



ANCESTOR VENERATION IN IGBO CULTURE AND ITS PARALLELS WITH CHRISTIAN BELIEFS

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Abstract

This study explores the concept of ancestor veneration in Igbo culture and its parallels with Christian beliefs, focusing on the perception of Jesus as an ancestor. The reverence for ancestors is a critical aspect of Igbo spirituality, profoundly shaping customs, values, and social structures. Ancestors occupy a significant role in the daily lives of Igbo communities, being regarded as vital mediators between God and their descendants. The methodology adopted for this research is multidisciplinary, incorporating both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include ethnographic interviews with Igbo practitioners and community leaders, as well as observations of cultural rituals that embody ancestor veneration. Secondary sources consist of scholarly literature that provides insight into Igbo cosmology and the intersections between traditional beliefs and Christianity. Qualitative analytical methods, such as content analysis, narrative analysis, and discourse analysis, are employed to interpret the data and uncover the complexities of this spiritual practice. The study ultimately seeks to illuminate the enduring significance of ancestor veneration in Igbo culture while highlighting the compelling parallels between Igbo spirituality and Christian beliefs, facilitating a deeper understanding of cultural syncretism and the universal dimensions of human spirituality. Through this lens, the research emphasizes the importance of tradition as a guiding force, reinforcing community identity within a rapidly changing world, where Jesus is similarly regarded as a Great Ancestor in Igbo thought.

Keywords: Ancestor, Christian Beliefs, Concept, Igbo Culture, Parallels, Veneration

Introduction

In the rich tapestry of human cultures, the reverence for ancestors emerges as a ubiquitous thread, interweaving diverse traditions and belief systems across the globe. This ancient



practice is characterized by a deep spirituality that signifies a connection between the living and the deceased, facilitating a dynamic relationship that guides daily life.

Among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria, ancestor veneration constitutes an essential element of their spiritual landscape, profoundly influencing their customs, values, and social structures. According to Chukwudebelu, Ajakor, and Oguechuo (2021), "in Igbo cosmology, ancestors play significant roles in the day-to-day lives of the society" (p. 3).

God is conceived as the Supreme Being through whom people access divinized spirits. It is preferred not to approach God directly, as such an act implies disrespect or irreverence. Following Igbo traditions, earthly ancestors acquire a supernatural status upon death, ascending to a position of mediator between God and their human descendants. This fundamentally underpins the respect and veneration afforded to ancestors, as they are elders who merit honor for the benefits they brought to their communities when they "lived among them." Ancestors are thus viewed as a source of life for their living descendants. In Igbo thought, death does not sever the ties between individuals and their families; rather, the living-dead remain united and connected with the living (Oguechuo et al., 2021, p. 4).

The Igbo's profound respect for their ancestors is intrinsically tied to their understanding of the interconnectedness between life and death. In Igbo cosmology, ancestors are not regarded merely as departed relatives; instead, they are active participants in the lives of their descendants, providing guidance, protection, and wisdom. According to Chukwudebelu, Ajakor, and Oguechuo (2021), "the veneration of ancestors transcends the act of honoring the past and serves as a critical means of seeking blessings and prosperity in the present." (P.4)

Moreover, the convergence between Igbo ancestor veneration and Christian beliefs, particularly within Catholic and Orthodox traditions, reveals remarkable parallels worthy of exploration. The veneration of saints, the reverence for relics, and the notion of the intercession of the deceased resonate deeply with the Igbo practice of honoring their ancestors. This alignment raises compelling questions about the universality of human spiritual experiences and the complex dynamics of cultural exchange and syncretism (Chukwudebelu, Ajakor, & Oguechuo, 2021).

This article aims to delve into the nuanced dimensions of ancestor veneration in Igbo culture, examining its theological and cultural parallels with Christian beliefs. By scrutinizing the historical contexts and shared values underlying these practices, we seek to enhance our understanding of the intricate complexities of human spirituality. Ultimately, this exploration highlights the enduring power of ancestor veneration in Igbo culture and its significance in fostering community identity and continuity in a rapidly changing world.

Through this lens, we can appreciate how tradition persists even amidst the currents of modernity, reinforcing the importance of ancestral wisdom as a guiding force. The parallels drawn above underscore a prominent feature of African culture: the profound belief in ancestor worship. Among the Igbo people, there exists a compelling comparison in which Jesus assumes the role of a Great Ancestor. In the Igbo perspective, the significance of ancestorship resonates with the grandeur and potency attributed to Jesus. Describing Jesus as the "Ancestor" holds particular weight within Igbo traditions, as this title epitomizes the most conspicuous and influential manifestation of the transcendent realm. According to Chukwudebelu, Ajakor, and Oguechuo (2021), "ancestors, having departed from the world of the living and now residing



in the world of the dead, are believed to still be part and parcel of the community they had lived in."(5)

Methodology

This study employs a multidisciplinary approach to thoroughly investigate the concept of ancestor veneration in Igbo culture and its parallels with Christian beliefs, particularly the perception of Jesus as an ancestor. By adopting this approach, the research aims to provide a holistic understanding of how ancestor worship integrates with Christian practices among the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. To achieve a well-rounded exploration of the topic, the study utilizes both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include ethnographic interviews with Igbo practitioners, community leaders, and theologians who can provide firsthand accounts of the significance of ancestor veneration within their cultural and religious contexts. Additionally, observations from relevant cultural events and rituals will be documented to illustrate the living practice of ancestor veneration. Secondary sources consist of scholarly articles, books, and historical texts that discuss Igbo cosmology, ancestor worship, and the intersection of Igbo traditional beliefs with Christianity. A qualitative methodology is employed to analyze the collected data, incorporating several analytical techniques: content analysis, narrative analysis, and discourse analysis.

Conceptual framework

Concept of an Ancestor

In Igbo cosmology, ancestors hold a significant and revered position. They are considered the spirits of deceased family members who have passed on to the spiritual realm. These ancestors are believed to maintain a connection with the living, influencing their descendants' lives and well-being.

The Igbo belief system includes Ancestorship, attributing power to the deceased over the living. This belief, akin to reincarnation, signifies that death does not signify the complete annihilation of life but rather a continuation in a different cosmic realm (Obiakor and Onuora, 2019).

According to Chukwudebelu, Ajakor and Oguechuo (2021), In the Igbo worldview, individuals, ancestors, and spirits play significant roles and the fear of ancestral wrath is a foundational principle guiding the Igbo to lead a righteous life (P.3). For them, the ancestors can influence the lives and activities of their earthly relations, either bringing fortune or misfortune based on the living's regard and remembrance of them. (Nwoye, 2011) Ancestorship, as understood among the Igbo, represents a lineage of departed elders from the same ancestral abode, forming a spiritual community that oversees the lives of the living. Emphasizes the continuity between the dead, the living, and the yet unborn, forming an unbroken family. (Nwafor, 2017) This affirms the general belief in the Igbo culture that communion and communication are possible between the living and the deceased. Thus, the departed ancestors possess the power to influence, assist, or trouble the living. This interconnected relationship between the living and the deceased shapes the Igbo understanding of Ancestorship and its influence on daily life. (Idowu, 1973)

Concept of Veneration

Veneration, as a concept, is characterized by deep respect and reverence for individuals or entities that hold significant importance, often in religious, cultural, or historical contexts.



Scholars have explored and defined veneration in various ways. Here are a few scholarly sources that discuss the concept of veneration. Gayner (1985), asserts "veneration is an act of honoring a person or object that is seen as embodying a form of holiness or importance"(P.5). For Brown (1997), "veneration involves not only respect but also involves practices and rituals designed to honor the memory and influence of those who have passed" (P.7).

According to Fly (2022), veneration is "a practice that reflects the ongoing relationship between the living and the dead, manifesting in rituals and ceremonies that honor ancestors" (Fly, 2002). Kearney (2010) explains, "veneration is a manifestation of collective memory and identity, where individuals express their reverence for ancestors or gods, thereby reinforcing cultural connections" (Kearney, 2010).

Ancestor Veneration in Igbo Culture

Ancestor veneration is a fundamental aspect of Igbo culture, deeply rooted in the belief that deceased family members remain an integral part of the community and continue to influence the lives of the living. For one to be considered an Ancestor in Igbo cosmology, such a person must have led and lived a good life, have children, especially a male child (to continue the circular nature of Igbo cosmology), die at a ripe age, die a natural death, and will be given a befitting burial. In Igboland, such a person with all these attributes is considered an Ancestor and worthy of emulation. Afterwards, various rituals, offerings, and communal celebrations, are collectively serve to honor ancestors, seek their guidance, and uphold social order within the community.

Practices Associated with Ancestor Veneration

The rituals associated with ancestor veneration in Igbo culture are diverse and multifaceted, including offerings, prayers, and communal celebrations. Offerings may consist of food, drinks, and other items favored by the deceased, which are presented at ancestral shrines, usually located within family homes or communal spaces (Nwobi, 1995). These offerings are meant to appease the spirits of the ancestors and ensure their continued favor.

Rituals typically involve cleansing ceremonies, prayers, and the invocation of ancestors during significant life events such as births, marriages, and naming ceremonies (Nwankwo, 2014). These rituals may also include drumming, dancing, and communal feasting, reinforcing social bonds within the community.

Communal celebrations are often tied to specific times of the year, where the entire community participates in paying homage to the ancestors, further solidifying the communal identity (Egbuonu, 2013). Events like the Ibo New Yam Festival epitomize these communal celebrations, whereby families gather to honor their ancestors and show gratitude for the harvest.

The Role of Ancestors in Guiding the Living and Maintaining Social Order

Chukwudebelu, Ajakor, and Oguechuo(2021) in their work highlighted Mediation, Spiritual Efficient and Exemplary roles and the roles of an Ancestor(P.7). Apart from the above, Ancestors play a crucial role in guiding the living and maintaining social order within Igbo society. For Chukwudebelu, Ajakor, and Oguechuo(2021) it would seem as if ancestors function as the social conscience of a community. The norms and moral values given by the ancestors assist individuals to live a proper life. The example set by ancestors ensures a



harmonious community where everybody knows and understands their place and function. In doing so, there is continuity with the past (P.6). They are viewed as guardians of moral and ethical standards, providing oversight on how community members should behave (Nnebe, 2011). The belief is that ancestors, having lived through various experiences, offer wisdom and guidance to their descendants, helping them navigate life's challenges.

In times of conflict or decision-making, families often consult with their ancestors through divination, seeking their counsel and approval before proceeding with significant actions (Okwu, 2015). This consultation reinforces the notion that ancestors are active participants in the lives of the living, thus fostering a sense of accountability and responsibility among community members. By adhering to ancestral guidance, individuals contribute to social stability and cohesion.

Christian Beliefs on the Veneration of Saints/Ancestors: The veneration of saints is an integral aspect of many Christian traditions, particularly within Catholicism and Orthodoxy. While the practices and beliefs surrounding this veneration may differ, there is a shared theological foundation that underpins the significance of saints as intercessors, examples of Christian life, and models of faith. This essay will explore the theological basis for the veneration of saints, examine their roles in the lives of believers, and highlight key rituals associated with the commemoration of these figures, including feast days and prayers for intercession. The veneration of saints in Christianity is rooted in a theological understanding that emphasizes the communion of saints, which signifies the spiritual union between the faithful on earth and the souls of the righteous who have died (Morris, 2013). This belief is articulated in the Nicene Creed, which encapsulates the notion of one holy Church, extending across the temporal and eternal realms. Saints are viewed as individuals who have lived exemplary lives, often characterized by deep faith, moral integrity, and significant contributions to the Christian community (McGrath, 2018).

One of the primary roles of saints is to act as intercessors before God on behalf of the living (Benedict XVI, 2007). This is grounded in the understanding that, having attained holiness and being in the presence of God, saints can offer particularly efficacious prayers. This belief is exactly what an Igbo man professes about Ancestors in Igbo cosmology.

Comparative Analysis of Ancestor Veneration and Christian Beliefs

The practices of ancestor veneration in many indigenous cultures, particularly within the Igbo community, and the veneration of saints in Christianity reflect deep-seated values about family, community, and spirituality. While these practices might seem distinct at first glance, a closer examination reveals thematic similarities and substantial differences shaped by cultural contexts, worldviews, and theological implications. This analysis explores shared values such as remembrance, moral guidance, community cohesion, and family legacy continuity, as well as the differences in the understanding of the afterlife and the roles of ancestors versus saints.

Thematic Exploration of Shared Values: One of the most significant shared values between ancestor veneration and Christian beliefs regarding saints is the theme of remembrance. In both traditions, the act of honoring those who have passed serves as a way to celebrate their lives, preserve their legacies, and keep them present within the community (Horrell, 2011; Nwobi, 1995). For instance, in both Igbo culture and Christianity, rituals surrounding significant anniversaries—such as the feast days of saints or the annual remembrance of ancestors—create



a space for communal reflection and storytelling, reinforcing the connection between the living and the deceased (Nicolas, 2014; Egbuonu, 2013).

Moral guidance is another common thread in both traditions. Ancestors and saints alike are viewed as moral exemplars whose lives provide a blueprint for ethical behavior and virtuous living and preach against evil.

Chukwudebelu, Ajakor, Oguechuo(2021) in comparison of Africa and Christain wrote;

... just as the ancestors are expected to teach the people in the community the correct way of living, the dos and don'ts that people have to know concerning life. Similarly, Jesus taught the people of His time and is still doing so even today as an Ancestor, through his ministry of the church - this includes the good moral way of living. Jesus Christ lived such an exemplary life on earth. People listened to His teachings and guidance. (P.7).

According to Chukwudebelu, Ajakor, and Oguechuo (2021), the ancestors also preach repentance from evil, which, if the living fail to oblige, they bring punishment upon their lives in different forms. When the people bring sacrifices to the ancestors, they accept their offerings, and their sins are forgiven. Jesus Christ also preached repentance from sin unto righteousness (P.7)

Ancestors and the teachings and stories of Jesus in Christianity, for example, are intended to inspire believers to emulate their faith and virtues (McGrath, 2018). Similarly, in Igbo culture, elders emphasize ancestral wisdom, guiding members of the community in making ethical choices (Nnebe, 2011). Thus, both practices function as mechanisms for instilling values within families and communities, fostering a sense of moral responsibility.

Community cohesion is another tangible benefit derived from both ancestor veneration and the veneration of saints. In both contexts, communal rituals and celebrations serve to strengthen social bonds among participants. Festivals such as the Ibo New Yam Festival unite families and communities in gratitude to their ancestors, while Christian feast days do the same, creating solid social networks built on shared beliefs (Chukwu, 2016; Nicolas, 2014). Such gatherings nurture a sense of belonging and identity that transcends individual experiences, reinforcing the idea of community in both spiritual practices.

The ancestors also preach repentance from evil, which if the living fail to oblige, they bring punishment upon their lives in different forms. When the people bring sacrifices to the ancestors, they accept their offerings and their punishment is wiped out. Jesus Christ also preached repentance from sin unto righteousness, of which anyone who is, will receive forgiveness and absolution from punishment. Jesus was simultaneously the one paying for the sins by His blood, having died on the cross of Calvary. What a great ancestor

Finally, the continuity of family legacy is a prominent theme in both traditions. Ancestor veneration in Igbo culture emphasizes the importance of lineage and heritage, as families seek to honor their ancestors and pass down their legacies to future generations (Nwobi, 1995). Similarly, in Christianity, saints are often canonized because their lives reflect the ideals of faith, serving as both models for behavior and intercessors (Benedict XVI, 2007). In both settings, honoring the deceased is a way to maintain a connection with the past while shaping the future.



Differences in Worldview: While there are similarities in the shared values between ancestor veneration and Christian beliefs, significant differences in worldview also exist. One of the most critical distinctions lies in the understanding of the afterlife. Ancestor veneration often reflects a belief in an afterlife where ancestors actively participate in the lives of the living, providing guidance and protection from the spiritual realm (Nnebe, 2011). In contrast, Christian doctrine generally posits a more defined afterlife consisting of heaven, hell, and purgatory, with the ultimate goal being communion with God (Horrell, 2011).

This leads to a difference in the intermediary roles of ancestors versus saints. Ancestors in many indigenous belief systems are often seen as active participants who maintain a direct connection with their descendants, influencing daily life and decisions (Obi, 2021). In contrast, saints in Christianity are viewed as intercessors whose primary role is to advocate on behalf of the faithful before God (Lansford, 2015). This theological distinction indicates a variation in the understanding of divine access and authority, shaping how believers engage with the supernatural.

The implications of these differing worldviews have theological consequences. In ancestor veneration, the emphasis on maintaining a connection with the dead and acknowledging their presence shapes a worldview centered on family and community continuity. On the other hand, Christian beliefs emphasize individual salvation and a relationship with God achieved through Jesus Christ, with saints as guides rather than direct representatives of the deceased (McGrath, 2018). This theological framework has a profound influence on spiritual practices and approaches to mortality and the afterlife.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of ancestor veneration in Igbo culture and the veneration of saints in Christianity reveals a rich tapestry of shared values and significant distinctions that reflect the unique cultural contexts from which these practices emerge. Both traditions emphasize remembrance, moral guidance, community cohesion, and the continuity of family legacy, illustrating the deep-seated human desire to connect with the past and draw wisdom from those who came before. Ancestors and saints function as moral exemplars and intercessors, providing a bridge between the mortal world and the divine, reinforcing communal identity and continuity.

However, the differences in worldview, particularly regarding the understanding of the afterlife and the intermediary roles of ancestors and saints, highlight the distinct theological implications inherent in each belief system. While Igbo cosmology perceives ancestors as actively engaged in the lives of the living, Christianity frames saints primarily as intercessors, pointing to a structured afterlife. This foundational divergence shapes spiritual expressions and the socio-cultural landscapes in which these beliefs are practiced.

Ultimately, this exploration underscores the universality and complexity of human spirituality, portraying ancestor veneration and the veneration of saints as powerful expressions of respect, morality, and communal identity. As traditions adapt in a modernizing world, the principles at their core—honor for the deceased, moral vigilance, and community cohesion—persist as vital components of social and spiritual life. Consequently, the role of both ancestors and saints continues to be a source of guidance, identity, and legacy for their respective communities.

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