

Worship or Veneration: An Analysis of Whether the African Veneration of Ancestors Equals the Biblical Understanding of Worship

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Abstract

Before the coming of Christianity, Africans believed in the existence of a supreme Being and worshipped him. They also have a long-held, almost-ubiquitous belief in and veneration of ancestors. However, after Christianity was introduced in African societies, there have been conflicts between African traditional understanding of veneration of ancestors and biblical teaching of worship to God. Some have argued that respect, reverence, and honour accorded to ancestors amounts to worshipping them. However, some African authors have refuted these assertions and have asserted that ancestors are intermediaries between the living and God. This paper sets out to determine whether the African traditional practice of remembering, respecting, and honouring ancestors is veneration or worship. This is critical because some African Christians continue to venerate their ancestors and have fallen under sharp criticism of ancestral worship, which constitutes idolatry. The study utilised existing literature and biblical texts. It evaluates the concept of worship as understood and carried out in the biblical and African traditional contexts. The Bible and traditional African perspectives have similarities; for example, they uphold the existence of life after death. However, the meaning of life after death in the biblical perspective differs in these two worldviews. Also, in African cosmology, worship to the supreme Being was offered through intermediaries like ancestors and divinities, but in Christianity, worship is offered directly to God through Jesus Christ. Therefore, Christians should not fall into the temptation of ancestral worship in the name of honouring the dead.

Keywords: Veneration, Ancestors, Biblical Worship, African Traditional Religion



Introduction

Religion occupies a central place in African societies. Mbiti argued that the knowledge and worship of God has been a staple of African life.¹ To Africans, religion is a cultural heritage that shapes their culture, socioeconomic life, and political life. Traditional African societies had a hierarchy of beings, with God at the top, followed by divinities, spirits, the living dead, human beings, animals, plants, and inanimate beings.² They acknowledged the Supreme Being as the eternal Being who is the source of life and the sustainer of the universe.³ However, they perceived a distance between them and the Supreme Being; therefore, they used divinities and ancestors as intermediaries between them and the Supreme Being.⁴ Worship is deeply rooted in human existence. It cuts across ethnicities and can be traced back to ancient generations. Arguably, every human knowingly or unknowingly engages in some form of worship. For instance, in Africa, worship is engrained in the peoples' way of life. In many African societies, communities worship the Supreme Being and honour their elders who have died (ancestors).

Mbiti describes ancestors as the dead departed who are physically dead but are still believed to be alive in the memory of the living.⁵ Further, Mbiti argues that there are “the living dead” – good spirits of those departed who are recently dead but are perceived as still related to the living in the community. According to Ikyoive, ancestors are considered “those dead persons who, due to their powers or role, transit to the world of the dead and transform into deities to commune with the living.”⁶ Therefore, the ancestors are highly respected and seem to set rules and regulations for the living. They are also much interested in running the day-to-day life of their children.⁷ Therefore, members of African communities saw the need to maintain a good relationship with them.

1. Mbiti, John S., *Introduction to African Religions*, London, Heinemann, 1975, 152.

2. Mbiti, 152

3. Ekeke, Emeka C., and Chike A. Ekeopara. “God, Divinities and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Ontology.” *American Journal Of Social And Management Sciences* 1, no. 2 (2010), 209.

4. Yusufu Turaki, “Christianity and African gods: A method in theology”, *Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir Christelike Hoër Onderwys*, (1999), 162.

5. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religions*.

6. Tertsea Ikyoive, “Ancestors, Elders and Power in Traditional African Societies: Ogunyemi’s The Vow and the Question of Suicide,” *Journal of Pan African Studies* 10, no. 7 (September 2017): 94.

7. Abraham Olutoye Odeleye, “Comparative Ethical Analysis of Sin in African Traditional Religion and Christianity,” *International Journal of Innovative Social Sciences & Humanities Research* 8, no. 2 (June 2020):

8.



Ancestral veneration is a richly debated field in light of biblical teaching of worship. The crux of the matter has been whether veneration of ancestors amount to worship, which would constitute idolatry from the biblical perspective. Some have argued that the way ancestors were esteemed and the activities involved in the veneration of ancestors in traditional African societies would constitute worship.⁸ In contrast, others opine that ancestors are only venerated and not worshipped as gods.⁹ Additionally, Mbiti disagrees with those who believe that giving offerings and sacrifices to ancestral spirits is a way of worshipping them. Instead, he says these offerings and sacrifices symbolise remembrance, communion, and fellowship.¹⁰ This paper addresses whether Africans worship or venerate ancestors. Determining this is critical because, as Afeke and Vester say, some Africans have not yet abandoned the beliefs and practices of their traditional religions, while some have Christianized this concept.¹¹ Therefore, this article analyses the meaning of worship to determine whether respect for ancestors in the African tradition equals worship as taught in the Bible. The paper defines worship in biblical and African traditions to better understand the concept of worship.

Perspectives on Ancestors

African Perspective of the Ancestors

Ancestors are the heroes and heroines of different tribes who have died and are believed to have acquired extra-human powers in their afterlife, which enables them to intervene in the lives of the living members of society.¹² Turaki says members of the African community consist of the unborn living – those who are about to be born –; the living, and the living dead (those who have died but are still remembered by the living).¹³ Mbiti distinguishes between ancestors and the living dead; he says that ancestors are the dead departed who are physically

8. Afeke, B., and Verster, P.. "Christianisation of Ancestor Veneration within African Traditional Religions: An Evaluation" *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* [Online], Volume 38 Number 1 (1 August 2004).

9. Ushe Mike Ushe, "God, Divinities, and Ancestors in African Traditional Religious Thought", *Igwebuikwe: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities* Vol. 3 No 4, (June 2017).

10. Mbiti, *Introduction to African religions*, 152.

11. Afeke, B., and Verster, P.. "Christianisation of Ancestor Veneration within African traditional religions: An evaluation."

12. Ekpatt, AniediAbasi Okon. "Concepts of God, Divinities, Ancestors, and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Thought: Conceptual Analysis." In *Phenomenological Approaches to Religion and Spirituality*, edited by Essien D. Essien, 18-43. Hershey, PA: IGI Global, (2021), 18-43.

13. Turaki, "Christianity and African gods: A Method in Theology."



dead but are still believed to be alive in the memory of the living.¹⁴ Further, he describes the living dead as good spirits of those departed who are recently dead but are perceived as still related to the living in the community. These living dead have not attained the highest spiritual standard to qualify them as ancestors. Ushe adds that there are specific qualifications that one ought to have met to become an ancestor in an African society. They include: the person must have died “a good death,” must have lived to old age, must have been given befitting burial rites, must have been married and had children, and must have lived a good life with acceptable moral standards worthy of emulation.¹⁵ Ancestral spirits play a vital role in African society, and through proper burial rites, and remembrance of their names, their existence in the afterlife is assured.¹⁶ The ancestors are considered to assume power and authority that place them in a central position with the ability to interfere with the lives of the living. That’s why the living strive to offer sacrifices to appease their ancestors because neglect attracts punishment from the ancestors. Ancestors, or the living dead, are believed to be intermediaries between the Supreme Being and the living. The Yoruba people of Nigeria believe that the death of a person is not their end; some of the people join the realm of their ancestors after they die. The position of the ancestors is reserved for a few in the community, like kings, elders, and kinsmen, primarily those who served the community well.¹⁷

Similarly, the Agikuyu people of central Kenya believe in God and ancestors, whom they call *ngomi*, meaning those who have slept (died).¹⁸ As such, *ngomi* are highly respected and considered high-ranking in the community. This reverence is shown by occasionally offering sacrifices and rituals to thank them for their protection.¹⁹ Likewise, the Cameroonian people believe that people don’t die, but instead, they transit to be ancestors who continue to act within their community. The ancestors are responsible for punishing the wrongdoers, rewarding the upright, and assisting with harvest and fertility.²⁰

14. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religions*.

15. Ushe, 171.

16. Turaki, “Christianity and African gods: A Method in Theology”

17. Ikoye, “Ancestors, Elders and Power in Traditional African Societies,” 94–95.

18. Kamuyu-Wa-Kang’ethe, “African Response to Christianity: A Case Study of the Agikuyu of Central Kenya,” *Missiology* 16, no. 1 (January 1988): 29.

19. Wangari Muoria-Sal et al., *Writing for Kenya: The Life and Works of Henry Muoria* (Bielefeld, GERMANY: BRILL, 2009), 388, accessed April 24, 2023, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aiu/detail.action?docID=467704>.

20. Ross Kane, “Communion of Ancestors: From Africa, a Christian Case for Reverencing the Dead,” *The Christian Century*, 135, no. 8 (April 11, 2018): 30.



Although the above examples may not be exhaustive, they indicate that ancestors are recognised and highly regarded across different African societies. Also, ancestors are never referred to as dead (as no longer there) but are considered part of the living. They are intermediaries between the living and the supreme Being. Community elders are the immediate contact persons to the ancestors who, in turn, communicate with the supreme Being.²¹ The reverence for the ancestors and how the respect is expressed differs from one community to another.

In summary, the African perspective of ancestors is that they are members of the society who exist in the spiritual world and act as intermediaries between the living and the Supreme Being. We have highlighted that there is a clear-cut criterion by which a person becomes an ancestor after death. Therefore, not everyone who dies in the African society becomes an ancestor. However, those who qualify to become ancestors are esteemed in society, and the living offer sacrifices to appease them since neglecting them is punishable. Given that these ancestors met the moral standards of society while alive, in their death, they are believed to be in good spirits and remembered, respected, and honoured.

The Biblical View of Ancestors

The Old Testament is rife with the teachings of the Israelites' great reverence for their fathers. In Deuteronomy 26:7, God is called the "God of our fathers." The call of Abraham by God, and the promise to make him the father of many descendants, present Abraham as an ancestor in Israel. Isaac and Jacob continued this promise and position. God is called the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and has been known this way for many generations. During the call of Moses, God introduces Himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exod 3:5). At the same time, the Bible contains narrations of other people who were chosen by God and who possessed certain characters who then proceeded to become esteemed in Israel while they were alive and even in their death—for instance, Noah, Moses, and David, among others. Israelites prayed to God while invoking these ancestors.

The New Testament presents the genealogy of Jesus Christ (Matt 1:17; Luke 3:23-38), which traces Jesus' family tree from the ancestors. Jesus is presented as a Saviour who

21. Daniel Kasomo, "An Investigation of Sin and Evil in African Cosmology," *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 1, no. 8 (December 2009): 153.



stems from the House of David as God swore to Abraham (Luke 1:68). There are narrations in the New Testament which shows the link of ancestry from the Old Testament, which suggests a connection between the living and the dead. Hebrews 11 mentions the heroes of faith (Israelites' ancestors) and their actions. Verse 4 indicates that Abel still speaks even though he is dead. These ancestors are shown to have had a strong relationship with God and achieved extraordinary quests like conquering kingdoms, shutting the mouth of lions, escaping the edge of the sword, and administering justice (Heb 11: 33-35). Jesus Christ could be regarded as the great ancestor who saved and delivered his people from evil. He was a Mediator between the people and God while alive on earth and continues to do so even after His resurrection and ascension.

In both the biblical and African traditional perspectives, acknowledgement of the existence of humans after death exists. However, they carry different meanings. From the African perspective, the dead are said to be sleeping or, in the biblical context resting (2 Sam 7:12, 1 Kgs 1:21, 1 Thess 4:14, 2 Kgs 21:18). In contrast, from the biblical point of view, there is no relationship between the living and the dead (Eccl 9:5, Isa 26:14). The term reward as used in Ecclesiastes 9:5 perhaps means the benefits of life that the dead cannot partake.²² Wesley notes that "they are dead" in Isaiah 26:14 means the mighty men, kings, and princes of the people who have died. He further states that they will never come back to molest people.²³ It is considered a sin to commune/consult with the departed souls. Therefore, the dead are not permitted to be involved with any affairs of the living. Unlike in the African culture where the dead becomes mediators, Christians believe that when someone dies, they wait for judgment (Heb 9:27). The Bible recognises the ancestors, and, on many occasions, you will find God blessings His people based on the covenant He had with the fallen ancestors (Deut 7:12, 6:23, Josh 1:6, 1 Kgs 8:34, Prov 22:28), but does not elevate them to the point of receiving human worship or adoration.

22. John H. Walton, Victor H Matthews, and Mark W Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary- Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 574.

23. John Wesley, *Wesley's Notes on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.), 1503.



Understanding Worship

Worship can be defined as devotion to a deity or a feeling of profound love, admiration, or adoration for something or someone.²⁴ Easton describes worship as “homage rendered to God which it is sinful (idolatry) to render to any created being (Exod 34:14:14; Isa 2:8).”²⁵ According to Witvliet, “worship” can refer to the complex of Christian communal liturgical actions. These actions may include funerals, weddings, daily prayers, baptisms, preaching, and prayer services.²⁶ In addition, Wolterstorff describes worship as deep love and respect (adoration) to a deity/God for who he is and what he is doing.²⁷ Worship can be expressed differently, like prostrating, showing reverence and awe, serving and honouring, sacrificing, giving, or paying homage.²⁸ Mooney agrees that authentic worship manifests in both adoration and actions. He further notes that worship involves attitude, activities, and ethics.²⁹ Therefore, worship is a lifestyle that can be expressed in different actions depending on whom or what you worship. In the Old Testament, God instructed His people on how, when, and whosoever to worship him (Exod 20:3). From the biblical perspective, worshipping any other god is idolatry. Worship in the African context is not construed in these terms. Performing rituals to divinities and ancestors merely symbolises fellowship since the ancestors and divinities are taken as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and the living.

Worship in Biblical Perspective

Christian worship is our whole life’s response to God’s self-revelation, remembering God’s doings through actions and expressions. As mentioned above, worship entails various activities focusing on acknowledging God. Different activities can be traced within the Bible, from the Old Testament to the New Testament, that expressed worship. For instance, singing hymns or songs is one of the oldest forms of expressing adoration to God recorded in the Bible. Hymns declare God’s deeds; different people sang hymns to tell of the goodness of

24. John D. Witvliet, “Pedagogical Reflections on Changing Uses of the Term ‘Worship,’” *Worship*, 95 (January 2021): 4–11.

25. M. G. Easton, “Easton’s Bible Dictionary” (Albany: AGES Software, 1997), 1203.

26. Witvliet, “Pedagogical Reflections on Changing Uses of the Term ‘Worship.’”

27. Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Reformed Worship: What Has It Been and Should It Continue So?” *Worship* 89, no. 3 (2015): 194–213.

28. Kobo Emmanuel, “Worship: A Biblical Perspective,” (February 13, 2020): 4.

29. D Jeffrey (David Jeffrey) Mooney, “Toward a Holistic Biblical Theology of Christian Worship,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, 63, no. 1 (2020): 54.



Yahweh. The main point is not to emphasise the works but to show the effects of God’s goodness on His people.³⁰ For instance, a hymn of praise was sung after the Red Sea had given way for the Israelites (Exod 15:1–21). They show Yahweh’s superiority over all other powers in the world (Exod 15:21). On some occasions, the people would gather, and a leader would sing hymns. At the same time, the congregation responds in unison in agreement with the leader (Ps 136).

Still, in the New Testament, we find the singing of hymns in worship of God. For instance, the disciples – Paul and Silas – sang hymns while in prison (Acts 16:25). Paul also encourages his audiences to sing hymns, songs, psalms, and music to the Lord as a way of encouraging one another and praising God (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16). Perhaps, telling the goodness of the Lord is the prominent form of worship in Christian liturgy. Worship is a matter of the heart, but vocalising what the meditations of the heart through music help to express our worship of God. Kelman observes that music is not a private affair, but as we gather, we express our gratitude through music.³¹

Worship can be offered in different ways. First, offering sacrifices was one of the ways of showing adoration, admiration, and reverence for God, especially in the Old Testament. The Jews had different sacrifices and offerings they offered as a requirement or a way of showing their adoration to God. Sacrifices were regarded as gifts to God.³² Different objects/items were offered as offerings depending on the giver’s ability or the purpose of giving. These items include doves/birds, bulls, lambs, goats, gold, silvers, food, clothes, and drinks, among other items (Num 6:14, 28:30, 29:11, Lev 1:14–17, Ex 12:35–36, Matt 2:1–12). Worship in the Ancient Near East involved human sacrifices while seeking the intervention of the supernatural (2 Kgs 3:27).³³ Apostle Paul emphasises giving oneself as a sacrifice (Rom 12:1–2). He considered himself as poured out as a drink offering (Phil 1:17). In the Apostolic

30. Dirk J. Human et al., *Psalms and Liturgy* (London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005), 90, accessed April 24, 2023, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aiu/detail.action?docID=436164>.

31. Ari Y. Kelman, *Shout to the Lord: Making Worship Music in Evangelical America* (New York, United States: New York University Press, 2018), 91, accessed April 24, 2023, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aiu/detail.action?docID=5103967>.

32. Liane Marquis Feldman, “The Idea and Study of Sacrifice in Ancient Israel,” *Religion Compass* 14, no. 12 (December 2020): 4.

33. Edward Lipiński, “‘Shall I Offer My Eldest Son?’ (Mi. 6:7),” *The Biblical Annals*, 5, no. 1 (March 2015): 96.



church, bringing gifts during worship sessions (1 Cor 12) was part of worship in the early church.³⁴

The second way of rendering worship is by serving God. Scripture shows that God asked His people to worship and serve Him only. From a biblical perspective, the act of dedicated service also expresses worship to the King (Deut 6:13, 8:19; 1 Sam 7:3-4; Luke 4:8). Serving other gods, like the gods of Baal, was considered as worshipping them and abandoning the true God. Tuttle observes that out of 165 Bible verses containing the word “worship,” twenty-six refer to “serving” the one who is worshipped.³⁵ Therefore, there is a very tight connection between worship and service. Offering devoted service to a deity or something can amount to worship, knowingly or unknowingly.

Third, worship can be rendered through devotion to teachings, fellowship, prayer, and breaking bread. From the Apostolic Church in Acts 2:42-47, the worshippers devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teachings, fellowship, prayer, and breaking the bread. Worshipping, therefore, can be expressed through devotion to and following particular teachings. Ascribing to wrong teachings, like the teachings of Nicolaitans and teachings of Balaam, was considered as deviating from the true gospel (Rev 2:6,14-15). Patterson observes that idol worship is not only confined to golden calves.³⁶ Therefore, following certain teachings and devoting oneself to the teachings can be termed as worshipping whatsoever the teachings highly regard.

The fourth aspect of worship involves fellowshiping with one another. This involves people who ascribe to the same ideology gathering together to perform certain activities as corporate worship to God. Both the Old and Testament encourage gatherings of the saints to offer worship or seek God’s intervention (Joel 1:14; Heb 10:25). During these gatherings, prayers are offered to God. Prayer plays a role in communing with God; therefore, prayer is part of the liturgy in every worship session.³⁷

Lastly, dancing is another act that expresses adoration and admiration in the Bible (Exod 15:20-21). The Psalmist calls the audience to praise God with a dance (Ps 30:11,

34. Don Wesley Tuttle, “A Strategy for Identifying the Necessary Elements of a Worship Studies Program,” Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 1999), 9.

35. Tuttle, “A Strategy for Identifying the Necessary Elements of a Worship Studies Program,” 19.

36. Richard B Patterson, “Other Gods: Idol Worship Is Not Confined to Golden Calves,” *America Magazine* 208, no. 13 (April 22, 2013): 21.

37. Alkiviadis C. Calivas, “The Liturgy: The Church’s Faith in Motion,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 49, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter //Fall/Winter2004 2004): 225.



143:3, 150:4). King David also offered a dance to worship God after successfully returning the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:14-22). Wellford identifies dancing as an integral part of worship, noting that some sacred dances are offered to gods or spirits.³⁸ In essence, biblical worship is monotheistic. Despite many forms of worship, they are all done to only one God. The church is a community of saints comprising believers in Christ who are living and dead. Those who have gone ahead of us are never worshipped, for God alone is the object of worship.

Worship in African Tradition Religion

According to Mbiti, Africans believe in a hierarchy of beings, with God at the top, followed by divinities, spirits, the living dead, human beings, animals, plants, and inanimate beings.³⁹ African societies believe in the existence of a supreme being – the eternal Being, the creator, and the source of life.⁴⁰ Mbiti argues that missionaries did not introduce God to Africans; rather, Africans have always known and worshipped God.⁴¹ He argues that although African's knowledge of God is undocumented in any sacred book, it is expressed in proverbs, prayers, names, myths, religious ceremonies, and stories.⁴² According to Adedeji, worship in African traditional religion entails ancestors, traditional beliefs, social values, rituals, customs, divinities, death, and salvation. Africans believe that God is embedded in culture, and they offer worship to God by following cultural practices.⁴³ We can observe that worship is a day-to-day lifestyle in African culture.

Moreover, worship in African settings is considered a response to God after revealing Himself to humans in different forms. The Self-revelation nature of God creates a relationship between God and humans, calling for a response commonly referred to as religion.⁴⁴ Africans believe they worship one God, though the name differs from one community or language to another. He is a unique God with power that no other can equal; unlike Christian teachings

38. Jane C. Wellford, *Moving Liturgy: Dance in Christian Worship, A Step-by-Step Guide*, (Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications, 2016), <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.libraryaiu.remotexs.co/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1339954&site=ehost-live>.

39. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religions*.

40. Ushe, "God, divinities, and ancestors in African traditional religious thought," 155-156.

41. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religions*.

42. Ibid., *Introduction to African Religions*.

43. Adebisi G. M. Adedeji, "African Concept of God, Evil and Salvation in African Traditional Religion (Atr): Critique from Cultural View Point," *Journal of Global Intelligence & Policy*, 5, no. 9 (Winter 2012): 45, 47.

44. Emeka C. Ekeke and Chike A. Ekeopara, "God, Divinities and Spirits in African Traditional Religious Ontology," *American Journal Of Social And Management Sciences* 1, no. 2 (2010): 210.



that teach that Jesus is the only mediator between God and man, in African traditional religion, divinities and ancestors serve as mediators and messengers between God and his creations.⁴⁵

Prayers are considered a way of worship and communing with God in African Traditional Religion. The Agikuyu community prayed for God on different occasions, mainly under a *Mugumo* tree (strangler fig tree – considered sacred). The head of every household also prayed every morning, seeking the well-being of his family.⁴⁶ The worship in African religion also involved offering sacrifices and offerings as they sought God’s intervention in different situations.⁴⁷ For instance, the Agikuyu communities offered gifts, favours, and lamb meat, among other items, under a *Mugumo* tree to their God through the elders.⁴⁸

Dancing is another form of worship in African culture, similar to the biblical perspective mentioned earlier. Different African communities have ways of dancing; some styles are considered sacred and help navigate to the spiritual realm and commune with God. While analysing whether a popular dance in Kinshasa was to God or the devil, Pype note that the goal of the dance is to bring the dancer into a highly charged bodily and spiritual state that can lead to loss of control.⁴⁹ Mostly the dancing in African tradition was on a beat from drums that were considered to summon people and gods for communion. The drumming was considered a way of appeasing the gods and inviting them.⁵⁰

Ultimately, we can see that almost all forms of worship from the Christian perspective also apply to African Traditional Religion. These include sacrifices/offerings, songs, dancing, prayers, gatherings, service, and following certain teachings. Nevertheless, the difference comes in the access to God, as Ukpong observes – sacrifices in African traditional religion are not offered directly to God but through intermediaries like ancestors and divinities.⁵¹ As

45. Adedeji, “African Concept of God, Evil and Salvation in African Traditional Religion (Atr),” 48.

46. Hannah Wangeci Kinoti, *African Ethics: Gikūyū Traditional Morality* (Boston, United States: Brill, 2010), 29, accessed April 25, 2023, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/aiu/detail.action?docID=587914>.

47. J Akinyele Omoyajowo, “Human Destiny, Personal Rites and Sacrifices in African Traditional Religion,” *The Journal of Religious Thought*, 30, no. 1 (1973): 8.

48. Matthew M. Karangi, “Revisiting the Roots of Gikuyu Culture through the Sacred Mugumo Tree,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 20, no. 1 (June 2008): 121.

49. Katrien Pype, “Dancing for God or the Devil: Pentecostal Discourse on Popular Dance in Kinshasa,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 36, no. 3–4 (2006): 296.

50. Jon Michael Spencer, “Rhythm in Black Religion of the African Diaspora,” *Journal of Religious Thought*, 44, no. 2 (Winter/Spring //Winter/Spring88 1988): 68.

51. Justin S Ukpong, “The Problem of God and Sacrifice in African Traditional Religion,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 14, no. 3 (1983): 194.



such, we can conclude that African Traditional Religion and Christianity sharply differ at the point of worship. Ancestors are believed to be in a state of personal immortality⁵² which explains the acts of respecting them, like giving them portions of food, pouring libations, and following their instructions. Ushe admits there is no clear demarcation between the supreme Being, the divinities, and ancestors.⁵³ Worship in Traditional African Religions is polytheistic; different deities are acknowledged and honoured differently.

Ancestors Veneration or Worship?

This paper attempts to answer whether Africans' great respect (veneration) for their ancestors is worshipping them. Worship is a complex subject. It can be understood by breaking down the activities involved in worship. So far, the paper has analysed different activities from African and biblical perspectives that can be recognised as worship. Veneration of ancestors made the early missionaries to central Kenya accuse the Agikuyu people that they believed in more than one God.⁵⁴

First, African religion recognises ancestors' role as intermediaries who link the living with the supreme Being. Therefore, the living prays and communes with their ancestors so that they can have peace within their land. As noted earlier, prayer is one of the ways to express adoration to a supreme Being. On the contrary, Christian teaching directs the faithful to let their prayers and supplication be known to God (Phil 4:6). Believers are required to access the throne of God through the blood of Jesus (Heb 10:19) and pray in the name of Jesus (John 16:24).

The African religion also encourages sacrificing and offering to the ancestors to appease them. When a calamity hits a region, or there is an unusual occurrence, it was supposed that the ancestors were unhappy, and it was required to offer necessary sacrifices.⁵⁵ The Agikuyu people typically pour drinks (libation) to appease the ancestors before drinking,⁵⁶ which is common in northwest Cameroon's Obang culture. Esoh observes that

52. Ushe Mike Ushe, "God, divinities, and ancestors in African traditional religious thought", 170.

53. *Ibid.*, 170.

54. Kamuyu-Wa-Kang'ethe, "African Response to Christianity," 29.

55. Kasomo, "An Investigation of Sin and Evil in African Cosmology," 152.

56. Jomo Kenyatta, "Kikuyu Religion, Ancestor-Worship, and Sacrificial Practices," *Africa Journal of the International African Institute*, 10, no. 3 (1937): 308.



libation is a religious worship of the dead, spirit, ancestors, and idols.⁵⁷ Giving sacrifices and offerings is a form of worship, and therefore offering sacrifices to spirits and seeking intervention from the dead is contrary to biblical teaching (Exod 20:3, 1 Sam 28; 1 Cor 8).

Devotion to teaching is also a form of expressing adoration to a supreme being, as identified in the biblical perspective of worship. The Kikuyu traditionalists have recently urged its people to return to their indigenous values,⁵⁸ which include honouring the ancestors by offering sacrifices to them under the *Mugumo* tree and through libation. Ascribing such teachings contrary to biblical teaching can be considered a way of worship (Rev 2:6, 14–15).

Lastly, worship is expressed through songs and dancing to particular rhythms. In most African cultural settings, the most effective way of reaching out to ancestors is through music and dances. For instance, among the Bapedi people of South Africa, songs and dancing would invite the presence of the spirit of ancestors for worship and communion.⁵⁹ Some African drum rhythms and dancing were conducted at particular seasons of the year to appease the ancestors.

Arguments have been raised against the notion that the veneration of ancestors is ancestral worship. Some have argued that ancestors are not worshipped as gods; instead, they are honoured as members of the society with higher status and power.⁶⁰ Mbiti argues that what is termed as ‘ancestral worship’ by those outside Africa is not worship at all. Instead, giving food and drink to the ancestral spirits is only a symbol of fellowship, communion, and remembrance.⁶¹ However, as Ushe says, there is no clear demarcation between the supreme Being, the divinities, and the ancestors.⁶² Although many Africans acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being, he seems distant and uninvolved in their daily activities. It is the ancestors who seem to be involved in their everyday life.

There have been arguments that ancestor veneration can be integrated into Christianity because it is not ancestral worship but respect for ancestors. Further, the Old Testament

57. Felix K. Esoh and Chammah J. Kaunda, “Religio-Cultural Heritage of Libation, Memory and Obang Cultural History, Northwest Cameroon,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 76, no. 1 (January 2020): 4.

58. Grace Nyatugah Wamue, “Revisiting Our Indigenous Shrines through Mungiki,” *African Affairs*, 100, no. 400 (July 2001): 461.

59. Morakeng E.K. Lebaka, “The Art of Establishing and Maintaining Contact with Ancestors: A Study of Bapedi Tradition,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 74, no. 1 (January 2018): 1.

60. Ushe Mike Ushe, “God, Divinities, and Ancestors in African Traditional Religious Thought,” *An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 3 No 4, (June 2017).

61. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religions*, 152.

62. Ushe, “God, Divinities, and Ancestors in African Traditional Religious Thought.”



teaching of God’s dealings with people like Noah, Enoch, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David, among others, validates the theology of ancestors but with limited application. Some have argued that the Old Testament is rife with the teachings of Israelites having great reverence for their fathers. However, in Deuteronomy 18:9–11, God warned the Israelites that they should not engage in certain practices the Canaanites practised, like consulting mediums and consulting the dead. According to Afeke and Vester,⁶³ sound biblical understanding would not allow ancestor veneration, but respect for them is accepted. Veneration of ancestors was done for, among other reasons, to show gratitude for answered prayer, for good fortune, and to avoid misfortunes. M’Fundisi Holloway argues that these are the same reasons why Africans worship God.⁶⁴ When ancestors are understood as deities and become the objects of worship, this turns from veneration to worship.

Conclusion

This paper examined the concept of ancestors veneration from both the traditional African and biblical perspectives. In the traditional African view, Ancestors were respectable people with good moral standing in society while alive. Although they have died, they continue to exist in society through the memory of the living. In their intermediary role, they are involved in the daily activities of the living and receive offerings, sacrifices, and prayers.

Contrastingly, in the Bible, ancestors were men with a special relationship with God and great social responsibility for the people while they were alive. Due to the nature of the relationship they had with God, they continue to be revered even after their death. However, not in their own right, but based on their relationship with God. For instance, Israel’s founding fathers or ancestors do not receive any offerings, sacrifices or worship. Biblical worship is rendering reverence to God for who He is and his doings. It should be directed to God alone, the creator, and not to His creation. Worshipping the creation (or any other thing) translates to idolatry. Worship of God is rendered in different ways, including music, songs, dance, offering sacrifices, serving God, devotion, and fellowship with one another.

63. Afeke and Vester, “Christianization of Ancestor Veneration within African Traditional Religions.”

64. Naar M’fundisi-Holloway, “When Pentecostalism Meet African Indigenous Religions: Conflict, Compromise and Incorporation. In Afolayan, Adeshina; Yacob-Haliso, Olajumoke; Falola, Toyin (2018). *Pentecostalism and Politics in Africa || When Pentecostalism Meets African Indigenous Religions: Conflict, Compromise, or Incorporation?* 10.1007/978-3-319-74911-2(Chapter 5), 87–100.



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