

**A METAPHYSICAL UNDERSTANDING OF ANCESTRAL WORSHIP IN YORUBA THOUGHT
SYSTEM: A PHILOSOPHICAL EXPOSITION**

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Abstract

The belief in the existence of ancestors is predominant in African Traditional Thought. This belief further emphasizes the ontological relationship and interconnectedness between the physical and the spiritual worlds within African thought systems. It is held that ancestors, although dead in the physical world, continue to exist in the spiritual realm and possess the power to influence or interfere in the affairs of the living. Hence, John Mbiti refers to ancestors in African spirituality as the “living-dead.” This paper therefore attempts to examine certain conceptual and linguistic clarifications concerning the subject of ancestral worship or veneration. Using the expository and critical methods of philosophizing, the study explores the practices of ancestral worship or veneration (as the case may be) within African traditional thought. The paper also examines not only the requirements for ancestorhood but, more importantly, the categories of ancestors in African ontology. The study concludes that the term ancestral worship is not entirely misleading because, based on the categories of ancestorhood, some ancestors are indeed worshipped while others are venerated.

Keywords: Ancestor, Worship, Veneration, Deities, Rituals, Sacrifices

Introduction

Ancestor worship has attracted the enduring interest of scholars in many areas of the study of religion and philosophy. In the late nineteenth century, it was identified as the most basic form of all religion, and subsequent studies of the subject in specific areas have provided a stimulating point of access to related problems of religion, philosophy, society, and culture. The worship of ancestors is closely linked to cosmology and worldview, to ideas of the soul and the afterlife, and to a society's regulation of inheritance and succession.¹

However, in this work, we shall discuss the ontology of ancestors in the Yoruba thought system, ancestral rites and worship; we shall deal with the metaphysical issues in ancestral worship or veneration in Yoruba culture and also raise some philosophical questions. Many Yoruba people have ancestral shrines where they can go and have communion and communication with the ancestors, to beg for aid, to thank them for past gifts, to applaud for a wrong done so that they may not suffer penalties, to enter into a covenant with them, and to ask for all kinds of material benefits.

Ancestors in Yoruba Ontology

Ancestors in Yoruba 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 the 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 Yoruba religious thought and practice. It is believed that the status of ancestor-hood is only conferred on those who contributed massively to the welfare of society, or those who have made sacrifices in one way or another for the society in which they lived during their lifetime. A person without descendants cannot become an ancestor, and in order to achieve ancestor-hood, proper burial, with rites appropriate to the person's status, is necessary. After an interval following death, a deceased person who becomes an ancestor is no longer perceived as an individual. Personal characteristics disappear from the awareness of the living, and only the value of the ancestor as a moral exemplar remains. Ancestors are believed to be capable of intervening in human affairs, but only in the defined area of their authority, that is, among their descendants. According to Adelumo Dopamu, the conditions for the status of ancestor-hood amongst the Yoruba, he claims that: “Within the African context, the Yoruba inclusive, the living dead are the ancestors, not every dead person becomes an ancestor.”² According to Meyer Fortes, “Strictly

¹Lucas, J. O. 1948. *The Religion of the Yoruba*, Lagos C.M.S. p. 216

²Dopamu, P. A. 2006. “Change and Continuity: The Yoruba 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. p. 11.

speaking, therefore, a person who leaves no descendants cannot become an ancestor spirit.”³ For Dopamu, “Children who die cannot become ancestors since they do not achieve parenthood.”⁴

However, the dead are believed to be everywhere, at any time; they continue to live, but in another kind of existence. The reality of their existence constitutes one of the most important features of Yoruba traditional religion. The ancestors are always respected and held in high esteem. In fact, after God, who is the final authority in all matters, the one who is pre-eminent in all things, the ancestors come next in importance. All other spiritual beings may be spoken ill of or even ridiculed on occasion, but God and the ancestors are always held in awe. The ancestors, who once lived in human society, now live in the land of the spirits if they had fulfilled certain conditions. A person’s conduct in this world and the manner of his death determine his entry into the ranks of the revered group of ancestors who form the backbone of our societies. In Yoruba land, a person who dies childless is not acknowledged as an ancestor. To become an ancestor, one must also have died a good death, that is, one’s death must not have been due to accident, suicide, or any form of violence, and one’s death must not also be caused by such “unclean” diseases as lunacy, dropsy, leprosy and epilepsy.⁵ Why are the ancestors so revered? In conformity with Yoruba culture, in which old age has a touch of venerability, the ancestors are respected because they are our elders and our predecessors who have trodden the path of life which we, the living, are now treading. It is also believed that the ancestors enter into a spiritual state of existence after death. They have their feet planted in both the world of the living and the world of the spirits. Therefore, they know more than the living and are consequently accorded great respect. It is also widely believed that the ancestors live very close to God. However, the Yoruba ancestors act as friends at court to intervene between man and the Supreme Being and to get prayers and petitions answered more quickly and effectively. It is from this belief of the close relationship between God and the ancestors that libation, the specialised method of communicating with the ancestors, originated; through libation, prayers are directed to the ancestors and ultimately to God.⁶

Libation may be offered with food and drink, for it is believed that the ancestors continue to live the same kind of life they led when they were on earth, and they require food and drink to sustain them, even in their spiritual state of existence. Hence, offerings are made to them either by individuals daily or by religious officials who perform on behalf of the entire society during festivals. Offerings may be made by individuals in several ways. An individual may pour a bit of water or drink on the ground before drinking in the belief that through this act, he is giving his ancestors the water or drink they need. In the same spirit, he may throw a morsel of food on the ground for his ancestors when he is eating. The dead do not sever their links with their kinsmen but continue to be members of their individual families, fulfilling their obligations as elders. Thus, they are considered active members of the families.⁷ The relationship between the dead and the living is symbiotic, as each group has a part to play for mutual benefit. The dead still show a keen interest in the affairs of the living, and the living, in turn, have a duty towards the dead. The Yorubas, therefore, have a supernatural dimension to it, for it is made up of the living and the dead, both of whom have specific roles to play in the maintenance of the family and the society in general.

Olawole, in his dissertation on *Art and Spirituality: The Ijumu Northeastern-Yoruba Egungun*, submitted at the University of Arizona, gives the example of the *Ogboni*, the “Yoruba goddess of the Earth, which the myth records to have been born and lived in the Yoruba City of Ile-Ife, where she is known by the name, *Abeni* (‘We begged or petitioned God before He gave us the baby girl’).”⁸ Olawole claims further that:

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

³Fortes, 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), p. 126; M.J. Field, *Religion and Medicine of the Gambia*, (London: Oxford University Press.) p. 16.

⁴Dopamu, A. 2006. p. 11.

⁵Kofi, A. O. 1978. *West Traditional Religion*, FEP international private limited, Jurong, Singapore

⁶*Ibid.* pp. 36-37

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸ Olawole, F. 2005. “Art and Spirituality: The IjumuNortheastern-Yoruba Egungun.” *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.

thunder and lightning deity, who was said to be the fourth *Alaafin* (king) of Oyo, the ancient capital city of the Old Yoruba Kingdom.⁹

However, Yoruba people believe that the ancestor is the dead who died a “good death,” who lived by example, and more importantly, reached a preferably old age before he or she dies, and did not die before his or her parents. This explains the Yoruba distinction between good and bad death.¹⁰ The bad death includes those caused by wicked divinities, untimely death, unfulfilled life, and shameful death.¹¹

For Olawole, ancestors can be classified into two: family ancestors (Obi) and generalised ancestors, which are also known as glorified ancestors (*Akoda, Esidale, Isese*). 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 move between their new abode in heaven (*Orun*) and earth (*Aye*) and regularly commune with their living children. Thus, the Yoruba saying: *oku olomo kii su* (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).”¹² The living children whom the ancestors have left behind thereby reciprocate the care of the ancestors by venerating or worshipping the ancestral spirits. The glorified ancestor/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 another, 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) support to be the first settlers of given societies. The Yoruba strongly believe that their spirits are so powerful that if accorded with befitting worship 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 worship, like that of the family ancestors, can also be in the 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.¹³

The glorified ancestors also have stories around them; these stories become legends, which are re-told at the family gatherings, and these particular ancestors have a power that transcends any particular family. But there’s also this second class of ancestors known as the “family ancestors”, and they are worshipped and honoured by a particular family. We often ask: “If someone in Yoruba has a loved one who dies, do they automatically become an ancestor?” How do you determine whether or not a person who dies is an ancestor? Well, certainly not everyone who dies becomes a family ancestor. According to the Yoruba, it is *Olodumare* who ultimately decides who achieves the status of family ancestor, and who just dwells in heaven or is judged and sent to a place of separation, which in Yoruba they call the *Orun-Apade* (meaning the place of potsherds).¹⁴

However, in the Yoruba traditional religious belief system, there are three requirements which are generally accepted among the Yoruba, which could entitle someone to become an ancestor. First, a person must live a good life. It’s the quality of their life which first commends them into the world of *Olodumare* and to the *Orisa*. Secondly, they must attain old age, because that is the surest sign that they have fulfilled their destiny. Age is highly revered amongst Africans in general and certainly amongst the Yoruba. And therefore it’s not a surprise that they revere those who live to an old age. So it would be very unusual for someone who died young to become an ancestor. Finally, thirdly, they must possess descendants who are willing to continue to perform ceremonies in their honour. So there must be people who are willing to acknowledge your role, and who you are and what you were involved in. So this becomes a very important aspect of the practicality of the whole thing. If you don’t have descendants who are willing to carry on your name and remember you and carry on these functions, ritual functions, then you won’t be an ancestor. Now because these family ancestors reside at the lowest level of the second tier, it is here that one begins to encounter real difficulty drawing a clear demarcation between what can

⁹*Ibid*

¹⁰ Awe, S. K. & Esan, O. D. 2026. Rethinking the Metaphysical Issues of Reincarnation (*Atunwa*) in Yoruba Thought System: A Philosophical Exposition. *Sophia*, Springer, p. 6. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11841-026-01125-w>; Awe, S. K. 2019. “Existential Concerns in Africa: The Yoruba Perspectives of Death and Suicide.” *Language, Literature and Culture*, vol. 2, no. 2, 44.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

¹² Olawole, F. 2005. p. 63

¹³ Idowu, E. B. 1962. *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, (London: Longman.), p. 119.

¹⁴ <https://www.biblicaltraining.org/library/tier-3-role-ancestors-yoruba-cosmology/essentials-african-traditional-religions/timothy-tennent>. Accessed on 6th April, 2025.

be called worship – what is truly worship – and what is just venerating or honoring someone who is an exalted mediator or a spiritual functionary but doesn't really have the full privileges of deity or divinity.¹⁵ For the foregoing discussion, it can be deduced that the belief in the existence and influence of ancestors is evident amongst the Yoruba people, and also that they attach some happenings or events to the influence of the ancestors.

Ancestral Rites and Worship in the Yoruba Thought System

The meaning of worship in ancestor worship is problematic. Ancestor worship takes a variety of forms in different areas, and its attitudinal characteristics vary accordingly. The ancestors may be regarded as possessing power equivalent to that of a deity and hence may be accorded cult status and considered able to influence society to the same extent as its deities. Typically, the conception of ancestors is strongly influenced by ideas of other supernatural beings in the society's religious system. Ancestors may be prayed to as having the power to grant boons or allay misfortune, but their effectiveness is regarded as naturally limited by the bonds of kinship. Thus, a member of a certain lineage prays only to the ancestors of that lineage; it would be regarded as nonsensical to pray to ancestors of any other lineage. Accordingly, members of other lineages are excluded from the ancestral rites of kinship groups of which they are not members. The religious attitudes involved in the worship of ancestors include filial piety, respect, sympathy, and sometimes, fear. The rites of death, including funerary and mortuary rituals, are regarded as falling within the purview of ancestor worship only when memorial rites beyond the period of death and disposition of the corpse are carried out as a regular function of a kinship group.¹⁶

The practice of ancestral worship amongst the Yoruba is founded on the belief in the continuation of life after death. The Yoruba believe 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, according to the Yoruba.”¹⁷ According to Awolalu and Dopamu, in Yoruba 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, accident and iron), those who die young and those who die childless.”¹⁸ Hence, death is being considered as that which terminates physical, visible and bodily existence, and opens another door, the door to a new life. ¹⁹The Yoruba hold the belief that “there is a state of existence, attainable by human beings, beyond the limits of our present mortal life spans.”²⁰ This point is well articulated by Dopamu, who argues:

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 judgment, reincarnation, the doctrine of the soul and punishment of moral offenders.²¹

As earlier adverted to in this work, 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 to his society.”²²

The Yoruba ancestral beliefs underscore the following fundamental ideas:

- (a) They indicate a strong belief in the continuation of life after death and that the dead continue to live and remain members of their families, clans and societies. Thus, human relationships cannot be broken, for not even death can cut off relations with one's relatives.
- (b) They also show that obligation, the basis of the Yoruba society, is unending; for it continues after death, through time. The dead are expected to protect and guard the living, and as it is believed that death increases one's powers, the dead can offer more help or assistance.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Idowu, E. B. 1962. *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, (London: Longman.) pp. 107- 111.

¹⁷Dopamu, P. A. 2006. p. 8.

¹⁸Awolalu, J. O. and Dopamu, P. A. 2005. *West African Tradition Religion*, (Ibadan: Macmillan Nigeria Publishers Ltd.), p. 301.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰Kainz, H. 1981. *The Philosophy of Man: A New Introduction to Some Perennial Issues* (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press.), p. 113.

²¹Dopamu, P. A. 2006, p. 10.

²²Fortes, M. 1961. p. 129.

- (c) The ancestral beliefs also give concrete expression to the Yoruba idea of community. For them, to be a human being is to belong to a community and to do so is to participate in the rituals, ceremonies and other activities of the community. The ancestors form the supernatural part of the human community in the world. Hence, this is an unseen part of the human community in the world. Hence, this unseen part of the community is never left out in any communal activity, and their participation is always sought. However, those who had bad deaths and those who, for various reasons, are not regarded as members of the revered group of ancestors, are outside the community.
- (d) The beliefs also bear clear evidence of the firm acceptance of the return of the dead. Reincarnation is therefore an accepted fact.
- (e) Lastly, the ancestral beliefs act as a form of social control by which the conduct of individuals is regulated. The constant reminder of the good deeds of the ancestors acts as a spur to good conduct on the part of the living, and the belief that the dead can punish those who violate traditionally sanctioned norms, more so, acts as a deterrent. Ancestral beliefs, therefore, represent a powerful source of moral sanction, for they affirm the values upon which the Yoruba society is based.²³

However, ceremonies involving the ancestors form an important part of the Yoruba traditional religion. Most of the festivals are centred on the periodic feeding of the ancestors, whose well-being is sought through such rites. The Yoruba attitude towards their ancestors further illustrates the idea that the dead continue to live in much the same way as they lived in the world, maintaining their essential selves. Thus, to the Yoruba, a dead father is still *Baba mi* (my father), and a dead mother *Iya mi* (my mother), and their obligations and functions remain the same as when they were living in the world. All their ancestors continue to be known by the titles of relationship they had borne while they were on earth. Thus, there is essentially an unbroken and uninterrupted relationship between the living and the dead.²⁴ Death, therefore, is only a transition from the material world to the spirit world, the inhabitants of which maintain their links with those in the material world. Hence, the Yoruba are fond of ascertaining the will of the ancestors through the oracle from time to time. This practice is most common with the *Ifa* oracle, which is consulted whenever there is a need to know the will of the ancestors or to make a decision affecting the entire community. 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.²⁵

Ancestral worship is common among Yoruba people, and it is a major belief in the traditional religion. This idea is dramatised in Yoruba culture by the existence of the ancestral cults of the *Egungun* and *Oro*, which are used as “instruments of discipline and execution”. The *Egungun* represent the spirits of dead ancestors who make periodic appearances to hold communication with the people. To represent the dead ancestors, the *Egungun* are dressed as masked figures who speak in a piping treble voice or nasal voice, and are regarded as visitors from heaven (*Ara-orun*). Only authorised persons may go near or touch the *Egungun*. It may appear during the farming season, which is from April to November in Yoruba land. The *Egungun* festival is held at the beginning of the planting season to ask for blessings on the crops that will be planted. On the eve of *Egungun*'s appearance, preparations are made in the sacred *Egungun* groove where sacrifices are offered to the dead. In an all-night ceremony, petitions for blessings and prosperity are addressed to them. The *Egungun* make their appearance in the town, playing drums and dancing and are led to the chief's house. During the week-long festivities, sacrifices of food are offered at the *Egungun* shrines as well as at the shrines of the gods. The dead are also remembered, and the reality of their continued existence is reaffirmed and vividly brought home to everyone.²⁶

The *Egungun* are believed to have the power to turn away any evil, misfortune or fear that may befall Yoruba people. In times of crisis, such as an outbreak of an epidemic or the failure of rains, the *Egungun* would sacrifice to the gods and ancestors so that they may watch over the community more vigilantly and protect it from harm. Barren women or people with lingering diseases may also go to the *Egungun* for help, and children who are believed to be *abiku* are also taken to the *Egungun*, who, the Yoruba believe, can prevent them from returning to the spirit world. The *Egungun* may also be called upon to discharge certain tasks which would benefit the community, especially when there is no one else to do it. An example of such a situation is when a king has become unbearingly despotic and flouts traditionally sanctioned customs. The *Egungun* would then take the despotic chief to the *igbale*, the *Egungun* grove, to discipline him. Persons who are regarded as a threat to the community may

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴Kofi, A. O. 1978. *West Traditional Religion*, pp. 47-48

²⁵*Ibid.* pp. 48-50

²⁶*Ibid.*

also be expelled by the *Egungun*. Oludare Olujubu, in his paper “The *Egungun* Cult”, states that during the political disturbances in 1965, the people of Esa-Odo near Ilesha invited a fierce *Egungun*, Inajogbo, to expel certain persons whom the people believed to be undesirable.²⁷ However, Oro is like *Egungun*, who also represents the ancestors. It may represent a specific ancestor, or it may symbolise all the ancestors in Yoruba land. The similarity between the *Egungun* and Oro is portrayed as twin brothers. Like the *Egungun*, whose voice is nasal, the voice of Oro is similar to the noise made by an angry bull. The Oro appears mostly in the grove at night. In the areas where the Oro may appear in masked form, the women are usually locked up and not allowed to see him.²⁸

Nevertheless, the idea that the Yoruba worship their ancestors is a controversial one amongst scholars. Some scholars like Simeon Ige have argued that the Yoruba 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.”²⁹ This point is also emphasised by Ushe Mike, who claims that the Africans venerate the ancestors but do not worship them. This is because the relationship that the living have with their ancestors is so important that life has no meaning without the ancestral presence and power.³⁰

However, he 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.”³¹ 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 Yoruba 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. John S. Mbiti claims that traditional Africans do not worship their ancestors, but what they do is to venerate them through certain practices of reverence.³²

Yoruba ancestral worship in the Diaspora, god-children are instructed in the proper way to set up an ancestor shrine in the privacy of their own home, the way in which worship is done traditionally in the god-parent's house. However, in Nigeria, in Yoruba land, personal ancestral shrines are not set up in the house, because there is no need for them. In traditional Yoruba households, the deceased is buried right inside the house in a grave beneath an earth floor or the deceased is laid to rest just outside the house near the front door. Therefore, when a person from a traditional Yoruba household wants to communicate or appease an ancestral spirit, all which is required is for the family member to go to the head of the grave, pray and do the necessary ritual ceremony.³³

Belief in ancestors supplies strong sanctions for public morality. They are the guardians of traditional morality. They, therefore, demand a high sense of respect for the traditional law and custom. The living must have lived as they lived. It is believed that just as the living parents have the power to punish disobedience in the youth or dereliction of filial duties, so also the neglected or offended ancestors can punish their offspring for moral offences, and they can bring disaster upon the whole family. Thus, murder, sorcery, witchcraft, stealing, adultery, bearing false witness, taking false oath, hatred, incest and other evils are all condemned and punished by the ancestors. Hence, many West African peoples, including the Yoruba, have ancestral shrines where they can go and have communion and communication with the ancestors, to beg for aid, to thank them for past gifts, to applause for a wrong done so that they may not suffer penalties, to enter into covenant with them, and to ask for all kinds of material benefits.³⁴

The study of ancestor worship involves several different metaphysical questions. How are the ancestors viewed in relation to their descendants? Is ancestor worship in some sense a reflection of actual relations between fathers

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹Ige, S. 2006. p. 29

³⁰Ushe, U. 2017. “God, Divinities and Ancestors in African Traditional Religious Thought.” *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities Vol. 3 No 4*, p. 175.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²Mbiti, J. O. 1970. *Concept of God in Africa*, S.P.C. K., London, p. 230

³³<http://www.ileorunmilashrineinc.org/index.php/articles/75-praising-the-ancestors>. Accessed on 9th April, 2025.

³⁴Awolalu, J. O. and Dopamu, P. A. 1979. *West African Tradition Religion*, (Onibonjo Press Book Industries (NIG) Ltd.), pp. 276-277.

and sons? In what circumstances are the ancestors viewed as capable of harming their descendants, and is the ancestors' benevolence or malevolence linked to descendants' sense of guilt toward them? What is the character of domestic rites? These often seem to reflect a feeling that the dead are still "living" in some sense, that they can be contacted and their advice sought. Studies in this area illumine attitudes toward death and reveal a very general perception that the dead gradually lose their individual characteristics and merge into an impersonal collectivity.

Conclusion

From the foregoing analysis, it is evident that this study has examined the concept of the ancestor in Yoruba ontology, as well as ancestral rites and worship in Yorubaland. It has also raised metaphysical issues concerning the worship or veneration of ancestors in Yoruba culture and explored the philosophical questions surrounding these practices. In the course of this study, various aspects of Yoruba beliefs were discussed, including the idea that only those who lead morally upright lives, live to a ripe old age, die a good death, and are accorded full burial rites can become ancestors. Thus, individuals who possess such admirable qualities are considered worthy of ancestorhood.

Furthermore, this analysis indicates that every cultural or religious practice of a people is grounded in their belief systems. The Yoruba practice of ancestral veneration becomes a metaphysical issue because it is premised on fundamental questions concerning existence that are embedded in the life patterns of the Yoruba people. These fundamental issues are rooted in the Yoruba metaphysical belief in life after death, the protective powers of ancestors, and the continuous interaction between entities in the physical and spiritual worlds.

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