morally upright. The consideration must be in the non-exclusive sense of disjunction.

Let us agree, for the sake of argument, that the non-exclusive disjunctive analysis of the criteria for ancestor is considered, and the individual does not have any of the two, but he is an emperor, is he not qualified? In a way, being an emperor will qualify him to be an ancestor. Therefore, the non-exclusive disjunctive analysis will be maintained, but this time, another criterion will be added. That new criterion is that of being an emperor. It may be asked that what if he does not have any descendant who will remember him as ancestor? To respond to this, the community will. The community is divided into two; micro and macro (Babatunde, 2004: 219). The former is immediate while the latter is remote. Even if he does not have any immediate member of his family to remember, and to whom he will become ancestor, members of the macro community will remember him. If he possesses one of the criteria, at least, that of being an emperor, then, he qualifies as one. It must be noted that, although other criteria may suffice, the most important one is having descendants.

There is the usual claim that one is not dead if he has survivors to continue the lineage (Obi, 2004: 56). This has been unequivocally expressed by Odolaye Aremu (1977), a *Dàdàkiàdà* singer. He chants thus: “...wọn a ní ikú ò lóògùn. Èmi a ní iró nì, ikú lóògùn; ọmọ lóògùn ikú, kí baba ó kú kí ọmọ ó máa bẹ in lẹmí fí n gùn...” (...they claim that death does not have an antidote. I say it is not true, it has; a survivor is the antidote of death, the longevity of a lineage is for a father to be survived by a child). Mbiti’s position is also similar to this. He believes strongly that procreation remains “the absolute way of insuring that a person is not cut off from personal immortality (Mbiti, 1969: 26). This idea of personal immortality has some affinities with ancestorship as it shall be discussed in subsequent section. It can then be argued that only people with survivors have personal immortality. By personal immortality, it means they are remembered as ancestors by immediate members of their family. This is demonstrated especially when survivors bear their names, surnames, family names. These instances are to show that survivors are necessary to keep family, lineage, clan, race etc going. These are evident in cultures.

Remembrance, an important element in ancestorship, is guaranteed given the fact that survivors bear the names of their dead fathers. It implies that those who have lived without survivors will disappear into the community of, according to Michael Kirwen (1987: 110), “unknown ancestors.” One can reasonably say, therefore, that while each of these criteria is individually necessary, recognition is given more to having survivors/descendants; they are jointly sufficient. It can be agreed for now, borrowing the idea of Igor Kopytoff (1971: 131),



that the ancestors retain and maintain their assumed roles in the affairs of their kin-group more in their kin-group.

Categories of Ancestors

The lives and contributions of individuals to their micro and macro communities determine their being ancestors. If, on the one hand, the contributions are so enormous that they are remembered by almost all members of their community, it means they become ancestors for the entire community. If, on the other hand, their contributions are within their immediate family, then, they become ancestors for their immediate family. In this regard, ancestors are categorised in line with the division of the community. The fact that they are immortal in the consciousness of the survivors forms the basis of the categories of ancestors. There are two main categories of immortality, hence ancestors. They are personal and collective. They are ancestors in collective immortality and ancestors in personal immortality. The first category implies that they are remembered and their deeds are recognised but by almost every member of the community. The second category implies that they are remembered and their deeds are recognised but, this time, by immediate members of his family. On both, an ancestor would have embarked on path of enlightenment with virtuous conduct through moral or ethical living. This is the sense in which somebody that thinks of becoming an ancestor pursues it (Thurston, 2022: 160). Hence, pursuing the status of ancestorship is conceived to be contribution to societal functioning (Thurston, 2022: 160).

The belief in ancestors is an aspect in the belief in the immortality of the soul. Ancestorship is hinged on the supposition that the soul is an immaterial part of human being that survives bodily death (Gyekye, 2003: 13). For the Igbo, for instance, it is called *ino-uwa*, a process of continual return which follows a pattern that repeats itself at regular intervals and does not come to an end (Obi, 2004: 53). This must not be confused with reincarnation, although it shares some similarities with it. This concept underlies and explains further some possible aspect of reality. A similarity it shares with reincarnation is the notion of cyclicity. This means that things tend to repeat themselves in the same way at regular intervals. Augustine Obi (2004: 53) describes this as “principle of eternal recurrence of the same.” This is explained more so that ancestors are expected to remain the same.

One must not forget the fact that ancestors were, first of all, human beings before being ancestors. They are honoured and revered due to their contribution. “Their former humanity links them [with] their living descendants and constitute them as part of the society of human now living in the flesh” (Gyekye, 2003:161). This is because they are the forebearers. Apart from being honoured and revered, some acts of worship are performed for them. Gyekye (2003: 161) seems not to agree with this view. For him, ancestors are not worshipped. This may not be correct. Many tribes in Africa have ancestral worship whether they are worshipped or not, they are referred to as dead; their “dwelling in a world of spirit does not deter them from constantly communicating with the world of the living” (Gyekye, 2003: 161). The reason adduced to for the possibility of this is that they had once lived in the mundane world, had presumably similar experience with their living descendants; hence, the belief in the welfare of the descendant as their concern. This, perhaps, is why they are described as charming and sympathetic (Torday, 1928: 226), at least, their survivors,



Ancestors are necessarily connected with genealogical relationship (Wilson, 1967: 137). There is no doubt about the fact; there may be ‘very distant kin’ and ‘very close kin’. Given the fact that the community for him, is divided into two, that is, micro community and macro community. People think about this and remember their ancestors. These acts remind people of ancestors’ personal names, impressions which they have left in the mind of their successors, rooted in their personalities (Dalfovo, 1997: 448). These suggest the impacts of the individuals while alive either positively or negatively.

Immortality of the soul is not restricted to the conception that the soul does not die alone; it is also extended to the ability of the survivors to remember the deceased. This, presumably, is why the dead are referred to as living-dead. For Mbiti (1969: 25), “the living-dead is a person who is physically dead but alive in the memory of those who knew him in his life.” They are remembered and referenced when traditions are considered and discussed. This does not mean that some certain traditions adhered to by the survivors, which are considered ‘given’ cannot be replaced with new ones created (Teffo and Roux, 2006). This is due to change in time. The time here implies generations and histories. The immortality of human being can be interpreted in, at least, two ways. The first one is the conventional general belief about the soul, while the other is that the memory of the dead remains with the survivors. Most times, given what he said, it is believed that he is still alive. It is for this reason that “attention is paid to the living-dead” (Mbiti, 1969: 84). They are ever present in the consciousness of the survivors. This gives them support for their reason for honouring and celebrating their memories (Gyekye, 2003: 161).

Elusiveness of the Status of Ancestors

It is a belief prevalent among African that ancestors live on. For instance, Stephen N. Morgan and Beatrice Okyere-Manu argue that, among the Akan, the existence of the ancestors is premised on the strong belief in the immortality of the soul (Morgan and Okyere-Manu, 2020: 16). While it is believed that they live on, their existence is not in this shared phenomenal world. For instance, it is believed among Igala of North-Central Nigeria that the ancestors belong to afterworld, a continuation of this known world (Ho, 2022: 153). This may further explain why their relatives take it upon themselves as their duties and practices to take food and drink to their ancestors’ graveyards believing that ancestors could dine and wine with them. This act equally signals a proof of the ancestors dwelling within the community and among his people (Hua, 2022: 133).

According to Dalfovo (1997: 448), the division into personal and collective is influenced by the fact that

The extension of the [survivor’s] memory is subsequently conditioned also by publicity made to an ancestor’s beneficial or maleficial presence by his descendants. As time passes the memory of the individual ancestors tends to fade and new names to take their place. In this way, individual memories and names dissolve in the collective memory.

Ancestors in personal immortality will be those that are constantly and consciously remembered by immediate survivors. In other words, very close kin and members of the micro community are those who are remembered in this category. Apart from being remembered by descendants of the immediate family, the ancestors appear to them, especially



the oldest members of the family and they inquire about the family. Sometimes, they “may even warn of impending danger or rebuke those who have failed to follow their special instructions” (Mbiti, 1969: 83; See Wiredu, 1983: 6-13).

Ancestor in the personal immortality is not a continuous one, so long as the living-dead is thus remembered; he is in the state of personal immortality. This explains the reason why people are enjoined to get married as that will enable them have survivors, descendants and progenitors that will remember them. John Mbiti ((1969: 26) might be informed by this for him to have opined that, a repletion (emphasis now), “it is a duty, religious and ontological, for everyone to get married... Procreation is the absolute way of ensuring that a person is not cut off from personal immortality.” By implication, an ancestor in personal immortality is stronger than an ancestor in the collective immortality. Personal immortality goes with personal memory of the ancestor while collective immortality goes with collective memory of the ancestor (Wilson, 1967: 137).

The personal immortality is not continuous. The ancestors are remembered for some periods. According to John Mbiti (1969: 163),

attention is paid to the living-dead of up to four or five generations, by which time only a few, if any, immediate member of their families would still be alive. When the last person who knew a particular living-dead also dies, then, in effect of process of death is now complete as far as that particular living-dead is concerned. He is no longer remembered by name, no longer a human being but a spirit, a thing...

Hence, there is ancestor in collective immortality or collective memory.

The ancestor in the collective immortality/memory is for the very distant kin or members of the macro community. This is, indirectly, a way of forgetting ancestors because it will get to a stage where they will no longer be remembered by both members of immediate and remote families. Even for ancestor in personal immortality/memory, once it is certain that after the fifth generation, they are forgotten, and they transcend to the realm of collective, the collective will also cease to exist after the fifth generation. The generations will no longer have the knowledge of their existence. This implies that they may not be considered as ancestors for them. By implications, their being ancestors will no longer be reckoned with; their ancestorship is pseudo.

This is going to be the condition for all ancestors since there is no permanence in the status of being ancestors. This is premised on the fact that, even those with collective memory, and who relay the stories of past ancestors may be dead. Sometimes, the originality of the accounts they give is questioned. In other words, when they are dead, there is the possibility of having no one to get the new generations acquainted with their ancestors.

Conclusion

The belief in ancestor is no doubt traditional in Africa. The tradition is conceived as old. It can be established as long as a pattern of behaviour. It is understood as “opinions, beliefs, and practices that from many generations and yet true to its origin” (Igboin, 2014c: 193). It may be true that ancestors are responsible for the good conditions of their survivors; it may not be absolutely true that they can do so many things for them (Igboin, 2014a: 435-458). If a



stranger comes to an African land, he will quickly notice the care and reverence given to the dead and the honour with which they accompany elaborate burial, and funeral ceremonies. This shows, to a larger extent, that they do not joke with their ancestors.

Despite this strong belief in ancestorship, that makes the survivors associate themselves to the ancestral chain, they cannot establish convincingly the ontological statue of the ancestors. It may be raised that this is not an issue. It is a serious issue if the ontological status of those they depend on for guidance and protection, and whose rules and regulations they follow cannot be established. It implies that the possibility of their existence is not within the purview of both material and logical possibilities. Whatsoever that cannot be found within the material and logical possibilities is pseudo

In conclusion, their status can best be described as elusive, since the ancestor in personal immortality becomes ancestor in collective immortality and the latter later becomes an anonymous ancestor (Dalfovo, 1997: 487). This is because many things would have been forgotten about him and his remembrance fades off the memory of those still alive. There is no way to describe this except that it is elusive.

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