

# **‘TRANSCENDENT’ GENEALOGICAL AND KINSHIP RELATIONS**

## **Afterlife in African Traditional Religions**

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### **1. Introduction**

Ancestor worship, in most instances is positioned within a cosmological worldview that represents a very specific conceptualization of this world, living in this world and life after death for the individual. It speaks to a worldview where there are levels of involvement and genealogical linkage between the living and the dead, as well as the world of the living and the world of the dead. In this perception, a dying person does not go to another world but changes merely his or her physical mode of existence to that of a spiritual one.<sup>1</sup> Mbiti points out that African Traditional Religion is an “ontological phenomenon” that pertains to the question of existence or being, and draws our gaze to the detail that this is a religious worldview where the individual is “immersed in continuous religious participation which starts before birth and continues after death.”<sup>2</sup>

Of all man’s (sic) religions, ancestor worship has occupied a place of special interest in anthropology. This is due, no doubt, to the fact that ancestor worship appears so commonly among the peoples studied by anthropologists. Literally scores of ethnographies document the appearance, form, and functions of ancestor worship among specific peoples.<sup>3</sup>

In his early 1975 study from which the above quotation is extracted, Dean Sheils offers a taxonomy of ancestor worship based on what he sees as an ‘intensity of involvement of the ancestors with the living’ and attempts to relate ancestor worship to a variety of other culture-traits by looking comparatively at data across 114 societies. Sheils approaches his study by initially unpacking an operational definition of ancestor worship

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<sup>1</sup>Mugambi, J. N. K., *Christianity and African Culture*, Nairobi: Action Publishers, 2002, 51.

<sup>2</sup>Mbiti, J. S., *An Introduction to African Religion*, London: SCM Press, 1975, 19.

<sup>3</sup>Sheils Dean, “Toward a Unified Theory of Ancestor Worship: A Cross-Cultural Study,” *Social Forces* 54, 2 (1975), 427-440, 427.

and offers an exegesis of ancestor worship as “the belief in, and often the propitiation of, the spirits of the dead.”<sup>4</sup> Sheils, however, is at pains to direct our critical gaze to, what I consider to be of fundamental importance, the fact that these ‘dead’ are not merely generalized ghosts or apparitions in the Tylorian tradition, but one’s own ‘living’ genealogical ancestors. Sheils confines ancestor worship to those instances in which there is a genealogical relationship between the spirits and the living.

Sheils’ comparatively designed large empirical study reveals that the involvement of the ancestral spirits in human life, while showing some congruence, also shows cross cultural differences. Having worked latitudinally with data across a massive 114 societies, Sheils then sets up a typology of ancestor worship based on the degree to which the ancestors (the dead) involve themselves with their descendants (the living). One tier in this typology is termed ‘otiose ancestor worship,’ in which the ancestors are believed to exist and are aware of the activities of their living descendants, but abstain from acting in the lives of those descendants. ‘Active ancestor worship,’ as an alternate typology, exists when the ancestors are implicated in the lives of their descendants, but on a largely capricious basis, for example, compliance or failure with kinship obligations is not linked to rewards or punishments from the ancestors. The strongest form of ancestor worship in this schema is ‘supportive ancestor worship,’ when the ancestors directly are intimately entangled in the lives of their descendants, and accordingly reward or punish for fulfilling, or conversely failing to fulfil, various kinship obligations. Ancestor worship within African Traditional Religions can be said to, by and large, fit into this last typology of direct involvement.

This paper is a descriptive outline of the manner in which the ‘Afterlife’ is conceived with African Traditional Religion by offering a discussion and understanding of the role of ancestor worship and the context of a religious Afterlife constructed along genealogical and kinship links. It attempts to situate this discussion within the context of a need for social solidarity and reassurance built along genealogical ties that extend after death. Religion itself is understood as complex, multi-dimensional and dynamic. Like ‘culture’ within anthropological discourse, it is easier to say what religion is not, as opposed to what religion is. From the early racially chauvinistic and evolutionary definitions of religion, to later Tylorian definitions that aimed to be more inclusive by referring to ‘belief’

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<sup>4</sup>Sheils, “Toward a Unified Theory of Ancestor Worship,” 427.

in spirits, through the vast gamut of theorists and theories of religion, religion has emerged as a fluid and contested phenomenon. The paradigmatic lenses applied to the study of religion have moved from functionalist, to neo-functionalist, to structuralist to interpretivist, and in more recent times, postmodern, deconstructionist and feminist. This paper takes a post-structuralist approach which is believed to allocate greater importance, value and currency to the interpretive and constructivist activities of the actors or believers involved in the religion. Such an interpretive-constructivist heuristic enables one to excavate the meanings embedded in particular situations for those participating in it. Interpretive-constructivist researchers maintain that there are multiple constructed realities, and accept that the meaning of particular forms of social life need to be interpreted and thus reconstructed, in order to be understood by the researcher. The paper concludes by attempting to illustrate that such an interpretation and reassembling also allows us to construct an understanding of the contemporary significance of African Traditional Religions and aspects of afterlife and ancestor worship that show up as continuities within African Indigenous Churches and Charismatic Pentecostal Christianity.

## **2. African Traditional Religions in the Social Sciences**

African Traditional Religion within the Social Sciences has moved from being largely ignored as a viable autonomous subject, to being studied at the periphery of religious studies, to being now distinctly positioned in the study of world religions. The study of African Traditional Religion has also extended beyond the spatial boundary of the African continent, with Religion Studies and Comparative Religion departments in the USA and Europe offering it as a disciplinary choice of study at tertiary level. There is moreover renewed interest in the study of Africa’s past within the context of the advent of Neo-colonialism. The agitation for academic redress and for African scholarship that is rooted in local social realities have also opened a flood of opportunities and a rehabilitated desire to study the traditional religions and cultures of Africa. In addition, there have been intellectual attempts to integrate the study of African Traditional Religion on the continent and in the Diaspora, especially in the area of high impact publications in regional and international journals, either by individual African or non-African scholars in Africa and in the Diaspora, or as collaborative research work between scholars in Africa and in the Diaspora. The University of Michigan in USA and the University of Bern

in Germany have dynamic African Studies Centres, and are but a small example of such centres that dot the international tertiary landscape. International conferences on African Traditional Religions also bring together scholars of religion from dispersed corners of the world, including scholars of African Religions.<sup>5</sup>

African Traditional Religions refers to the indigenous religion(s) of the Africans which was handed over orally through the generations, until recent attempts at documentation. The overarching worldview of African Traditional Religions presents a unique understanding of this world and the next, in a manner that offers a natural collapse of a Cartesian dualistic bifurcation of this world and the next. In the context of the religious architecture of African traditional beliefs, there is no polarising dichotomy between the world of the living and the world of the dead. I have mentioned African Traditional Religions in the plural for the simple reason that there is no one single African community but a rich cluster of plural African groups dispersed across sub-Saharan Africa, each with richly unique cosmological and religio-cultural features that distinguish them, and place and root them to their geographical contexts of origin.

The title ‘African Traditional Religions’ thus presents an assumed, but imaginary homogenous landscape of the (multiple) religions of the African peoples. Though it is true that many features of religion and its practice are similar across Africa, it would be fallacious to assume some sort of essentialism and that all African religion(s) is the same. Hence, it has been suggested by scholars working within African Religious studies, that the more accurate/proximate label for the religions of Africa, is the pluralistic form of ‘African Religions’ or ‘African Traditional/Indigenous Religions,’ to reflect the rich contextual and geo-spatial plurality within the continent’s religious landscape.

The main shared and overarching characteristics of African Traditional Religions are:

i. Belief in a Supreme Being: In almost all African religious traditions there is recognized a Supreme Being who is Creator, such as Nyankopon (Akan: Dependable Companion), Olodumare (Yoruba: Supreme) and Chineke (Igbo: Creator).

ii. Belief in spirit beings and smaller deities: The supernatural realities of the African pantheon consist not just of a Supreme Being but also a multitude of benevolent and malevolent deities and spirit beings.

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<sup>5</sup>See “Theology of African Traditional Religion Module description,” [http://www.nou.edu.ng/noun/NOUN\\_OCL/pdf/cth%20692.pdf](http://www.nou.edu.ng/noun/NOUN_OCL/pdf/cth%20692.pdf).

The Supreme Being is universal but the spirits and deities are local and in some traditions there are also the smaller deities, which inhabit trees, stones and rocks and other animate objects.

iii. Belief in the finitude of the human person: the human person is finite and vulnerable and therefore stands in need of the assistance and protection from the supernatural realm of spirits. Prayers, rites, rituals and sacrifices are thus organized as means of solicitation of help from the transcendent realms of health, power and protection.

iv. Belief in mystical causality: Africans live in a world in which things do not happen by chance. In Africa, aetiology and diagnosis often asks the following basic question: ‘who is the cause of my predicament?’ Events have causes and so the African universe is an intentional one in which misfortunes in particular occur through the evils of witchcraft, curses and sin.<sup>6</sup>

v. Belief in ancestor worship: The belief in ancestors is of critical concern to us. Within the context of many of the African Traditional Religions, the ancestors are the living elders of the ‘lineage’ who have transitioned from a physical existence into the realm of spirits. John Mbiti refers to them as ‘living-dead’ because, although no longer physically alive, it is believed that they participate in the activities of the living as custodians of morality and are believed to be the sources of aid to their living relatives and kin.

### 3. Ancestor Worship

The African scholar K. A. Opoku points out that “African traditional religion is practiced by millions of Africans” at present and it is therefore a “contemporary reality” which exists in the ethnographic present.<sup>7</sup> There

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<sup>6</sup>For an understanding as deconstructed to students wishing to study African Traditional Religions, see description of “Theology of African Traditional Religion Module,” [http://www.nou.edu.ng/noun/NOUN\\_OCL/pdf/cth%20692.pdf](http://www.nou.edu.ng/noun/NOUN_OCL/pdf/cth%20692.pdf).

<sup>7</sup>Opoku, K. A., *West African Traditional Religion*, Accra: FEP International Private Ltd., 1978, 9. It is the aggregate of indigenous belief systems and practices which existed in Africa prior to the coming of Christianity and Islam and to which millions of Africans still adhere covertly or overtly. The term “traditional” is used to refer to the technique of cultural transmission, that is, oral tradition – stories, myths and proverbs – that are used in passing this religion from generation to generation. Beliefs are passed on to posterity through songs, folktales, dances, shrines, and festivals. African scholar K. A. Opoku explains that the term, ‘traditional’ indicates a fundamentally indigenous value system that it has its own pattern, with its own historical inheritance and tradition from the past.

exists diverse plurality in the way the world, life, death and the afterlife is conceptualised. Beyond this rich diversity, however, is an overarching narrative common to most of the African people, that of the belief in ancestors.<sup>8</sup> 'Belief in the ancestors' is thus one 'universal' brick in the conceptual architectural matrix of African Traditional Religions.

Ancestor 'worship' is the belief in human spirits who continue their life after death and continue to exert an influence over their living descendants. The ancestral spirits are seen as wishing to remain in close contact with their surviving family, to whom they are able to reveal themselves through dreams and diviners/healers. The living, in turn are meant to reciprocate this care bestowed on them, by showing the ancestors respect and obedience and by offering (living animal) sacrifices on particular occasions.

We can thus subsume ancestor worship as 'active ancestor worship' in Sheils' typology, and it bears noting that the dead (who go on to become ancestors), have an influence on the lives of their own descendants only. Likewise, none but their own descendants need pay any attention to them in this relationship of reciprocity. In contemporary practice people occupy themselves chiefly with the spirits of ancestors recently dead and well remembered. And the group that participates in ancestral rites is the family group with a common patrilineal grandfather.<sup>9</sup>

A substantial number of Africans are believers in ancestral worship<sup>10</sup> and honour their dead by burying them within the proximate spatial

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<sup>8</sup>Another suggestion to describe the religion of Africa has been African Traditional Religions, the emphasis being on the 'traditional' aspect of the religion as opposed to other religions which due to the process of contextualization are now construed as African religions too. An example is the reality of African Christianity and African Islam.

<sup>9</sup>That is why it is most essential for a person to have ancestors in the male line. Without these, he would be forgotten and forsaken after death.

<sup>10</sup>According to some scholars the term ancestral worship does not adequately express the ancestral rites in African Traditional Religions. In this regard, many African authors have suggested alternative terms such as communion with ancestors. This includes ancestors as instruments between God and man and elderly members of the family who are venerated and not worshipped. Hence the term of submission and pleading supplication which appears in prayers to God and the deities are significantly absent. In addition, they may be rebuked, insulted or even threatened. For the purposes of this paper, I have retained the more popular term 'ancestor worship' with the understanding that there are more elements of veneration than worship as conventionally understood.

domain of their homes.<sup>11</sup> The belief that feeds this social practice is the religious conviction that families and relatives who have shared their homes, deserve to be buried where they lived, and not in a remote, impersonal cemetery. Since Africans articulate much of the routine, day to day aspects of life (illness, misfortune as well as good fortune) by communicating with their ancestors to seek advice and guidance, it is understood as logical to create a burial space where the ancestor and that advice is more accessible. There is thus a perpetuation of the tradition of being close to their dead, both physically and spiritually. Traditional religion is thus, understandably, claimed as beginning ‘at the kraal’ or homestead. This perhaps makes sense when we understand that the cattle kraal is the equivalent on some levels as an ‘African temple,’ or central sacred space, where it is believed that all the ancestors have some form of contact with the living.

This contact and ‘closeness’ is enhanced and solidified through reiterative ritual actions and performances which are performed and are intended to link the living members of the family with the dead. There is a belief in, *Umvelinqangi*, the High God in the local isi-Zulu language, thought of as (theologically) superior to all other beings, and believed to be the Creator of all things. Within this normative framework, God is the Supreme Being, and various ascriptions and names are accorded to him depending on the particular linguistic and religio-cultural specificities of the particular African community, such as *Onyame* (Supreme Being in Akan culture in Ivory Coast), *Mawuga* (Great God in Ewe culture in Ghana) or *Oludumare* (Supreme, in the Yoruba language of Nigeria). God is, however, represented as being too remote and in a sense inaccessible to be directly in the lives of the individuals (on a day to day basis) or to be directly approached by the living. Ancestral spirits are thus often asked to intercede with God, on behalf of the living.

It is believed that the ancestors, even though dead, continue to live (or wish to live) the same kind of life they led when they were on earth, and as such they require the same material artefacts of food and drink to sustain them, even in their spiritual state of existence. Libation which is the pouring of water, food or drink to the ground is therefore used as a specialized means of communication with the ancestors.

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<sup>11</sup>Since many Africans live in urban areas they are at liberty to bury families and relatives in cemeteries. But some of the Africans still take bodies back to their place of origin in the rural areas and bury them within the premises of their homes.

There are cases in particular African communities where it is believed that the naming of the descendant with the name of his ancestor makes it possible for the ancestor to continue to live in his descendant. The belief is pervasive and deeply entrenched that the ancestor will continue to survive as an ancestor, only on condition that he is not forgotten, i.e. if his descendants will communicate regularly with him through prayer performances and ritual offering. Hence, it is popularly said that the African desires to have many children who will remember him and ritually communicate with him/her. The ancestor, on their part, is believed to accrue benefits for the living kin such as health and a successful and productive long life. As elders, the ancestors are thought of as the ‘owners’ of the land, fertilizing the earth and ‘causing’ the food to grow. The living-dead receive requests from the living and, reciprocally request offerings from the living.

The linking of particular descendents to particular ancestors is also vital as it serves to link the living with not only the immediate ancestor, but the very lineage of the ancestors. The narrative that follows below is a description of the context of sacrifice to the ancestors, as shared by an informant: The sacrifice is a ritual dedication, ‘tying’ and linking the descendant (the living) to the ancestor (the dead). It also reveals behaviours by the ancestors typical in this world, where one ‘fights’ for ownership and proprietary claim on the part of one’s lineage.

#### **4. *Ukungeniswa* (Dedication Ritual)**

*Ukungeniswa* is a ceremony where a young person or child is dedicated to a certain family ancestor. This ceremony is usually performed when ancestors from two families ‘fight’ for ownership of an individual. This ‘fight’ in the ancestral realm for ownership of the living descendent, according to the believers, manifests and reveals itself in the physical realm in the child who is chronically ill. This is how the family knows what ritual to offer up to appease the ancestors.

Children are of course born of two people, the mother and the father from two different families; with each family having its own lineage of ancestors. When a child is born, one ancestor becomes dominant which may anger the other ancestor. In some cases it is not only the ancestors who ‘fight’ for the child’s ownership, but the families as well. Should this happen and one family (even if it is one member) curses the child and wishes it misfortune, the ancestors (of the cursor) ‘turn away’ from the child, bringing bad luck (this is usually the paternal side especially if the



child was born out of wedlock). When this occurs, the child has to be dedicated to the maternal ancestors, and this disconnects the child from its paternal ancestors.

This fight between ancestors is usually seen or detected by a *sangoma* or a prophet who would have foreseen the misfortunes of the child. For this ceremony to be acceptable before the ancestors, the child needs to be taken to a ‘prophet’ who administers herbs and water that has been specially prayed over. This water is used to ‘clean/purify’ the family lawn which is believed to have been stained by witchdoctors. The lawn is watered for three weeks. During this time the child wears a string around its waist. Once the purifying is done, the family prepares Zulu beer which serves as a sign to the ancestors that they (ancestors) will be ‘eating.’

Money to buy a goat and chicken has to be given to the child’s grandfather or uncle as they are considered the head of the family. On the day that the goat and chickens are to be bought, incense is burnt notifying the ancestors that they (uncles) will be going to purchase the sacrifice or their ‘food’ as it is referred to. A day before the ceremony (usually on a Friday which is considered auspicious) the goat is slaughtered and dedicated to the ancestors. This is done so as to ask the ancestors to relay the message to God. If, within the family there is a member who is considered ‘gifted’ and able to communicate with the ancestors, that person would receive a message from the ancestors indicating whether they accept the child or not. The child is always accepted; or rather the messages relayed by the ‘prophet’ always indicate that the child has been accepted. After this ceremony, the child is considered to belong solely to the maternal family. The child then changes its surname to that of maternal family (Informant Nokwanda Nzuza).

The (male) ancestor<sup>12</sup> is, in many ways, regarded as the father of the clan, lineage or ethnic group. As a father, he should be loved, cared for and protected. In African belief system, there appears to be a rich and dense

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<sup>12</sup>While female ancestors also exist, and informants were clear that both males and females can attain to the level of ancestor, and could be offered ritual sacrifices, in most instances they would refer to the ancestors in the masculine form, and as ‘father.’ This appeared to be duplicated in much literature on ancestor worship, by African scholars like John Mbiti and later ‘western’ scholars who draw from such works. One can speculate and say that this appears an unconscious modelling perhaps of the fact that many African cultures are patriarchal and much of the terminology tends to favour the masculine. See Idowu E. Bolaji, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, London: SCM Press, 1973; Awolalu J. O., “What Is African Traditional Religion?” *Studies in Comparative Religion* 10, 2 (1976), 1-10.

network of relationships. Everyone is related with the other in this network; God, the deities, ancestors, the lineage, the clan, the ethnic group, are interconnected to each other. Any 'breakage' in this complex webbed relationship is believed as foreboding trouble for all who meant to be connected. Thus, any misfortune or evil is traditionally interpreted as an omen of warning or punishment from the ancestors. The ancestors are believed to be good spirits, who look after the welfare of their kinsmen and families, and would according to this rationale, warn in the case of a potential transgression. They are conceptualised and believed to be closer to God and therefore able to act as intermediaries between (the more inaccessible) God, and members of their families.

As pointed out, according to African Traditional worldview, death does not totally bring an end to one's existence. It only brings a change of life in a new world.<sup>13</sup> According to Mbiti,

They return to their human families from time to time, and share meals with them, however symbolically, they know and have the interest in what is going on in their families... They are guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities. Offence in these matters is ultimately an offence against the forefathers, who in that capacity act as the invisible police of the families and communities.<sup>14</sup>

What is also prominent in this way of thinking is a strong sense of community, expressed by participation in the life of the community into which the individual is introduced by various initiation rites. This accounts for the deep sense of the family, shown by the attachment to the family and the bond with the ancestors. The funeral rites performed for them on the part of their descendants, have facilitated them in reaching the spiritual home of the clan, which is (experienced as being) in intimate communion with its living members. The followers of African Traditional Religions believe that the ancestors know and have a personal interest in what is going on in their families. They are guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities. Offence in these matters is ultimately an offence against the forefathers, who in that capacity act as agents of surveillance

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<sup>13</sup>It should be noted that there are two categories of death: that is bad or good death – the death of the young and of the aged. Death of the young person is not considered a good death, as is death by violent means or through intense illness such as HIV/AIDS. If one dies a bad death, one is not given certain funeral rites. Such dead person is not venerated as ancestor.

<sup>14</sup>Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion*, 83.

(al la Foucault) invisible police of the families and communities.<sup>15</sup> The living-dead communicate with the living by revelation, dreams, calamity, ecstasy and trance, possession prophecy and divination.

*Sangomas* are the traditional healers and are seen as being capable of providing a link between the living, the dead, and the spirits. One of the informants described the context of the sangoma’s involvement, based on what she had witnessed often. The informant described that,

Most sangomas use drumming and dancing to help channel the ancestors. When the spirit enters the body, the sangoma’s voice will change because a particular ancestor will enter her. Sometimes she [sangoma] will speak in tongues or a different accent and we then know she is “possessed.” The sangoma can communicate with the spirits as well as the ancestors.

Indeed, much of this communication through sangomas and diviners, is based on the fact that the living expect special benefits from their ancestors; protection from sickness, death or other mishap, and the acquisition of various benefits, such as long life, great wealth and many children. This sort of reciprocal relationship extends beyond this realm, and speaks to a kind of social and religious capital that transcends social relationships within the context of this world. An ancestor is, therefore, expected to be faithful to their earthly kin, who expect in return a favourable response or reward for their prayers and articulation of ritual donations and performances to them. The ancestors, on their part, are said to desire frequent or regular contact with their earthly relatives, and are even believed to visit them through mediums, or to have direct union with them through possession.

### **5. A Unique Traditional Outlook on the Afterlife Made Contemporary**

The understanding and outlook of life after death within African Traditional Religions is unique in the kind of (mutual) continuance one is offered with this world and one’s relatives in this world, that is able to transcend death. This outlook cuts through any kind of Cartesian dualism, and stitches together this world and the next. A post-structural approach allows us to see beyond binary disparate structures of *life* and *death*, *the living* and *the dead* and in a sense ‘get inside’ the understanding of the believer. It allows us to see that, in terms of the theological tenets of African Traditional Religions, the living and their ancestors, form a totality

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<sup>15</sup>Onwubiko O. A., *African Thought, Religion and Culture*, Enugu: Snaap Press, 1991, 34.

in which solidarity is lived and expressed through prayer and ritual, and in which human and ‘cosmic’ solidarity is (perpetually) engaged and sustained.<sup>16</sup>

For me this point of ‘*cosmic solidarity*’ finds its simple and powerfully eloquent expression in the fact that after death, the human person is accepted and understood as continuing to live on as a spirit, in a relationship of mutual fellowship of interests amongst a group, in this case a lineage and kinship group. The network of relationships that characterizes human existence is not seen as being interrupted, but stretches into the cosmic dimension of the beyond, in a sense, and “death is a necessary door through which the living pass in order to take up the inevitable role as the living dead,” in the wider cosmos. Death is therefore the “transition to the final destiny of all men and women.” Mbiti affirms that “life goes on beyond the grave.”<sup>17</sup> Death is thus understood by the adherent as “an inevitable event in the personal history of every living person...” Though inevitable, death does not terminate human existence, but is cognised as a moment of passage to the afterlife.<sup>18</sup> One of the informants shared with me “Life does not end with the moment of physical death but continues,” while another said that it was “movement to a different stage” ... “to the place of the forefathers.”

The point that John Burton makes is that “the African emphasis is not so much on how the dead continue to live (in ontological terms) but on the manner in which they affect the living.”<sup>19</sup> What this means in simple existential and experiential terms is that there is no overly elaborate philosophical or metaphysical discussion and description on *how* it is possible that there is an ontic continuity for the dead, in as much as what that ontological continuity means for the living. Rather at the level of explanation, there is discussion and aspiration passed through the generations, orally, as to how this can inspire the living to aspire to the good life (and the outcome of attaining to ancestorhood themselves). There is also oral discussion through myth and storytelling, and ritual performances and observances, as reminders that life continues beyond

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<sup>16</sup>Luhrmann T. M., “A Hyperreal God and Modern Belief: Toward an Anthropological Theory of Mind,” *Current Anthropology* 53, 4 (2012), 371-395.

<sup>17</sup>Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religion*, 119.

<sup>18</sup>Onwubiko, *African Thought, Religion and Culture*, 34.

<sup>19</sup>Burton John W., “Living with the Dead: Aspects of the Afterlife in Nuer and Dinka Cosmology (Sudan),” *Anthropos* 73, 1/2 (1978), 141-160, 142.

physical death and that kinship relations and reciprocal relations also continue seamlessly.

Burton emphasizes that it is the role of relationship (and remembering one adds), as a way of affirming life that is vital, and sees the goal of life as maintaining and joining “that cosmic web that holds and sustains all things and beings, to be a part of the integral mutuality of things.”<sup>20</sup> A ‘living dead’ is still considered as a member of the family and is in the state of personal immortality.<sup>21</sup> The living dead (ancestor) can help the family and the community during a crisis. Conversely, the ancestor can also cause trouble if certain rituals have not been performed properly or if there are some violations of community laws.

Among the spirits, the ancestors create a special category on their own. They are those who have lived exemplary life and who fulfilled all social and religious duties as understood by their community. Because of their good life they are remembered by the living. To become an ancestor is the best one can expect after death.<sup>22</sup> It is something that one aspires to considering that living an immoral life is said to preclude one from becoming an ancestor. This makes sense if one considers that the ‘immoral’ person (as conceived with African religio-cultural normatives) would not be afforded much respect while alive, much less when dead. It is also to be reiterated that it is the crucial act of remembering, respecting and offering ritual that solidifies the existence of the ancestors, or else they are forgotten and fade away. No one would want to remember and respect or perform ritual observances to someone considered immoral. The length of time one is remembered depends directly on the quality of life that the person had while alive. There is thus an embedded imperative to live the so called good and moral life (according to African traditional normatives) Nkemnkia says that “the necessary condition to remain always alive and present in the memory of the living is to lead a good and virtuous life. What each African fears most is to be forgotten by the living ones, the parents and the human race.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Burton, “Living with the Dead,” 144.

<sup>21</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heineman, 1969, 163.

<sup>22</sup> Zahan D., *The Religion, Spirituality and Thought of Traditional Africa*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979; Taylor, J. V., *Christian Presence Amid African Religions*, Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Nkemnkai M. N., *African Vitalogy*, Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 1999, 119.

Thus, the social cohesion built into the webbed network of solidarity and relationship, while extending into the cosmic beyond, still stays connected to the *'here and now'* in encouraging the living to live the virtuous life. The social cohesion is also articulated in the by now popularised notion of *ubuntu*, which is the African humanist ethic of fellowship and relationship to each other. It is a way of understanding oneself through a collective context of interconnectedness. This interconnectedness is in turn meant to be articulated through 'good' social reciprocal relations.

## 6. Conclusion

It can be clearly discerned that the notion of life after death plays an imperative and embedded role within the matrix of African Traditional Religions. It affirms the inner coherence of African religious worldview where the person is central and remains also a prominent figure after death, as an ancestor. Such a notion stresses also the role of the community, and one's life on earth as being defined through belonging to a community. As an ancestor, one continues to be useful to the community, because he/she remains a part of that community, even as a dead person and is able to be called upon to mediate between the descendent and God.

While a substantial number of African communities in sub Saharan Africa are converts to Christianity, who express a distance from and discomfort with the perceived conflicting aspects of African Traditional Religions and monotheistic, non-idolatrous Christianity, it has to be emphasised that many others still adhere to tenets and beliefs of ancestor worship, even if they practise Christianity. In South Africa, as in many other parts of Africa, there is a distinct 'type' of post colonial Christianity that has come to be encapsulated with the emerging African Independent Churches (AIC<sup>24</sup>). Members within these churches embrace both Christianity and African Traditional Religions as a syncretised religious form and do not see or experience these two religious worldviews as mutually exclusive or conflicting. Scholars have theorised that such Churches and forms of Christianity, initiated by Africans in Africa and not by missionaries from outside the continent, offer bridges back to aspects of African Traditional Religions. I feel that this is highly plausible and for

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<sup>24</sup>More recently AIC has been re-understood, with the term 'African' being understood as place or origin, rather than place of location, as many AICs can now also be found in other parts of the world with Diaspora African communities.

me, it indexes the importance of aspects like ancestor worship whereby African communities themselves believe that ritual articulation and performances help to maintain a sense of social cohesion and kinship. And as pointed out by a colleague, without falling prey to over essentialising, the communion of saints, the mystical body of Christ and praying for the dead are aspects of the Christian faith that may be understood by some as showing ‘family resemblance’ with the ATR’s ancestor worship.

Many Africans, especially the migrant and transnational Africans within South Africa also belong to Pentecostal Churches. Pentecostalism, as practiced by these adherents allows for aspects of divinised (or demonised) nature as well as recognition of multiple levels of spirits that are able to affect the individual in this world. So while Pentecostalism is certainly not synonymous to African Traditional Religions, there is enough of a perceived theological congruency (by the adherent) for her/him to be comfortable with aspects of ancestor worship, even as a practicing Pentecostal Christian.

Understandably then, one area of particular interest for Africanists and anthropologists has been the somewhat “paradoxical relationship between charismatic Christianity and traditional religion,”<sup>25</sup> with points of religious and theological contact as well as points of divergences. Much of the anthropologist, Birgit Meyer’s work with the Ewe in Ghana has also focused on this paradox.<sup>26</sup> On the one hand, born again Christians reject the African traditional religious practices and non-Christian spirits as inventions and interventions of Satan. Yet, on the other hand, much empirical and ethnographic work among people like the Ewe of Ghana and in the city of Iringa in Tanzania reveals deep seated practices of aspects of ancestor worship by staunch African Christians. Thus notions of rupture and breaking with the past and maintaining the past and the ways of the ancestors both figure prominently in the rhetoric of conversion. Anthropologists like Birgit Meyer and Martin Lindhardt point out that charismatic Christianity, through “processes of diabolisation” and the emphasis on spiritual or mystical warfare, in fact contribute to the preservation and renewed significance of traditional religion.<sup>27</sup> This is

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<sup>25</sup>Lindhardt Martin, “The Ambivalence of Power and Charismatic Christianity and Occult Forces in Urban Tanzania,” *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 22, 1 (2009), 37-54.

<sup>26</sup>Meyer Birgit, “Christianity in Africa: From Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004), 447-474.

<sup>27</sup>Lindhardt, “The Ambivalence of Power and Charismatic Christianity,” 38.

borne out by ethnographic work as well as anecdotal narratives. Many transnational African colleagues, who are followers of Pentecostalism, recount stories of understandings of social processes of economics and even personal health, in terms of 'bewitchment' and thus in need of traditional remedies or 'cures'. These traditional remedies are in turn traced back to African Traditional Religions and a very particular religio-cultural worldview as discussed earlier, which points to mystical causality in explaining good fortune as well as mishap and misfortune. Thus many followers of Christianity do not experience any conflict since this understanding (of mystical causality) finds place in both African Traditional Religions and Pentecostalism. By seeking recourse in African traditional remedy and cure, they are in a sense renewing a connection to ATR, on some levels.

Linhardt's ethnographic work in Tanzania also allows us to see beyond a simple continuity/discontinuity dualism and conceive of an active relation between charismatic Christianity (or even African Indigenous Churches), and African Traditional Religions in terms of an ongoing mutual influence. For me this speaks directly to the experiential importance of the aspects of African Traditional Religions around which a strong African group (or interconnected 'ubuntu') identity is constructed.

For most, if not all Africans, religion is an essential part of their everyday life and they articulate this, as many informants shared, in popular terms, as "my culture" and "my way of life." Ancestor worship as a religio-cultural practice comes to be integrated and incorporated by many African converts to Christianity. It can in turn be advanced that this is based, in large part, on the powerful continuity it offers between this world and the next through the genealogical kinship ties and the notion of 'living dead' or ancestors, who are accessible in spatio-temporal terms in the 'here' and the 'now', and able to take care of their descendants' well being. This conceptualisation of the Afterlife is also highly attractive in as much as it is pragmatic, as it offers the African believers a kind of cosmic solidarity by offering a known and traceable genealogical link and relations with kin, who can act as powerful intermediaries between them and God.