

Ancestral Veneration as a Metaphysical Issue in Yorùbá Culture: Exploring the Spiritual Agency of Social Reconstruction in a Glocal Context

Oreoluwa Idris ADESANYA*

Abstract

Africans are in the habit of venerating the dead among them who qualify as ancestors. The practice of ancestral veneration in Africa, particularly amongst the Yòrùbá people of West Africa, is premised on their belief in continual existence after death. The supposition is that the dead, who have now become ancestors, play active roles in their activities, in the plight of their children and grandchildren and their lives entirely. The ancestors are believed to possess the ability to influence either positively or negatively the fortune of the living. Belief in the existence of ancestors amongst Africans is paramount in African traditional religious belief systems. The ancestors are taken to be intermediaries between the living, the divinities and the Supreme Being. Ancestors therefore occupy an important place in African, particularly Yòrùbá ontology. Communion with ancestors therefore takes the form of veneration, in which the people honour, respect and look after them in their afterlives as well as possibly seek their guidance for the living descendants. Among the Yòrùbá people, ancestral veneration takes various forms as being evident in their traditional practices. The Yòrùbá have requirements for the conferment of ancestor-hood on a deceased soul, and as such not everyone who dies becomes an ancestor in Yòrùbá ontology. The task of this paper is to interrogate the practice of ancestral veneration as a metaphysical issue that is evident among the Yòrùbá people of Africa, while also delving into the discussion of the basic requirements for ancestor-hood amongst the Yòrùbá. This paper presents ancestors in Yòrùbá culture as spiritual agents of establishing social order, based on the belief in their continual relevance in the physical world. The role of ancestors as spiritual agents of social reconstruction will also be interrogated against emergent and dominant forces, such as globalisation, using the framework of glocalisation.

Keywords : Yòrùbá, ancestors, veneration, metaphysics, divinities, social order, glocalisation.

* Department of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria; watchidris@gmail.com

Introduction

Religious beliefs and traditions of the Yòrùbá people are central to their culture, which encompasses their daily activities and rituals. The practice of ancestral veneration amongst the Yòrùbá people of West Africa is therefore premised on their belief in the continual existence of a deceased soul after death and that such deceased soul has attained an esteemed position in the spiritual world and as such, due to its unfettered nature is able to mediate between the physical and spiritual worlds. The Yòrùbá believe in the continual presence of an ancestral spirit within the physical realm of the family or community it left behind, and as such, have a habit of acknowledging and respecting the presence of the ancestral spirit in all their activities, as being evident in the pouring of libations and the reservation of food and water for the ancestral spirit at night. The Yòrùbá also believe that a deceased soul, upon transition to the ancestral cult, has attained spiritual powers that make them superior to the living and can therefore protect the communities and families they have left behind and also bring upon good or bad fortune to the living.

In Yòrùbá traditional religious belief-system, the roles of the ancestors within the realm of the living are obvious. They are believed to act as intermediaries between the deities or divinities and their descendants or members of the community in which they lived while alive. The Yòrùbá also conceive of ancestors as guardians of traditional morality and that they as well serve as factors of cohesion in the Yòrùbá social life and ontological configuration. The importance of the practice of ancestral veneration in Yòrùbá traditional religion is well emphasised by E.G Parrinder who notes that life has no meaning in traditional African society “apart from ancestral presence and ancestral power” (1974; 57).

This paper therefore attempts to discuss and interrogate the belief of the Yòrùbá people in the efficacy of ancestral veneration by critically examining the impacts of Christianity, Islam and western education on the continual practice of ancestral veneration amongst the Yòrùbá people. As part of fulfilling the task of this paper, we shall discuss the basic requirements for the conferment of the status of ancestorship on a deceased soul in Yòrùbá traditional religious belief-system. This paper also discusses the art of ancestral veneration amongst the Yòrùbá people as an essential representation of Yòrùbá metaphysics, since it involves the fundamental beliefs that inform their cultural activities. The basic assumptions undergirding the Yòrùbá belief and practices in ancestral veneration shall be critically engaged, while also examining the role of ancestors as spiritual agents of orchestrating social order in typical traditional Yòrùbá communal settings. The challenge being posed by dominant forces like globalisation to the role of ancestors as spiritual agents of social ordering shall be subjected to scrutiny within the framework of the emerging theory of glocalization.

The Place of Ancestral Veneration in African Metaphysics

Joseph Omoregbe, while discussing the nature of metaphysical issues, writes that: “... it is not only realities that are beyond the physical world that metaphysics deals with. Rather, as a

branch of philosophy, it is the study of the totality of being, that is, the nature and structure of reality as a whole” (2006; ix). Metaphysics in this view therefore bothers on issues of concrete existence involving the beliefs and practices of a people or culture and how they explain reality as a whole. Africans in their daily struggle for survival and confrontation with the absurdities and intricacies of life, tend to raise issues on the purpose and meaning of existence, and as such pose some salient and basic questions in this regard. These salient and basic questions being raised by the African people and the solutions they provide to them, resulting from their philosophical insights constitute what can be called an African metaphysics. The practice of ancestral veneration is a metaphysical issue since it is predicated on the traditional religious beliefs of its subscribers.

Africans are said to think in hierarchical categories, and as such, they construe beings to exist in a hierarchical structure. At the apex of the hierarchical structure is the Supreme Being, which the Yòrùbá know as *Olodumare*, and called *Chukwu* among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria. He is believed to possess power over everything, and also that everything exists according to His plan and purpose. There is however a coherent belief amongst African cultures about the nature of the Supreme Being, which is that He has a transcendental nature which impedes access to Him, “hence the existence of intermediates like the ancestors and the localised deities who are approached through rituals and sacrifices” (Etim, 2013; 13). African traditional religious system is thereby characterised by the worship or veneration of ancestors and the localised deities based on the belief that through them, they can guarantee access to the Supreme Being.

In the words of Francis Etim:

The ancestors are their forefathers who were revered while alive because of their good standing in the society. At death they become unfettered spirit, therefore, can interfere in the affairs of the living, and can also be approached by the living through rituals and sacrifices. It is the unfettered nature of the ancestors that provide the ontological basis for the African’s idea of re-incarnation since, the ancestors through projection could naturally be re-born while still existing in the spirit world (Etim, 2013; 13).

The practice of ancestral worship amongst Africans is therefore premised on their belief in the continuity of existence after death. As such, death is not construed of as finality, according to the worldview of the Africans. On the hierarchical structure of beings, the ancestors are regarded as next to the Supreme Being.

Next to the ancestors are the localised deities who are often regarded as spiritual in nature but are localised in trees, rivers, hills, mountains, forests, stones and the rest. According to Etim: “There is virtually a deity for everything of existential importance to the Africans like thunder, war, fertility, agriculture, fishing, family, etc. They are approached for help in moments

of unexpected events within the area of their jurisdiction” (2013; 14). Even amongst the Igbo, there is the notion of a “personal god” or *Chi*, which looks after the person it is assigned to.

Man is therefore next to the deities in the African hierarchy of beings. There are differing explanations and beliefs amongst African cultures on what constitutes man. However, they hold the unanimous view that man is constituted of a mortal body and an immortal soul. Man or person is known as *Ènìyàn* in Yòrùbá culture, and conceived of as owing his existence to *Olodumare* who gave him the breath of life. The *Ènìyàn* thereby has a destiny assigned or affixed to him at the *Òdè Òrun*, the heavens, which now influences his plight upon coming into the world, *aye*. Whenever the Yòrùbá people encounter difficulties in life, they see it as important to consult the ancestors and divinities or deities in order to solve their problems. The ancestors and deities are therefore taken to be intermediaries between men and the Supreme Being, *Olodumare*.

Who are the Ancestors in Yòrùbá Ontology?

The ancestors in Yòrùbá ontology are the deified divinities that were once human beings (*Eda, Alaaye*) but who have come to assume the positions of divinities after death. An ancestor is believed to have transcended the earth, *Aye*, after death, to live with *Olodumare* and the divinities in heaven (*Orun*). From there he is believed to watch over or protect his kinsmen. It is worth noting that not all the dead are regarded as ancestors in Yòrùbá religious thought and practice. It is believed that the status of ancestor-hood is only conferred on those who contributed immensely to the welfare of the society, or those who have made sacrifices in one way or the other for the society in which they lived during their lifetime.

Ade Dopamu, stating the conditions for the status of ancestor-hood amongst the Yòrùbá, writes that: “Within the African context, the Yòrùbá inclusive, the living dead are the ancestors, not every dead person becomes an ancestor” (Dopamu, 2006; 11). Quoting Meyer Fortes, Dopamu has it that: “Strictly speaking, therefore, a person who leaves no descendants cannot become an ancestral spirit” (Fortes, 1961; 16). In Dopamu’s words, “Children who die cannot become an ancestor since they do not achieve parenthood” (2006; 11). The two major conditions for ancestorship amongst the Yòrùbá are therefore that the dead person should have children or descendants who would succeed him or her, and that such a person should have attained an appreciable age. Children who die young are left out of this category because they are yet to attain the age at which one dies a “good death” in Yòrùbá culture, and therefore have no descendants to succeed them.

Francis Olawole, in his dissertation, entitled, *Art and Spirituality: The Ijumu Northeastern-Yòrùbá Egúngún*, submitted at the University of Arizona, gives the example of the *Ogboni*, the “Yòrùbá goddess of the Earth, which the myth records to have been born and lived in the Yòrùbá City of Ile-Ife, where she is known by the name, *Abeni* (‘We begged or petitioned God before He gave us the bay girl’)” (Olawole, 2005; 63). Olawole continues that:

However, individuals with extremely bad or hot temperaments could also be deified after their death out of fear that their spirits could bring disasters into the community, where they were born and lived, if they are not referenced or honoured as divinities. A typical example is *Sango*, the thunder and lightening deity, who was said to be the fourth *Alaàfin* (king) of Oyo, the ancient capital city of the Old Yòrùbá Kingdom (2005; 63).

In Yòrùbá traditional religious belief, the ancestor is the dead that died a “good death,” who lived by example, and more importantly reached a preferably old age before he or she died and as well did not die before his or her parents.

According to Olawole, “There are two main classes of ancestors – family ancestors (*Obi*) and generalised ancestors (*Akoda, Esidale, Isese*)” (2005; 73). The family ancestors are comprised of the spirits of the dead fathers, mothers, grandfathers, grandmothers, great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers in a nuclear family or an extended family. “Such dead are believed to have acquired the supernatural powers that enable them to freely sandwich between their new abode in heaven (*Orun*) and earth (*Aye*) and regularly commune with their living children. Thus, the Yòrùbá saying: *Oku Olomo Kii Sun* (the spirit of the dead, who has children on the earth does not abandon them, but rather pays them regular visits to address their problems)” (2005; 73). The living children who the ancestors have left behind thereby reciprocate the care of the ancestors by venerating the ancestral spirits.

The generalised ancestors (*Akoda / sidale / Isese*) on their own part are the dead ancestors that are deemed to have been heroes or heroines of their various communities in one way or the other, or to have sacrificed something of great treasure to the community in which they lived. This class of ancestors comprises the dead ancestors that are conceived to have established given communities, clans or towns as the case may be. They are the ancestors that the histories (usually oral ones) supported to be the first settlers of given societies. The Yòrùbá strongly believe that their spirits are so powerful to the extent that if accorded with befitting worships or veneration, they could save the given towns or villages, which they founded or established, in times of crises, such as wars, droughts, famines, and so on. The veneration, like that of the family ancestors, can also be in form of a masquerade ritual and or animal sacrifice. It has been reported that the highest sacrifice to the generalised ancestors or any category of the spirit beings used to be human sacrifice (Idowu, 1962; 119).

Amongst the Yòrùbá, the ancestors are being called *Baba-nla* meaning the great fathers, and they are taking to be part of the family or household. The Yòrùbá believe that they are still present and they watch over the lives and property of members of the family. They are the powerful part of the clan, maintaining a close link between the world of men and the spirit world. The ancestors are taken to be interested in the welfare of their living descendants. They also discipline any erring member of the living belonging to their clan. They serve as “guidance of family affairs, traditions, customs, ethics and morality, health and fertility. They punish cases like incest, stealing, adultery, bearing false witness and other moral vices are

regarded as elders of the family and they are reincarnated into the family” (Amponsah, 1974; 272-273).

From what has been discussed above in this section, it can be deduced that belief in the existence and influence of ancestors is evident amongst the Yòrùbá people, and also that they attach some happenings or events to the influence of the ancestors. The next section will be devoted to a discussion of the several ways in which the Yòrùbá are said to venerate the ancestors.

The Belief, Practice and Relevance of Ancestral Veneration in Yòrùbá Culture

The practice of ancestral veneration amongst the Yòrùbá is founded on the belief in the continuation of life after death. The Yòrùbá belief in the possibility of the continual existence of a deceased soul, hence, to them, the phenomenon of death is not a finality. Dopamu has it that “death is a necessary end. It is a final turning point in the life of human beings here on earth,” in Yòrùbá belief (2006; 8). According to Awolalu and Dopamu, in Yòrùbá belief, there are two categories of death, namely, bad or good death. “The good death concerns those who live to a ripe old age, and full funerary rites are accorded such people. Bad deaths include those caused by anti-wickedness divinities (thunder, smallpox, and iron), those who die young and those who die childless” (Awolalu & Dopamu, 2005; 301).

It is believed that when the aged dies, he or she journeys to the world of the ancestors, and there are funeral rituals performed to prepare such soul for the journey home. Preparation of the soul for this journey exemplifies the Yòrùbá belief in ancestorship. Dopamu quotes one of the dirges sung at the funeral of the aged thus:

	<u>Translated as:</u>
<i>Ilé lẹ lẹ taara,</i>	He goes home direct,
<i>Bàbá wa ré ilé rẹ,</i>	Our father has gone to his home,
<i>Ilé lẹ lẹ taara.</i>	He goes home direct.
<i>Tí o bá d’ẹrun,</i>	When you arrive in heaven,
<i>Kó wẹhìn wò;</i>	Look back to take care of your children;
<i>Bàbá ré ilé o,</i>	Our father has gone home,
<i>Tí o bá d’ẹrun</i>	When you arrive in heaven,
<i>Kó wẹhìn wò.</i>	Look back to take care of your children (Dopamu, 2006; 9).

Here, death is being considered as that which terminates physical, visible and bodily existence, and opens another door, the door to a new life (Dopamu, 2006; 9). The Yòrùbá hold the belief that “there is a state of existence, attainable by human beings, beyond the limits of our present mortal life spans” (Kainz, 1981; 113). This point is well articulated by Dopamu who writes thus:

That there can be some kind of continuation in existence after death is attested to by the beliefs, actions and practices of living people such as veneration of the

ancestors, ancestral festivals, concept of the living-dead, belief in spiritual superintendents of family affairs, funeral rituals, the last words of the aged, transition of the dead, divine judgement, reincarnation, the doctrine of the soul and punishment of moral offenders (Dopamu, 2006; 10).

As earlier adverted to in this paper, an individual is only reinstated as an ancestor when he or she has left behind living descendants and children and has attained an appreciable age before death. "His reinstatement in this status establishes his continued relevance for his society" (Fortes, 1961; 129). However, the criterion of leaving behind children for attaining the status of ancestorship shall be thoroughly examined in a later section in this paper.

People believe that they are living in heaven, even though they no longer exist on earth. One could therefore be persuaded to agree with Dopamu who argued that "soul, death, spirits, ancestors and the after-life are issues that relate to one another in the people's belief and practices" (2006; 12). By virtue of the belief in the continual existence of the ancestor, the Yòrùbá are fond of invoking the names of the ancestors and performing rituals and rites in their honour in order to solve the problems they are confronted with or seek the protection of the ancestors. In the words of Dopamu: "Pouring libation to the ancestors, invoking their names to settle disputes, mentioning their names in discussions and seeing them in dreams presuppose that the ancestors are still in existence in some form or another. They are always watching to see that the living are on the right path, and that they preserve what their forefathers established" (2006; 13).

It is sometimes practised amongst the Yòrùbá, where libation is poured to the ancestors, when a woman is being given in marriage and on almost every other occasion or gathering. The Yòrùbá attribute some elements of spiritual powers to the ancestors and also hold the belief that their power is derived from, but used independently of the Supreme Being. They believe that death has given the ancestors greater and enhanced dignity and prestige, over the living. The powers possessed by the ancestors are believed to either be for good or for evil (implying that they could either be benevolent or malevolent). Anyone who is fortunate to be under the guidance and protection of the ancestors cannot be harmed by witches and sorcerers according to the Yòrùbá belief. In the words of Simeon Ige:

That is why the Yòrùbá say to their ancestors *Baba mi ma sun lorun* meaning my father, do not sleep in heaven. He is expected to be vigilant, watching over the living. If they dream of a dead relative, it is believed is a proof of the presence of the ancestor. The ancestors can also influence rainfall, good harvest, promote prosperity etc. misfortunes like drought, famine and destructive calamities are also attributed to them. Misfortunes however belong to those who break taboo (Ige, 2006; 27).

Appealing to ancestral spirits to remain awake and vigilant is often resorted to in situations of distress as well as for preventing impending or unforeseen danger. In Yòrùbá traditional

religious belief, it is important that the living be in good terms with the ancestors, in order to avoid incurring their anger or wrath. This is why they appease the ancestors when they are provoked to anger. At this stage, the ancestors deserve much more veneration or honour than they earned when they were living.

However, the Yòrùbá belief in ancestral veneration is also being reflected in certain funeral rites that are peculiar to the Yòrùbá traditional religion. Dada Adelowo gives an example of such funeral practices amongst the Yòrùbá while writing that: “In Yòrùbá funeral practice, when the corpse is lowered to the grave, the survivors draw near it, each according to the status of his family and each bringing an animal victim, usually a goat; he offers his gift through the officiating minister, asking that the deceased should accept it, and praying not to sleep in the world beyond, but to open his eyes wide and always look after his children” (Adelowo, 1990; 68). According to Adelowo, the “point here has to do with the belief of the Yòrùbá that death is not the end of life. It is only a medium whereby the present earthly existence is changed for another” (1990; 68).

The Yòrùbá are fond of ascertaining the will of the ancestors through the oracle from time to time. This practice is most common with the *Ifá* oracle which is consulted whenever there is a need to know the will of the ancestors or to take a decision bothering on the entire community. To substantiate this claim, reference can be made to Abiodun Olasupo Akande, who narrated in his 2019 study on Òyó-Yòrùbá *Egúngún* Masquerade, how an ancestral *Egúngún* known as *Je’njù* resurfaced in present Òyó town, after the historical migration from Old Òyó and required *Ifá* oracular consultation to determine the will of the spirit as to where it desired to settle (2019; 6). Upon consultation of the oracle, *Je’njù* was reported to have demanded to settle at Oke-Ogbo, in present-day Oke-Logun, Apará, at Iwajowa Local Government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria.

It is claimed that the traditional Yòrùbá even have a culture of not sleeping without food in their pots, as they are fond of leaving food outside at night for any visiting ancestor. “Water is not poured away at night without first announcing it so that any ancestor around may not be injured. When people drink wine or hard drinks, they pour a little on the ground for the ancestors. All this is to acknowledge and strengthen the interpersonal relationship between the living and the dead. Despite this closeness, ordinary people cannot see the ancestor. It is only those who possess special power or medicine that can notice their presence” (Adelowo, 1990; 27-28). However, this practice has become rather scarcely observable in modern Yòrùbá communities, largely due to alien cultural influences (globalisation, Westernisation, glocalisation etc.).

The Yòrùbá do not have separate annual festivals for ancestors except those who have been deified. Such communal ceremonies are done in honour of the ancestors and also to remind the people of the great deeds and sacrifices made by the ancestors. The Yòrùbá are common with the *Oro* or *Egúngún* festival which is done on annual basis. In most cases, masquerades or the *egúngún*, or *egún* in the case of a single ancestor, are being used to

represent the deceased soul or ancestor which the Yòrùbá call *Ara orun* (heavenly one). According to Akande (2019; 9), the annual *egúngún* festival in Òyó takes place within the month of August. The event transcends mere religious rituals but also foreshadows social and recreational allure (Akande, 2019; 9). There are shrines assigned to ancestors, where sacrifices and prayers are offered to them. The Yòrùbá call the shrines *Ìgbó Ìgbàlè*, with each shrine having priests and priestesses attached to it. However, it is noteworthy that the *Ìgbó Ìgbàlè* is a dedicated groove for the ancestral *Egúngún*, and not a place where all families gather to worship their ancestors.

According to Simeon Ige, “In many communities the same words are used for both the worship of God and the ancestors. For instance *Bo* is a general word for worship among the Yòrùbá. During the festival for the ancestors, a mask figure is designed specifically to give impression that the deceased is making a temporal reappearance on earth. In West Africa, ancestors are even addressed the same way as the living” (Ige, 2006; 28). However, the idea that the Yòrùbá worship their ancestors is a controversial one amongst scholars. Some scholars like Simeon Ige have argued that the Yòrùbá do not actually worship their ancestors, rather, they venerate them. Worship seems to be all embracing, “it includes the simple act of bowing, salutation, prayers, offering of food items, pouring of libation and sacrifices of animals and human beings.” Ige therefore submits that “Africans venerate their ancestors and not worship them” (2006; 29). This point is also emphasised by Ushe Mike Ushe, who writes that: “The Africans venerate the ancestors but do not worship them. This is because, the relationship that the livings have with their ancestors is so important that life has no meaning without the ancestral presence and power.” (Ushe, 2017: 175). Ushe further contends that “to say that the Africans worship the ancestors is to deny them the opportunity of giving respect and reverence to their departed as found in many societies of Africa” (2017; 175). Such acts as pouring of libations and giving food to the ancestors so that they can participate in the family meal with the living and communication with the ancestors through divination are indications that the Yòrùbá people do venerate their ancestors by acknowledging and respecting their presence within the family and during family events and traditions. The practice of pouring libations also shows a sign of ancestral presence. According to John S. Mbiti, traditional Africans do not worship their ancestors, but what they do is to venerate them by certain practices of reverence. This, Mbiti observes when he writes that:

Libation and the giving of food to the departed are tokens of fellowship, hospitality and respect; the drink and food so given are symbols of family continuity and contact. ‘worship’ is the wrong word to apply in this situation; and Africans themselves know very well that they are not ‘worshipping’ the departed members of their family. It is almost blasphemous, therefore, to describe these acts of family relationships as ‘worship’. Furthermore, African religions do not end at the level of family rites of libation and food offerings. They are deeper and more comprehensive than that. To see them only in terms of ‘ancestor worship’ is to

isolate a single element, which in some societies is of little significance, and to be blind to many other aspects of religion (Mbiti, 1969; 9).

Mbiti's observation in the above passage affirms the fact that certain practices performed in honour of the ancestors, such as pouring libation, giving of food to the departed and others represent tokens of fellowship, which have communal implications for both the living and the dead in Yòrùbá ontology.

Moreover, *Sàra* (spiritual generosity) is also another practice amongst the Yòrùbá, which is performed in honour of the dead, as a means of remembrance and also a way of seeking their guidance, protection and blessings (Ogunmefun, 2024; 191). This is a further indication that every cultural or religious practice of a people is based on their belief-systems. What makes the Yòrùbá practice of ancestral veneration a metaphysical issue is that it is premised on the fundamental issues of concrete existence that are inherent in the life patterns of the Yòrùbá people as a whole and this fundamental issues are premised on the Yòrùbá metaphysical belief in life after death, the protective powers of the ancestors, and the continual interaction between the entities in the physical world and the spiritual world.

Reviewing the Metaphysics of Ancestral Veneration in Yòrùbá Belief in a Glocal Context

Having exposted the belief, practice and relevance of ancestral veneration in Yòrùbá culture, it is pertinent to philosophically engage most of such beliefs and practices that characterise the idea, most especially as the phenomenon encounters conflicting and domineering cultures or forces that threaten its relevance, such as globalisation and the new wave of glocalisation. Glocalisation is a theory chiefly attributed to Roland Robertson, an American sociologist, who considers the concept as a fusion of the global and the local. Robertson (1994) explains globalisation as a phenomenon that does not necessarily threaten the local in terms of its homogenising tendencies. Rather, it is an outgrowth of local initiatives and ideas. As such, the global and the local are two sides of a coin in Robertson's interpretation, hence his theory of glocalisation (1994). In this manner, the supposed tensions between global knowledge, ideas and paradigms and their local counterparts are doused. According to Robertson, if globalisation means the compression (homogenising) of the world, then what it actually does, given the currently existing flows of events in the world is that it increasingly creates and incorporates locality. The process of globalisation also in turn largely shapes the compression of the world as a whole. As such, for Robertson, it is preferable to replace the word globalisation with glocalisation in the current context. If glocalisation subsists as a theory, then in the context of this paper, it implies the creation of cultural hybridity or a multiplicity of cultural hybrids, where local cultures intermingle with global cultures and vice-versa. The implication therefore is that traditions, beliefs and norms birthed in specific localities may be duplicated in multiple ways in various other localities and such traditions, beliefs and norms may also undergo changes as they encounter different cultures. Glocalisation is a phenomenon that stands in the way of

belief in the immanence of ancestral spirits and the attendant practices that compliment them, as being evident in the influx of Christianity, Islam and Westernisation into Africa and how these forces have reshaped peoples' conceptions of ancestral reverence in African societies. As against the Western scholarly literature that projects the collective worldviews of Africans as being uncritical, Victoria Ope' Akoleowo (2025; 56) asserts that the "global epistemic space is replete with examples of particularised and contextualised concepts and theories, most of which began at the level of individual reflections, but have now obtained global or regional acceptance... (as such)... ideas arise from individual minds, but the process of attaining collective assent depends on critical assessments of how such ideas prove relevant to local needs." Therefore, communal beliefs and traditions, such as ancestral veneration did not just emerge by fiat, but evolved as endogenous epistemic frameworks among the people across generations (Ephirim-Donkor, 2024).

Just like every other metaphysical issue, ancestral practices are predicated on the belief-systems of a people. Beliefs are in turn, objects of metaphysical investigations. The contention that only individuals who leave behind living descendants can strictly be reinstated as ancestors warrants serious questioning, due to certain views to the contrary. Awolalu (1979) avers that "the one who has no offspring is not readily remembered, unless he made a name for himself," which suggests that there are other criteria for conferring ancestorship on a deceased soul, aside the descendants criterion. This view is further accentuated by Jacob Olupona who remarks that "ancestorhood is both biological and ritual, and that important figures, even without biological children, can become ritually remembered through their influence or priestly status" (2011). Bolaji Idowu (1962) also corroborates the points underscored by Awolalu (1979) and Olupona (2011) by stating that personal virtue and public impact can elevate an individual to an ancestral status.

Islam, Christianity, Modern Science and the Continual Practice of Ancestral Veneration among the Yòrùbá

Africans, prior to the intrusion of Christian missionary movements believed and still believe in the universe as being full of spirits which include the Supreme Being, the divinities, the ancestors and other spiritual beings as the ghosts, evil spirits, and what the Yòrùbá people call *anjonu* (Jin), *iwin* (bush baby), *ebora*, *egbere* and the rest. However, the advent of colonialism into the African space was accompanied by the introduction of Western norms, values and culture to the African people, which also included the religion of Christianity as well as western education. Islam had also spread into Africa at that time. European writers had a misconception of Africans as having a religion and even knowing about the concept of God. Eurocentric scholars conceived of Africans as being polytheists or pagans who never had an idea of God. These notions of the Africans' religious life were also perpetuated by the teachings of Christianity and Islam, including western education, which made those Africans who had adopted Christianity and Islam to begin to have a negative notion of such religious beliefs and practices as ancestral

vation as being merely superstitious and belonging to a primitive mentality. Western education came with the conviction that Africans' belief in ancestral powers and presence is unscientific and therefore typical of a primitive culture. As such, the Africans' belief in the practice of ancestral veneration has been questioned by western science as being empirically unverifiable and as such a mere superstitious practice. However, there are certain similarities between the Yòrùbá veneration of ancestors and sainthood in Christianity, most especially in Catholicism. Both practices are similar in relation to their spiritual and religious nature, but differ with respect to the fact that the Christian saints are not regarded as the living dead, unlike the African ancestors.

The Portuguese were the first set of Europeans to come in contact with the people of Western Nigeria, including the Yòrùbá people. Even though their chief purpose of visiting Western Nigeria was exploration and trade, they had the conviction that Africans were not civilised, as such, they attempted to Christianise the Yòrùbá people, as in the words of Ahamad Faosiy Ogunbado, "To be civilised, according to them (the Portuguese), is to be Christianised and have rudimentary western education" (2012; 53). With the missionary movements that accompanied European colonialism, coupled with Western education, more Yòrùbá people became Christianised and started to see such traditional practices as ancestral veneration as being fetish, uncivilised or primitive, and superstitious.

Islam had gained ground amongst the Yòrùbá people before the advent of colonialism. The religion of Islam is based on the belief in the oneness of God (Allah) and this also conforms with the Yòrùbá belief in the supreme being, but the point where both religions diverge is that Islam rebukes the worship or veneration of deities or spirits other than the supreme being, and as such, the Yòrùbá belief in the efficacy of ancestral veneration and in the powers of the ancestors to protect the living is conceived as ungodly according to the religion of Islam. Islam vehemently opposes the Yòrùbá belief in ancestral spirits as being intermediaries between the supreme being (Allah according to Islam) and the living. The Yòrùbá usually call Islam "*Esin Imale*".

However, the Yòrùbá religion and Islam have coexisted for several years, making it possible for a harmonious relationship between both religions. According to Ogunbado, "This could be traced to some of the Islamic teachings that are concurred with Yòrùbá traditional religion and culture... Probably, because of harmony, tranquility and co-existence between both religions for a long period of time, the Yòrùbá assumed both as ancestral religions" (2012; 53). Ogunbado then gives an example of a Yòrùbá folksong that depicts the harmony between both religions as follows:

Aye laba Ifa, Aye laba Imole
Osan gangan ni' Gbagbo wole de
 We met oracle in the world
 We met Islam in the world
 It was late in the day that Christianity arrived (2012; 53).

However, there are still some Yòrùbá traditionalists who still hold the belief in the efficacy of ancestral veneration despite the teachings of the Abrahamic religions (Christianity and Islam) and the convictions of western science about ancestral veneration as an essentially superstitious concept.

Ancestral Links and the Spiritual Agency of Social Reconstruction in Yòrùbá Culture

According to John C. McCall (1995; 256), “In African ethnology evolutionary concerns eventually gave way to functionalist models of African societies but ancestors remained a key component in discussions of the maintenance of jural authority, land tenure systems and segmentary social organisation.” The immanence and transcendence of ancestors in Yòrùbá culture is reflected in the fact that Africans generally do not draw strict distinctions between the living and the dead (Kopytoff, 1971). Igor Kopytoff (1971) portrayed ancestors as ‘elders in Africa’, who through their spiritual presence in the physical world, sustained social cohesion, identity and social order in their respective communities. Kopytoff asserts that traditional Africans did not bother so much as to whether someone in a position of political or jural authority was dead or alive, rather, such concerns were raised by Western academics (1971). As such, political or jural authority within the traditional African context could be held by both ancestral agents and the living elders, with no strict distinctions held between both agencies. This view represents a fusion of physical and spiritual forces in social ordering in Africa.¹ Just as Bantu terms used to refer to ancestors and the living elders are similar, the Yòrùbá terms used to refer to ancestors and the living elders do not defer so much. Among the Yòrùbá, elders are referred to as *baba* and the same goes for ancestors (*baba nla*). This linguistic illustration reflects the immanence of ancestral spirits or agents in the social life of the Yòrùbá. However, Kopytoff’s linguistic criteria of the structural-functional theory of ancestors received heavy criticism in the works of Brain (1975), Mendonsa (1976) and Uchendu (1976). Uchendu posited that analyses of ancestral veneration which reduced the nature of relations with ancestors to a structural role fail to capture the essence of ancestors as objects of honour and tools for competitive ends in certain African cultures, with specific recourse to the Igbo ritual practices.

Given the stagnation of scholarly interest in ancestors due to several theoretical considerations, most especially with reference to the defects of the functionalist approach, the practice-based approach and the lineage theory, which have defined the nature of anthropological interests and analysis in ancestral studies for decades, it is pertinent to resort to a socially constructed experience of ancestral presence among the Yòrùbá and Africans in general. This is crucial for underscoring its relevance for social ordering for the Yòrùbá nation. Following McCall (1995; 257), ancestors continue to play important roles in the daily lives of most people in West Africa, and addressing the problem of Ancestors from a new and productive perspective enables a revitalisation of scholarly interest in ancestral relations (ancestral veneration). McCall (1995; 258) contends that “a theory of ancestors must encompass a much broader range of experience,” beyond the boundaries of cult and religion

and beyond jural and political confinements. McCall (1995; 258) addresses the “experimental dimensions of living in a social milieu which includes ancestors and the relationship of that experience to the construction and reproduction of historical consciousness and identity,” which is instructive for our aim in this paper. As such, McCall’s analysis exposes us to a broader perspective of interpreting the roles of ancestors in social life. Hence, ancestor-related practices can be appropriately conceived as ways through which west Africans and the Yòrùbá in particular, engage with the socially constituted past, thereby providing a cultural context and mechanism with which the Yòrùbá people can make and remake their social world.

Knowledge of the past shapes the notions of community, ethnicity, paternal and maternal descent groups, each individual’s sense of himself in connection to various social identities and roles in Yòrùbá culture. This knowledge is birthed in the lived experiences of daily life in a traditional Yòrùbá community. Based on such experiences, conceptions of the person are predicated on links to ancestors, who served as vehicles for the existence of each person. Typically in a Yòrùbá cultural setting, the ancestors are embodied in a wide range of practices and material culture, in different ways. Ancestral presence is immanent in the landscape of Yòrùbá communities, most especially in the naming of family compounds, streets and even communities and villages. To this effect, reference is often made to those who first cleared the bush, inhabited the spaces and established communal life (*awon baba nla to te ile do*). For instance, the founding of *Ilé-Ifẹ̀*, which is widely regarded as the spiritual homeland of the Yorùbá people is often attributed to *Odùduwà*, who is regarded as a primordial ancestor. An *Ifá* verse (*Òdù Ifá*), *Ọ̀ṣé Ọ̀nirá*, narrates the ancestral origination of *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* thus, “*Odùduwà dé’ lẹ̀-Ifẹ̀, ó fì ọpa àṣẹ rẹ̀ lé ilẹ̀ gbà, ayé balẹ̀... Odùduwà ní gbogbo pa àc’ r’l’ lé il’l’, Il’l’ gbà, ayé bal’l’... Odùduwà ní gbogbo àgbàlagbà ni kí wọ̀n bẹ̀rẹ̀ láti Ilé-Ifẹ̀...*” That is, “*Odùduwà arrived at Ilé-Ifẹ̀, where he struck the earth with his staff of authority. The earth accepted it and peace dominated the land... Odùduwà then pronounced that all elders and kingdoms should trace their origin to Ilé-Ifẹ̀.*”

The immanence of ancestors in social life is also evident in the skilled works and several occupations of the Yòrùbá people, most especially with recourse to those which devise iron implements. Ironworking or metallurgy as it is known in the modern parlance is traced to *Ògún*, who is also regarded as a primordial ancestor who founded iron implements. *Ifá*, in *Ògúndá Méjì*, eulogises *Ògún* as the first ironsmith, revealing that:

It was *Ògún* who introduced iron with a ringing sound to the world
 It was *Ògún* who introduced bronze with a ringing sound to the land of *Sòkòrì*
 It was *Ògún* who introduced brass with a ringing sound to the town of *Ìjùmú*
 It was *Ògún* who forged iron continuously
 Till he reached the expanse of heaven,
 Where *Àjàgunmàlè* initiated *Òrúnmilà* in the casting of *Ifá* (Adeniji and Armstrong 1977:5).

The above verse illustrates the deep connection between ancestral reverence and the means of livelihood, sustainability and existence of the Yòrùbá. Virtually every community, village or town is traced to a first settler, who is regarded as the (*alale*) or ancestors, to whom reference should be made in social and religious functions. The same link holds for ancestral occupations like hunting, ironworking, farming and even traditional medicine. Agrarian thanksgiving during the new yam festivals, as practised in places like Ekiti, Ondo, Osun and parts of Oyo (Yòrùbá tribes in Western Nigeria) foreshadows ancestral links to farming, sustainability and reproduction in Yòrùbá culture. The new yam festival marks the end of the farming season and the beginning of the harvest, especially for yam in Yòrùbá diet and ritual life. The rituals typically involve offering the first yam tubers to the gods and ancestors before consumption, which is often accompanied by music, dance, masquerade performances (*Egúngún* displays) and communal feasting.

The practice of ancestral veneration among the Yòrùbá transcends mere religious rites or rituals, but is deeply symbolic and functional, as it plays active roles in rebuilding, reaffirming and regenerating the social fabric of the community. For instance, in agrarian thanksgiving during the new yam festival, we find the reinforcement of core values like respect for elders and ancestors, gratitude to spiritual forces, communal participation and moral responsibility, which are essential values for rebuilding a morally grounded and cohesive society, most especially in times of social disintegration or generational conflict. The ritual practice of offering yams first to the ancestors teaches humility, patience, and the ethic of collective wellbeing over individual gains. Ancestral veneration is a vehicle of social reconstruction since it strengthens intergenerational bonds, as transmission of tradition is essential for reconstructing society during or after disruption. This transmission also ensures that the young generation see themselves as part of a larger historical and spiritual narrative. The *Egúngún* masquerade is not only a performance, but a social lesson in discipline, order and respect. Ancestral festivals and rituals also help restructure social roles, as chiefs, priests and family heads perform symbolic duties, while gender and age-based responsibilities are re-affirmed, thereby re-asserting legitimacy and authority in the traditional structure. Ancestral presence in community functions and the practices that exude such are necessary in challenging times of cultural erosion, colonial impact or modernisation, most especially in the contemporary glocal context. Apart from dispute settlements that take place during communal gatherings where ancestors are venerated, broken relationships are often rebuilt on such occasions. Cultural revival and economic renewal are also benefits that can be sought from communal festivals, since they serve as occasions for the revival of long-forgotten rituals, songs, dances, and languages. Economically, these events boost local farming and trade (most especially through the thriving of staple crops, such as yam markets), encourage communal labour and resource sharing and help celebrate productivity as a virtue. Ancestral veneration is a practice through which the Yòrùbá people, just like several African cultures preserve the past, empower the present and preserve the future.

Conclusion

This paper has been able to demonstrate the place of ancestral veneration in the ontological setup of the Yòrùbá. The practice of ancestral veneration amongst the Yòrùbá like every other traditional practice is premised on the belief-systems of the people. The belief in the phenomenon of death and the continual existence of a soul after death opens doors to the belief in the existence of ancestors, who they revere with utmost dignity and honour. The Yòrùbá treat their ancestors with great respect and offer sacrifices in their honour to benefit from their protection and guidance. Given our discussions in this paper, one could safely claim that the Yòrùbá venerate their ancestors rather than “worship” them in the strict sense of the word. However, there are few exceptional cases where certain ancestors have been deified in Yòrùbá religious belief-system. Such deities as Sango, who was once an *Aláàfin* (king) of old Oyo Empire during his lifetime is revered as an Ancestor in Yòrùbá cultural history. This paper submits that the practice of ancestral veneration amongst the Yòrùbá is premised on their belief in the powers and abilities of the ancestors to protect them and solve their problems, and this is further based on their belief in the essential link between the physical world (*aiye*) and the spiritual world (*orun*). These two worlds both constitute the Yòrùbá ontology. A broader interpretation of the social roles of ancestors has been presented in this paper, which explains ancestral veneration as an instrument for social reconstruction among the Yòrùbá, through communal feasts and festivals, as exemplified in agrarian thanksgiving during the new yam festival. Ancestral veneration bridges the gap between different generations, while re-asserting social responsibility.

References

- Adelowo, E. D. 1990. Rituals, symbolism and symbols in Yorùbá traditional religious thought. *Asia Journal of theology*, 4(1), 162-73.
- Adeniji, D. and Armstrong, R.G. 1977. *Isé irin wiwà àti sísun ní ilẹ̀*’ Yorùbá (Iron mining and smelting in Yòrùbáland). Occasional Publication, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.
- Akande, O.A. 2019. Ará Òrun kin-in kin-in: Òyó-Yòrùbá *Egúngún* masquerade in communion and maintenance of ontological balance. *Genealogy* 2019, 3, 7; doi:10.3390/genealogy3010007.
- Akoleowo, V.O. 2025. Extraversion, Scientific Dependency and the Democratisation of Knowledge. *Agídígbo: ABUAD Journal of the Humanities*. Vol. 13. No. 1.
- Amponsah, k. 1974. Topics on West African traditional religion volume 1 (Accra: Mc Graw-Hill FEP.) p. 85. see also Awolalu and Dopamu 1979. *West African traditional religion* (Ibadan: Onibonje press.)
- Awolalu, J. O. (1979). *Yòrùbá beliefs and sacrificial rites*. London: Longman.
- Awolalu, O. and Dopamu, A. 2005. *West African traditional religion*, (Ibadan: Macmillan Nigeria Publishers Ltd.)
- Dopamu, A. 2006. Change and continuity: The Yòrùbá belief in life after death. A paper prepared for *continuity and change: Perspectives on science and religion*, June 3-7, 2006, in Philadelphia, PA, USA, a program of the Metanexus Institute.
- Ephirim-Donkor, A. (2024). *African spirituality: On becoming ancestors* (Rev. ed.). Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

- Etim, F. 2013. African metaphysics. *Journal of Asian Scientific Research*, 2013. 3(1): 11-17.
- Fortes, M. 1961. Some reflection on ancestor worship in Africa, in Fortes, M. and Dieterlen, G. (eds) *African system of thought*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p126;
- Field, M.J. 1937. *Religion and medicine of the Ga people*, (London: Oxford University Press.).
- Idowu, B. 1962. *Olodumare: God in Yòrùbá belief*, (London: Longman.)
- Kainz, H. 1981. *The philosophy of man: A new introduction to some perennial issues* (Alabama : The University of Alabama Press.)
- Kopytoff, I. 1971. Ancestors as elders in Africa, *Africa* 43 (2), 129-42. - 1987.
- McCall, J.C. 1995. Rethinking ancestors in Africa. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (1995), pp. 256- 270. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1161193>.
- Mbiti, J. 1969. *African religions and philosophy*. (London: Heinemann.)
- Mendonsa, E. L. 1976. Elders, office-holders and ancestors among the Sisala of northern Ghana, *Africa* 46 (1), 57-60.
- Ogunbado, A. 2012. "Impacts of colonialism on religions: An experience of South-Western Nigeria." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (JHSS)*. PP 51-57.
- Ogunmefun, E.T. 2024. *Sàrà: Ancestral veneration in Yoruba religion. Light in a Once-Dark World* Volume 6. January.
- Olupona, J. K. (2011). *City of 201 gods: Ilé-Ifè in time, space, and the imagination*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Omogbe, J. 2006. *Metaphysics without tears: A systematic and historical study*. 6th edition. (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Ltd.)
- Parrinder, E. 1974, *African traditional religion*. (London: Sheldon Press.)
- Robertson, Roland. (1994). "Globalization or Glocalisation?" *Journal of International Communication*, 1:1, 33-52, DOI: 10.1080/13216597.1994.9751780.
- Uchendu, Victor C. 1965. *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*. New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston.
- Ushe, U. 2017. God, divinities and ancestors in African traditional religious thought. *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities* Vol. 3 N0 4, June 2017. ISSN 2488-9210 (Online) 2504-9038 (Print).

Unpublished Work(s)

- Olawole, F. 2005. "Art and spirituality: The Ijumu Northeastern-Yòrùbá egúngún, *A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of Art, in partial fulfillment of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The University of Arizona*. (Unpublished work) p.63.

Footnotes

1. Igor Kopytoff's characterization of ancestors as elders represents a version of the structural-functional theory of ancestors.