

THE ROLE OF ANCESTORS IN BUILDING A COHESIVE AFRICAN SOCIETY**Authors & Affiliations****ONAH, GREGORY AJIMA**

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ABSTRACT

Studies on ancestral veneration and its role among African peoples, particularly the significance of ancestors in fostering social cohesion, have continued to generate scholarly interest and debate. While it is widely acknowledged that Africans are deeply religious, the more pressing question is whether traditional religious systems; especially ancestral beliefs have, over the centuries, been sufficiently potent in promoting peace, order, and social harmony. This paper adopts an analytical and interpretive approach to examine the African conception of ancestors and their role in building a cohesive society. It argues that ancestral veneration serves as a vital moral and social framework that reinforces communal values and social stability. The study further situates this discourse within the context of modernity, highlighting the growing neglect of ancestral traditions among 21st-century Africans and its implications for social cohesion in contemporary African societies.

Keywords: Ancestor veneration; African Traditional Religion; social cohesion; indigenous knowledge systems; African moral philosophy; modernization and tradition.

Introduction

The belief in ancestors constitutes a central element of African Traditional Religion. It occupies a significant place in understanding the role of indigenous religious systems in promoting harmonious living among African peoples. One of the key mechanisms through which African Traditional Religion grows and nurtures individuals from childhood to adulthood is the cultivation of an awareness of the role of ancestors. Africans hold tenaciously to this belief, revering ancestors as powerful and benevolent members of the community, though not in a physical sense, since they are conceived as spiritual beings who continue to influence the affairs of the living.

In recent times, however, ancestors, once regarded as role models within African societies, are increasingly perceived as less relevant. The advent of Christianity and Islam in Africa has significantly diminished the

veneration of ancestors as moral exemplars. In addition, processes of modernization, globalization, and technological advancement have contributed to the growing neglect of indigenous beliefs in ancestors.

Traditional African societies, often characterized by strong communal bonds and moral regulation, drew significantly on ancestral authority as a means of maintaining social order. Although such societies were not entirely devoid of conflict or deviant behavior, mechanisms rooted in ancestral beliefs and other indigenous institutions played an important role in regulating conduct and addressing wrongdoing. Before the widespread influence of foreign religions and modern technological systems in Africa, these structures contributed to relatively stable and cohesive communities (44–46).

African societies were guided by a complex interplay of gods, spirits, divinities, and ancestors, all of which functioned as sources of moral authority and social control. Communalism was emphasized, and social norms and values were widely upheld. However, contemporary African society appears to present a contrast, as various social vices—such as kidnapping, ritual killings, organ trafficking, and internet fraud (commonly referred to as “Yahoo Yahoo”)—have become more visible Onah et al. (2024, p. 23). While it would be an oversimplification to attribute these developments solely to the decline of traditional systems, the apparent erosion of indigenous values and institutions calls for critical reflection.

It is within this context that this paper seeks to re-examine the role of ancestors in African societies, with a view to highlighting their significance in fostering social cohesion and exploring the need to re-evaluate indigenous value systems in addressing contemporary social challenges.

Ancestors in the African Context

Ancestors are generally understood across Africa as departed members of the community who lived, died, and are believed to continue their existence in the spiritual realm. They are regarded as heroes and heroines' forebears from whom the living traces their descent. Different African societies designate ancestors by various names: the Igbo refer to them as *Ndichie*, the Yoruba as *Babala*, the Ashanti as *Samanfo*, the Ewe as *Neshie*, the Yakurr as *Bauwo*, the Zulu as *Amadlozi*, and the Yala of Cross River State as *Ayeku*, among others.

The African understanding of ancestors is well captured in H. Parrinder's definition, cited in Idowu (1973), who explains that:

“An ancestor is a departed spirit who stands in a particular close relation to the tribe or the family... his favour or disfavour has therefore a sharply focused relation to it and is more urgently to be sought or avoided” (p. 179).

Traditionally, Africans maintain that ancestors constitute the closest link between the living and the spiritual world. John S. Mbiti describes the “living-dead” as “bilingual,” in that they communicate both with the living and with spiritual beings. According to Mbiti, they are the spirits with whom African people are most directly concerned, as they remain part of their families and are remembered personally Mbiti, (1969, p. 52). This perspective underscores the idea that ancestors occupy an intermediate position within a spiritual hierarchy, possessing access to supernatural forces that enable them to influence the affairs of the living.

Similarly, Gbenda (2006) supports Mbiti's position by emphasizing that ancestors are regarded as “living-dead” because they lived morally upright lives, fulfilled societal obligations, and have attained a spiritually elevated status. A key implication of this belief is that ancestors are actively involved in the lives of their

descendants guiding, protecting, and sometimes sanctioning them.

It is, however, important to note that in many African societies, ancestral recognition has historically been gendered. As T. U. Nwala observes, female ancestors are often less prominently revered than their male counterparts (Nwala, 1985, p. 119), reflecting broader socio-cultural structures within traditional African settings.

Qualifications for Ancestor-hood

While ancestors are generally understood as deceased family members, African belief systems maintain that not all who die attain ancestral status. Certain conditions must be fulfilled before one is recognized as an ancestor. In this regard, Onah et al (2024), drawing on Mbiti, refers to ancestors as “African saints” (p. 63), emphasizing their moral and spiritual distinction.

According to Ukpabi (2011), the qualifications for ancestor-hood include:

“Attainment of old age; living a morally upright life; leaving behind offspring (particularly male children); experiencing a “good death”; acquiring wealth justly; receiving proper burial rites; and being judged worthy by spiritual authorities” (p. 35).

Age is a significant factor in determining ancestor-hood, as those who attain old age are generally considered more qualified. However, some societies recognize exceptional individuals who die young but leave behind offspring. Idowu (1973) supports this view, noting that such individuals may still be incorporated into the ancestral community under specific conditions.

Moral integrity is another essential criterion. As Ukpabi (2011) emphasizes, ancestors are those who “lived good and upright lives” (p. 35). Ugwue and Ugwueye (2004) further elaborate that individuals considered for ancestor-hood must not have engaged in acts that violate societal norms, such as theft, adultery, witchcraft, or other forms of social deviance (p. 70). This highlights the ethical dimension of ancestor-hood, where moral conduct during one's lifetime determines posthumous status.

The manner of death also plays a crucial role. Certain forms of death are traditionally regarded as “bad deaths” and may disqualify individuals from becoming ancestors. These include deaths resulting from suicide, certain diseases (such as leprosy or smallpox), accidents, or circumstances perceived as spiritually impure (Ukpabi, 2011, p. 37; Onah et al, 2024, p. 60). Such deaths are often interpreted as consequences of cosmic or moral imbalance.

It is important to note, however, that what constitutes a “bad death” varies across African societies. Factors such as cultural norms, community beliefs, and local traditions influence these interpretations. Ugwu and Ugwueye (2004, p. 72) observe that deaths associated with social deviance, ritual transgression, or prolonged affliction may be viewed negatively in many communities.

Conversely, a “good death,” accompanied by proper burial rites, is essential for admission into the ancestral realm. Burial practices are therefore of great significance. Among the Yala people of Cross River State, for example, Onah et al. (2024, p. 159) note that burial rites extend beyond interment to include elaborate rituals such as the slaughtering of animals, which symbolize purification and the proper transition of the deceased into the ancestral world.

The Roles of Ancestors

Africans generally maintain that death does not signify the end of existence but rather a transition into another mode of being. In this worldview, the soul survives physical death, and individuals who have lived morally upright lives are believed to enter the spiritual realm the world of the “living-dead” or ancestors. Within this framework, ancestral veneration is often regarded as a key factor in sustaining the cohesion and continuity of African societies.

Ancestors are understood to play vital roles in the lives of individuals, families, and communities. While some scholars debate whether ancestors are inherently benevolent or capable of causing harm, a more productive perspective is to examine how their perceived relationship with the living contributes to social order, moral regulation, and communal development. In this regard, Etta and Onah (2024, p. 39), drawing on John S. Mbiti, emphasize that African religiosity permeates all aspects of life, and this is reflected in the enduring significance of ancestral beliefs.

One of the primary roles attributed to ancestors is that of moral guardianship. Ancestors are believed to uphold societal values, traditions, and ethical standards, functioning as custodians of communal morality. They are thought to supervise family affairs, ensuring that actions detrimental to social harmony are checked. As such, they are often conceptualized as moral enforcers who discipline erring members and provide protection for their descendants. This aligns with the view of Awolalu and Dopamu, who argue that belief in ancestors reinforces public morality by demanding adherence to traditional laws and customs, with sanctions for deviant behavior (1979 p. 276).

Closely related to this is the role of ancestors as agents of social control and justice. In many African societies, ancestors are invoked in the resolution of disputes, particularly in matters such as land conflicts or intra-family disagreements. They are believed to function as an invisible judiciary, witnessing oaths and ensuring justice. The fear of ancestral sanction, therefore, serves as a deterrent against wrongdoing and contributes to social stability.

Ancestors are also regarded as sources of knowledge and healing. Traditional medical practitioners including herbalists, bone setters, and traditional birth attendants often attribute their knowledge and skills to ancestral guidance. In this sense, ancestors are believed to mediate the transmission of indigenous knowledge systems across generations, thereby sustaining cultural continuity.

In addition, ancestors are perceived as playing intermediary roles between the living and the spiritual realm. They are believed to serve as channels of communication between humans and the Supreme Being or divinities. Quarcoopome (1987, p. 130) supports this view by asserting that ancestors possess privileged access to the spiritual domain and are entrusted with the responsibility of rewarding moral conduct and sanctioning wrongdoing. This intermediary function reinforces their authority within the moral and cosmological order of African societies.

Another significant role attributed to ancestors is reincarnation. Many African communities believe that ancestors may return through the birth of children within the family lineage. This belief is often reflected in naming practices, where children are given names that signify the return of a departed relative. Such practices further strengthen the perceived continuity between the living and the dead.

More broadly, ancestors are believed to contribute to **social cohesion and stability**. They are seen as benevolent forces who guide, protect, and intercede on behalf of the living, while also correcting moral deviations. Although these beliefs vary across cultures and should not be generalized uncritically, they nonetheless highlight the central role of ancestral veneration in shaping personal conduct, communal relationships, and the moral fabric of African societies.

Ancestors as Factors of Social Cohesion

It is widely acknowledged that, prior to the widespread influence of Christianity, Islam, and other external religious systems, many African societies exhibited strong communal bonds characterized by relative social stability, cooperation, and shared values. These features were largely sustained by indigenous belief systems that regulated the conduct and interactions of individuals within the community. Among such systems, belief in ancestors played a central role. While claims that pre-colonial African societies were entirely devoid of social vices should be treated with caution, some historical accounts; such as the report attributed to Lord Macaulay (1835), cited in Onah (2023) suggest that strong moral and communal structures contributed to relatively low levels of social dislocation (p. 1).

Within traditional African societies, beliefs about ancestors' function as a mechanism for inculcating and sustaining communal ideals of harmonious living. Ancestors are revered not merely for their spiritual status but for their perceived ability to enforce moral order and promote social stability. This reverence reinforces a collective consciousness that prioritizes unity, mutual responsibility, and respect for established norms.

Empirical illustrations of this can be observed among communities in Cross River State, such as the Ugep and Yakurr peoples, as well as the Okuni community in Ikom. Shared beliefs in common ancestry and ancestral migration narratives foster a sense of kinship and brotherhood among these groups, despite geographical separation. This shared identity encourages cooperation in social, economic, and agricultural activities, thereby strengthening inter-community cohesion.

A comparable example is found among the Ashanti of Ghana, where the **Golden Stool** serves as a powerful ancestral symbol representing the soul and unity of the nation. The symbolic significance of the Golden Stool transcends mere ritual, functioning as a unifying force that embodies continuity, collective identity, and political legitimacy within Ashanti society.

Ancestors also influence social behaviour through systems of moral instruction and intergenerational transmission of values. Elders frequently invoke ancestral authority in guiding younger members of the community, thereby reinforcing respect for tradition and social responsibility. In this sense, ancestral belief systems operate as informal but effective institutions of socialization.

Furthermore, ancestors are regarded as custodians of morality, culture, and social order. Their perceived capacity to reward good behaviour and sanction wrongdoing serves as a powerful regulatory mechanism. While it may be overstated to suggest that traditional African societies required no formal systems of conflict resolution, it is evident that ancestral authority functioned as a significant complement to existing social institutions, contributing to the maintenance of order and cohesion.

The belief that ancestors act as intermediaries between the living and the Supreme Being further strengthens their role in social cohesion. Through rituals, sacrifices, and prayers directed to ancestors, individuals and communities seek guidance, protection, and well-being. These shared religious practices reinforce collective

identity and solidarity, thereby enhancing the cohesion of the society.

Overall, although the nature and expression of ancestral beliefs vary across African societies, their role in fostering unity, regulating behaviour, and sustaining communal values remains a central feature of African indigenous social systems.

Challenges Posed by Modernization on Ancestral Belief

The traditional religious beliefs of African societies, particularly ancestral veneration, have experienced significant transformations in the face of modernity. Many contemporary Africans appear increasingly detached from ancestral traditions, a trend reflected in the declining familiarity with lineage histories and ancestral heritage. This growing disconnection suggests a shift in value systems, where indigenous belief structures are often perceived as less relevant within modern socio-cultural contexts.

Prior to the advent of colonialism and the widespread influence of external religions and economic systems, many sub-Saharan African societies were organized around relatively stable, small-scale, and culturally homogeneous communities. Within these contexts, African Traditional Religion functioned as a comprehensive worldview through which individuals interpreted and regulated their environment, social relationships, and moral obligations. It permeated all aspects of life and played a central role in fostering communal values and social cohesion. As A. G. Leonard observes, African societies were deeply religious, with religion shaping virtually every aspect of daily life (Leonard, year, p. 406).

However, the encounter with colonialism introduced profound socio-cultural disruptions. Colonial administration, alongside the expansion of commerce and Western education, contributed to the restructuring of indigenous institutions and value systems. In addition, the spread of Christianity and Islam brought alternative religious frameworks that often challenged or reinterpreted traditional beliefs, including ancestral veneration. This interaction did not simply result in a wholesale replacement of indigenous systems but rather initiated complex processes of adaptation, transformation, and, in some cases, erosion of traditional practices.

Modernization, urbanization, and technological advancement have further accelerated these changes. As African societies become more integrated into global systems, traditional beliefs are sometimes reclassified as “superstitious” or incompatible with modern scientific rationality. Consequently, ancestral veneration, which was once central to communal life, is increasingly marginalized, particularly among urban populations.

At the same time, it is important to adopt a balanced perspective. The introduction of Christianity and Western education contributed to significant developments, including expanded access to formal education, healthcare systems, and new forms of social organization. Scientific advancements have also provided alternative explanations for phenomena that were previously interpreted through spiritual frameworks. These developments have undoubtedly improved certain aspects of human well-being.

Nevertheless, the decline of ancestral belief systems raises important questions about cultural identity and moral frameworks in contemporary African societies. While modern institutions provide structural and technological solutions to human challenges, they do not always fully replace the communal and ethical functions historically performed by indigenous belief systems. Interestingly, even within highly modernized contexts, many Africans continue to draw on ancestral consciousness during periods of crisis, suggesting that

these belief systems retain a residual, though evolving, significance.

This tension between tradition and modernity highlights the need for a more nuanced engagement with African indigenous knowledge systems, particularly in exploring how elements of ancestral belief may continue to contribute to social cohesion in contemporary settings.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that ancestral beliefs and practices constitute a significant dimension of African Traditional Religion, functioning not only as spiritual expressions but also as vital mechanisms for social regulation and cohesion. Within many African worldviews, ancestral veneration provides a framework through which individuals interpret and respond to life's challenges, including both physical and spiritual concerns. In this context, ancestors are revered as continuing members of the community whose perceived spiritual authority sustains moral order and reinforces communal values.

As custodians of morality, law, and cultural norms, ancestors are traditionally understood to influence behaviour through systems of reward and sanction. This moral framework contributed to the maintenance of social order in many African societies, even though its forms and expressions varied across communities. However, as this study has shown, the influence of African Traditional Religion has undergone significant transformation in the face of modernization, the spread of Christianity and Islam, and the expansion of state institutions. Contemporary African societies are now shaped by formal legal systems, Western education, and global socio-economic structures, which have, to a large extent, redefined traditional mechanisms of authority and social control.

Despite these transformations, it would be reductive to conclude that ancestral belief systems have become irrelevant. Rather, they continue to exert influence sometimes subtly within the moral consciousness and cultural practices of many African communities. The persistence of these beliefs, particularly in moments of crisis, suggests that they still fulfill important psychological, ethical, and social functions that modern institutions do not entirely replace.

The apparent decline in the authority of traditional institutions raises important questions about moral regulation and social cohesion in contemporary Africa. While it may be difficult to establish a direct causal relationship, some scholars have associated the weakening of indigenous value systems with increasing social challenges. This underscores the need for a critical re-evaluation of African cultural resources, including ancestral traditions, in addressing present-day ethical and social concerns.

Therefore, rather than advocating an uncritical return to the past, this paper calls for a thoughtful integration of beneficial elements of African Traditional Religion, particularly its emphasis on communal responsibility, moral accountability, and social harmony into contemporary frameworks of governance, education, and social development. Such an approach may provide valuable insights for strengthening social cohesion and preserving cultural identity in a rapidly changing African society.

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