

ANCESTRAL VENERATION AT THE CORE OF AFRICAN SPIRITUAL RENEWAL AMONG THE AICS IN SOUTH AFRICA

V Molobi
University of South Africa

Abstract

The subject of ancestral veneration in the lives of Africans is prominent among the AIC for various reasons. Ancestral veneration carries a spiritual responsibility and a sense of unity and most members of the AIC view it as significant. For instance, true spirituality, to AIC, involves respect for parents, fighting for justice, coping with sickness, misfortunes and witchcraft, and appeasing the ancestors. Life does not end with death but, among traditional Africans, goes beyond to the living dead. This article intends to indicate the objective of ancestor veneration as a core of AIC spiritual renewal. It wishes to sanction debate between the historic churches and the AIC in South Africa. AIC is growing very fast and, sooner or later, will overtake the historic missionary perception of the mainline churches in South Africa. Finally, the issue of ancestor veneration in Africa cannot be avoided any longer.

1 INTRODUCTION

I was encouraged by the response of Albert Nolan (1999:8-11) to Bishop Ngada's (1999:1-7) paper with the heading: 'Transformation of theology in the African Indigenous

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Churches' in a book entitled *Hearing the AIC voice*, published by the Research Institute at Unisa. Nolan observes that the AICs focal point in searching for their theology centres around the spontaneous act of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit Himself who has brought them to a spontaneous Africanisation of Christianity. They do not intend to change anything in the bible, but than want to interpret the bible in such a way that it addresses what is their serious religious challenge. Ancestral veneration is the one burning topic which they would like to bring to the fore and seek to interpret within the African biblical context and the missionary church experience. I have used a prescriptive analytical method in addressing this theme. This method gives a direction to the pattern and use of thoughts in this paper. The systematic argument used is designed from within the mind frame of the AIC. I have concluded that ancestors are a significant component of the AIC spiritual belief system and cannot be ignored, especially in the light of AIC growth in the South African society.

1.1 The nature and revolutionary life of ancestors in life of Africans

The AIC view of ancestors can be described using any of the following terms: family, progenitors, roots, kinsmen, people, relatives, forebear, forefathers, parents, precursors, predecessors, prototypes, sire, descendants and relatives.¹ Their view of the ancestors' life circle is spiral in that, after a while they disappear into the distant past. The reason is that, eventually, ancestors become one with God and this is what must be proven. Ancestors form a circle which exists for as long as their offspring exist; this view is also apparent in Christian scriptures.² For example, the Bible does not shy from emphasising Christ's genealogy (or ancestral) lineage (Matthew 1:1-17), but often refers to Him being one with God the Father,³ who is more primordial. This is an angle through which we will discuss our debate. We will need to prove the

possible intercession between traditional ancestorship and the bible.

2 AFRICAN SCHOLARSHIP'S ATTEMPTS TO RELATE TRADITIONAL ANCESTORSHIP TO THE BIBLE

The one leading scholar in this discourse is Nyamiti (1998). I have referred mostly to his work because of the seriousness in of study. But there are others which I will refer to later. Nyamiti (1998:131) he immediately links African ancestorship with the biblical message. To him, Christ's sonship is related with God the Father, and this confirms that he is an ancestor or brother to us. His ancestral relationship (Nyamiti 1998:131) transcends all tribal, racial or sexual distinctions. The denial of African ancestors by mainlined churches warrants limitation of the seniority of Jesus Christ as humanity's ancestor. Christ was not for the Jewish community alone, but also for all of humanity. AICs discovered this long ago, which is why, in their conversion, could not abandon their ancestral roots. Instead, they have carried them into the newly founded African Christian belief system. While this is indeed a chicken-and-egg situation, I suggest that the living beings are the prime movers here, because they are the people experiencing challenges and asking the ancestors to help them.

Nyamiti (1998:130) relates well how God the Father is the parent ancestor of the Son and the Son is the descendant of the Father, whereas the Holy Spirit is their ancestral oblation, gift and Eucharist. As a result, in God, ancestorship and descendancy are essentially sacred, pneumatic, ritualistic, Eucharistic and doxological. These qualities suggest that ancestors should be compassionate to the living prayers and rituals, for example, by bestowing health, wealth and other

good earthly kin, in token of love, gratitude to their reciprocal benevolence like thanksgiving and homage or respect for their infinite holiness (as ritual offer or oblation). The sources mentioned above also suggest that God the Father, who is the parent ancestor, is a main source of life. It is because Africans desire to know how to relate to the 'spirit world', to God, spirits, angels and demons, that they have the capacity to tap power from these forces to enhance their own existence (Kinoti 1997). Demons must be identified and neutralised by the power of God and the good spirits or by God's servants. In this case, we are seeking to find the position of ancestors in the new religion (Christianity).

2.1 Basis for interpreting the bible in the African way

Recently Mbiti (2005:13) posed the question whether Africans understand what they are reading. He observed that AIC have found other ways of interpreting the bible passages, in ways that complement missionary methods or that are aimed at correcting those methods, and in some cases counteracting the imported interpretations. Mbiti (2005:14) saw the African approach to the bible as a conflict in understanding and interpreting the bible. He has suggested that various factors are at work in the process of interpreting the bible. The essence to this discussion is that African religion and culture makes it possible for many bible passages to 'ring bells' in enabling people to grasp passages and texts that relate to their cultural identity and tradition. This area, according to Mbiti, needs attention from both churches and academic circles.

Africans will therefore interpret the bible by relating it to their worldviews and culture. Elements such as ancestral veneration are imperative in the African agenda for Christianity. AIC speaking for ourselves (Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) 1985:22) saw the rejection of traditional ways of showing respect to parents and ancestors and was seriously damaging

to African society. They (ICT 1985:23-4) indicate that they have learned to make clear distinctions between culture and religion. Their churches do not impose any cultural customs upon the people, neither African nor European customs. They saw their ministers as preaching the commandment of God that their mothers and fathers are to be honoured and respected. They concur that customary ancestors are family affairs, but not a religious service. They do not honour deceased ancestors in the church the way that some white Christians honour their saints in church. And they certainly do not worship the spirits of the ancestors. In church they worship God alone.

Although we understand the AICs' standpoint as indicated above, African theologians would like to engage their ministers and theologians in scholarly, academic debate. The bible itself contains much that relate to ancestors and this is proven by terminology such as 'descendants' or 'lineage'. These words are indeed used culturally, and refer to people who once existed in history as told by scripture. If Africans feel that the bible has a voice that relates to ancestors or lineages why is it wrong when Africans talk about their ancestors in church? Setiloane's (2000:29) opinion is that ancestors are the 'living dead': *badimo*, *iminyanya* or *amadlozi* and they have been wrongly approached from the beginning by early missionaries to South Africa. Missionaries were definitely biased because of their agenda and programme of belief that promoted their theology alone and completely disregard foreign contexts.

The negative pressure exerted on African religion and cultures became what Mbiti (2005:14) had called a 'tremendous pressure' (silent, hidden, sometimes unconscious) that influenced the role of African religion and its impact on people's lives (including their location and understanding of the bible). Ngada and Mofokeng (2001:30) observed that there are many ways in which the AICs traditional sensitivity to

the world of spirits is misunderstood by western Christians. Some (Ngada & Mofokeng 2001:30) have said that AIC have replaced their traditional veneration of ancestors spirits with a new worship of the Holy Spirit, and that they see the Holy Spirit as a kind of ancestor spirit. This is simply not true of those AICs who have always believed in God and who have never confused the spirit of God with the spirit of ancestors.

Ancestors are parents and there is no way that they can be compared to angels or saints. The essential difference in the AICs is that traditional rites are not forbidden in their church practice and they point to the fact that the Bible says "honour your mother and father so that you live more days on earth" (Exodus 20:12). Spiritually, what are Africans gaining from this? We will attempt to answer this question in the next section.

2.2 Africans and spirituality

Spirituality is an act of developing inner strength, and acquiring psychic and spiritual power for self-defence (Kudadjie 1995:74). It is also action on the behalf of the others and knowing the wishes and prohibition of gods and ancestors. In the case of Christians, spirituality is meant to help one to know the 'will' of the 'triune' God. Spirituality helps us to gain insight into inexplicable accidents, sudden death, protracted illness and over-term pregnancies. It helps us to obtain insight from the spirit world and leads us towards healing and the ability to overcome calamities.⁴ Among Christians, it helps to attain the new birth in Christ and the infusion of the Holy Spirit. This refers to holiness and growth and our spiritual transformation into the image of Christ.

AIC states, they have always been aware of the world of the spirits because it is part of their African heritage. They acknowledge the existence of evil spirits or demons and believe that they can take possession of a person and that

they can cause illnesses. But they also believe in God, who is more powerful than any other spirit. This is why many people who were possessed by demons were healed as attested in the scripture (ICT 1985:27).

In the light of the AIC, Waruta (1998), saw them as the best example of African Christian dynamism. He concurs that, unlike the more orthodox Christian Churches, indigenous churches experience the presence of God not through some document or tradition, but in the context of their community life and existential reality, with little regard or reference to external validating authority. In the ZCC the use of the scriptures and the church doctrines remains their own composition, even though the ideas are borrowed from the bible itself (Molobi 2005:111).

Spirituality also involves a process of discernment into seeking answers to intractable social problems. In this case slogans are developed to resist the aftermath of such deadly challenges. For example, Moller (1979:123) discovered that the spirits of African ancestors need to be placated. If they are not placated, catastrophe will overtake those who fail to honour them. An example here could be HIV/AIDS, which has no immediate cure. It could be regarded by many grassroots believers in AICs as punishment by the ancestors. Some people put their faith and trust in God that, sooner or later a cure will be found. Others put their trust in their ancestors, saying that, if the ancestors are willing, a cure will be found. In his research findings, Moller (1979:123) concluded that a black person's entire progress is dependent on his or her relationship with the spirits of the ancestors.

3 Ancestral veneration as spiritual renewal, self realisation and protection

When I was travelling with two senior ZCC officials to Morija I overheard them saying that, it was during the Great Trek to Messina that, suddenly a sudden storm broke out as the trekkers were passing near Morija. This storm forced the trekkers off the road and, knowingly, they bypassed Morija. This was an act of Christ (Lekhanyane) himself, my companion said people need to understand these men's views. The ZCC viewed Lekganyane 'Angenase' senior as Christ, because of the awesome powers he had. (The belief here is that, had the trekkers seen Morija, they may well have decided to invade and occupy it permanently.

The ZCC's view that Lekganyane can be compared to Jesus Christ needs to be qualified. This is clear in *staela* or instruction among the ZCC which is a top to bottom order. Leaders receive orders from the bishop and transmit them to members. The leaders do not alter the voice of the bishop. It may mean that some of the AICs are convinced about their biblical interpretation concerning Christ as more appropriate. Their understanding of the bible is influenced by their religiousness, in which they immersed from birth (Mbiti 1969:15). African life is also greatly influenced by African's concept of time.

3.1 African concept time has a bearing in the notion of ancestral veneration

In Africa, life and time are inseparable and if one does not understand this there will be chaos. Time and growth are significant for existence. It also depends on how we understand this. Mbiti elaborates extensively on the concept *sasa* (present) and *zamani* (future) as vital transmissions of life in the birth of an African person and other people too. An African time frame of *sasa*, as discovered by Mbiti (1969:18), incorporates "remote future, immediate or near future, indefinite future, present or present progressive, immediate past or perfect, today's past, recent act or yesterday as a

single comprehensive component". The term *zamani* is used for the remote past and has an unspecified tense. Through *sasa* and *zamani*, one can observe why ancestors in African context cannot be divorced from life and the life hereafter.

In the book of Exodus (20:5) affirms "... for I the Lord God am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the *third* and *fourth* generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love and keep my commandments".⁵ This carries some weight in justifying why Africans consider ancestors as intermediaries. Even if you do right but your predecessors did wrong, you may be liable for their sins and punishment accordingly. This understanding causes African traditionalists to ask favours from their senior ancestors for, supposedly, they have already bypassed life of the living and its challenges.

AICs believe it is in the Son Jesus *indodana u Jesu* that people's sins are forgiven, although this does not suggest dishonouring one's own roots. On the same note Nyamiti (1998:131) professes that is through Christ the saviour, prophet, king, priest and eschatological messiah that his ancestorship must also be prophetic, royal, sacerdotal and eschatological. It is on this view that Nyamiti views Christ as the brother ancestor of Africans. And, through a biblical mandate, they see themselves as the *escorts* of the dead, especially when the dead have lived a Christian life on earth. This is a true element of African spirituality and one that is related to real factors and practices that include respect for parents, fighting for justice, or against sickness, misfortunes and witchcraft. This, however, by no means suggests that justice, sickness, misfortunes and witchcraft imply the worship of ancestors.

3.2 Ancestors are not worshipped

Traditionally ancestors are people who lived with us and whose presence we have fully experienced when they were still alive in this world. In his notes, Nyamiti (1998:169) confirms that death is not always a necessary condition for the acquisition of ancestral status since, in some African societies the immortal supreme being is considered as the true ancestor. Nyamiti sees the ancestor usually as the one who comes first or the prototype. Ancestors are therefore important because they come first to those who take them seriously. It was only through (Nyamiti 1998:169) the introduction of new existence after death that the belief in the communion of saints was superimposed upon the traditional veneration of ancestors. This intercession between African ancestors and the biblical notion of ancestors is conspicuous among the AICs.

The living dead (Mbiti 1969:83)⁶ are the closest link that men have with the world of the *spirits*. Ancestors speak the language of men with whom they lived until recently. They also speak the language of the spirits and of God, with whom they have ontologically communion. It is through the living dead that the spirit world becomes personal to men. The ancestors are part of their human families and people remember them.

3.3 Relationship between men and the living dead is not paradisaal

According to Mbiti (1969:84) people know of the barrier erect between them and the living dead. When the living dead return and appear to their relatives, the experience is not welcome. And if it becomes too frequent people are likely to refrain from it. There is no clear conversation between the living dead and the people in this life. The food and libation given to the living dead are paradoxically acts of hospitality and welcome and yet are also a message to the living dead, telling them to move away (Mbiti 1969:84). The living dead are wanted and yet not wanted. If they have been improperly

buried or even offended before they died, it is feared by the relatives that the living dead may take revenge in the form of misfortune and illness.

Moller (1979:123) observed that a black person's whole progress depends on his or her relationship with the spirits of the ancestors. He stated that "if ancestors are not happy and sleep, for a Black person such an individual we will be denied true life".⁷ The spirits of the ancestors must be satisfied and 'made to sleep peacefully' and not allowed to walk around dissatisfied. If they do walk around dissatisfied, the next of kin will meet with all sorts of strange mishaps. People (Mbiti 1969:84) are therefore careful to follow the proper practices and customs regarding the burial or other means of disposal of the dead body and make libations and food offerings, whatever is considered necessary.

When the last person who knew a particular ancestor also dies, in effect the process of death is complete as far as the ancestor is concerned. He or she is now no longer remembered by name, and is no longer known as a human being, but a spirit or thing, precisely known as *IT* (Mbiti 1969:84). Such a person has sunk beyond the visible horizon of the *zamani*. It is no longer necessary to pay any attention to him or her in the family by making food offerings and libation, except in some African societies within the context of genealogical remembrance or in the chain of intermediaries.

As new member of the living dead appear, who deserve or require most the attention from the living, old ones begin to slowly disappear into oblivion. Africans do not worship ancestors; old ancestors disappear into oblivion and new ones emerge. Africans appease the ancestors. The living dead⁸ (Mbiti 1969:69) occupy the ontological position between the spirits and human beings and between God and human beings. The departed communicate in the language of the human beings they have recently 'left' through physical death.

4 The extensive honour of ancestors has a serious influence on Christianity in Africa seriously

The decline in the influence of western Christianity has led to an enormous increase in the recognition of ancestor veneration among the African Instituted Churches (AIC). In Europe, for instance, Christianity is fast on the wane. African theologians see this as an opportunity to create a platform of debate. Debate around the theme 'Christianity needs to interpret African religion and vice versa' is crucial in this instance. However, the problem has never been Christianity itself, rather the way in which Christianity was presented. Africans have always welcomed any religious help that seems to address any critical challenge in their existence.

Africans perceive ancestors and spirits as either benevolent or malicious in their present reality in the human world. Some dangerous spirits are conceived as having a negative influence on the destiny of the individual or the community (Enang 2000:192). Against this background Independent Churches present themselves as places where spiritual powers can be obtained to combat and overcome the malice of such evil forces. AICs regard themselves as mediators of salvation, security and safety in people's daily lives. AICs develop as concrete Christian communities where angels and powers, through the help of ancestors, facilitate deliverance from various types of life threatening dangers.

Archbishop Ngada (2001:29) complained that some Christians think African Churches are continuing the pagan practice of worshipping the spirits of ancestors. He also confirmed that ancestors are not worshipped, but respected in the same way as we respect, honour and revere our living parents. To him, the spirits of the ancestors protect in the same way that people are

protected by their parents. Ngada confirms that traditional ancestral rites are never practised in church. Rites are cultural because they relate to the tradition of a family, the clan and the tribe, and they vary from one family to another. The Christian faith on the other hand, has its own rites or rituals and these are the same for all people who believe in Christ, no matter what their culture or family.

4.1 Problems relating to ancestral veneration among AICs

Some independent churches shrink from using the term 'ancestors' openly and are especially suspicious of researchers and interviewers (West 1975: 45). They do not want to be labelled as 'bogus' churches. AIC ministers believe in dreams which, in most cases involve ancestors.⁹ AICs do confirm that they often interpret ancestral spirits as *Moya o halalelang* also referred to as the Holy Spirit (West 1975:100; Anderson 1991). Interestingly members of these churches never view '*Holy Spirit*' plurally as '*Holy Spirits*', they equate an act of shadow of one ancestor and successfully call it an act of the Holy Spirit. This practice is mostly common in healing where a member, prophet or prophetess may confirm, in dreams, that the person saw *mofu ntatago* or *mmago* (Setiloane 2000:30), meaning: "I saw my late father or mother giving orders that must be followed."

4.2 Ancestral veneration is a private affair among traditional Africans and AICs

There are members who belong to churches (particularly the mission of charismatic churches) which reject veneration of the ancestors, as result, their members often perform these rites in secret. When members of the same family belong to churches with different beliefs about ancestors, serious problems can arise. For some Africans firmly believe that rejecting the veneration of the ancestors (Ngada & Mofokeng 2001:31)

leads to hideous behaviour such as rape, murder, abortion, robbery, sodomy, homosexuality, adultery, prostitution and every other kind of moral horror.

It is unlikely that church congregations, with their variety of members, could honour ancestors as a group. To what extent are individuals within the AICs adhering to ancestral veneration? Performances of ancestral rites may be interpreted in number of ways depending on the need at the time. The opposition by mission churches to belief in ancestors have made AICs shy away from admitting such beliefs to the outsiders, for fear of being ostracised. This has also made the leaders of the AIC churches do very controversial things in cases relating to the issue of the ancestors. For example, if they want to hold a thanksgiving ceremony, they may do it under the disguise of the church, by using Christian terms such as 'thanksgiving'. Thanksgiving is indeed thanksgiving,¹⁰ but this word may mean different things to one and the same group. For example, to others it may mean service and offering to the ancestors, especially within families. It may also mean an ordinary thanksgiving, where the usual feast was held after the church service.

West has done good work in making contact with leaders of five different AIC churches to find out whether they communicate with the ancestors or not. His findings are impressive and accurate. Each leader represented his or her own congregation. Out of these leaders five different answers emerged.¹¹ They first indicated that ancestors were remembered by the lighting of candles while members of the congregation are talking to them (ie the ancestors). Others communicate through offering prayer and meat. Still others communicate through offering animals and prayers. Members will also help in the memorial services to those who have passed away. The other leader said that they communicate through offerings and prayer, and that, occasionally church

services were held to commemorate the dead. The last leader said communication with the ancestors was through offerings, and through dreams. Because these five leaders could communicate with their ancestors, the church trusted them. Thanksgiving for healing by the archbishop, bishop or the prophetess is usual among these churches. Offerings in the forms of money and other gifts are collected to bless the abovementioned offices. My observation was that, in these churches, there is still a strong belief in ancestors. However, belief among the AICs does not supplement Christian beliefs; ancestors are mere intermediaries, and are appeased by offering and prayers. The success of this service has a positive bearing on the practitioners in the fulfilment of their spirituality. Most of AIC prophets live between the worlds of diviners and the Christian church. Where the prophets reach the position of the guiding ancestors, this may well become important to all members of the church and the community at large. When the prophet appeases his ancestors, the church is drawn in to take part (West 1975:186). This shows how the prophet can be the agent through which members are brought to increasingly participate in ancestral veneration and, indeed, in society generally.

5 Conclusion

African beliefs are centred around the divine (Bahemuka in Mugambi1998: 9). This divine may be in the form of the Supreme Being. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is one with the Father. If the Father (Yahweh) revealed himself to Africans and they responded in faith, why can the same Africans not discover Christ in their 'acts of faith'? AICs, in their involvement with ancestral veneration, do not see any contradiction here in their discipleship. What are their western counterparts saying about this conviction?

There are those who believe that ancestors can play a prominent role in the spiritual upliftment of those whose culture is embedded in African ancestral beliefs. At the same time, other westerners believe that the ancestors and Christianity have nothing to do with each other. What is taking place in reality is that many AICs are placating ancestors – either openly or ‘in the backyard’, and often to help others. Archbishop Ngada has explained that ancestors and Africans are inseparable and this has nothing to do with undermining Christianity. The reason for this is that it is spiritual experience that always marks the beginning of the spiritual journey (Gutierrez 1984:35). Members of AICs are not spiritually blind; they approach Christianity through their original interpretation of spirituality.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 According to Setiloane (2000:30) ancestors are people rather than gods.
- 2 Scripture confirms the historical connection since creation up to the birth of Jesus Christ.
- 3 God the Almighty could also be viewed as ancestor, especially from Genesis 1:26-27 which confirms the image of God to be like that of man. It is without saying that this understanding confirms God as a prototype ancestor to Jesus Christ who is a prototype to the Church, rather for the whole humanity and creation.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 The following are the supporting texts: Exodus 20:5; Exodus 20:12 "Honour your father and your mother so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. This is also confirmed in Matthew 15:4 and 19:19; Mark 7:10, Lk 18:20; Eph 6:2,3 all expressing the honour of both old and young since the time of Moses till today to prolong our days in the life on earth and the hereafter since Moses and his lineage has become a model of respect for seniority. The honour spoken about here remains intact for as long as it is remembered by those who are still alive. Often, the term 'elders' is also used to refer to the living dead.
- 6 We should be aware of Mbiti's choice of the term 'living dead' to draw a distinction between the living and the ancestors.
- 7 In Tswana they talk about *go roballwa ditlhokwa* meaning not to let the 'broom standing in a corner, but let it lie flat on the ground'. This suggests that the spirit of the deceased is allowed to rest in peace.
- 8 Some prophets, for example the late prophet Thandekiso near Vaaldam (a personal conversation with him at his home in the winter of 1982), before his second and final death claimed that he died for several days and was instructed by God that his earthly work was not yet accomplished. He is not classified as a living dead, but a blessed one who has experienced something beyond this life. This experience has secured him a respectful position among the best prophets among both the AICs and his community.
- 9 West (1975) uses the name shade referring to ancestors probably coming from *serefi* or shadow.
- 10 Thanksgiving may refer to ancestral activities as well.
- 11 See West (1975:182).