

THE ANCESTORS IN GHANAIAN RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

In the last Research Review Vol.3 No.1 of 1966, a note was made on the phenomenon of ancestor cult in Ghana and a further examination of it is made here. I mentioned in that note, that life after death is a universal belief in Ghana. The ancestors are supposed everywhere to be the kith and kin of the living who have passed into the world of spirits through physical death. It is necessary to note that Ghanaians distinguish between the spirits of 'the ancestors' and those of people who, because they did not live well or for some reason or the other, did not enter the world of the good. Such bad "spirits" asaman bone or asaman twentwan are not remembered or accorded any acts of reverence.

First, some analysis of reports from a number of the former tribal units called 'states' in Ghana may be useful in giving us more insight into this 'phenomenon' since there has been and are cults of the dead and social behaviour patterns that have been called ancestor worship.

In order to get a picture that could be called fairly universal, as far as Ghana is concerned, the sample examined covers parts of Akanland, Eweland and Adangmeland. (See map).

Explaining the significance of the festivities of their annual first fruit festival Ngmayem. Nene Akrobettoe III, paramount chief of Yilo Krobo, with a number of his elders, said the Ngmayem festival is a time for special sacrifices and libation. There is, of course, the dancing, which is an integral part of most social and religious performances in Ghana. In the main, the festivities help to reunite the living with the invisible dead.

These libations, sacrifices and dancings supplement the day to day reverential behaviour due, and given, to the ancestors. This

constantly revives and strengthens the vital belief in life after death. Like other 'states' in Ghana, the Krobo believe that the departed kin of the living live in the spiritual world which has no geographical location. The world of the ancestors is around or in the solid earth on which human life exists. Libation is poured as the usual way of invoking these ancestral spirits, but the spirits can, nonetheless, be invoked by mere words without the act of libation. As a matter of fact, libation is an art and an act of faith and this is the only reason why it is so common in affairs relating to 'the ancestors'. It is then a validation of what I call the law of use, which has a multiplier effect in the system of belief.

The patterns of behaviour seen in the circumstances which have been called worship of the ancestors, are first and foremost, influenced by the fact that the ancestors are regarded as elders to the living and therefore, must be accorded the familiar respect appropriate in ordinary social relations. The elders are called Nikotomai or Nimeli. These same names nikotomai or nimeli are used for the ancestors. The dead nimeli must not be denied their due reverence just because they are physically no more living. If anything, they command more respect and must be taken more seriously, since they are, in their new status, 'spirit'. As spiritual beings, they are capable of interceding for their living kin. They are nearer God, the supreme deity of the universe, than mortal men. Prayers passed through them have a shorter course to traverse to reach God or the superior deities. In this context, the superior deities are the greater spirits canalised by great rivers, trees and unusual phenomena. These spirits are not made by men but God created. Adebɔwɔi (Adangme) Mebɔwɔdzi (Ga) God created spirits. They come after God in the hierarchy of spirits.

All families, clans, and then the tribes or states have nimeli, and at all the levels, behaviour towards them must be in accordance with the norm; that is, reverence which borders almost on the modern meaning of the word "worship of a deity".

Nene Akrobetto reiterates that the belief is that the ancestors live life similar to that on earth, and the social connection between them and the living is facilitated through the acts of reverence and invocation. The constant remembrance of the ancestors, through acts which have been called worship of the ancestors, helps to promote social solidarity and mutual harmony.

When food and drinks are offered to the ancestors, the idea essentially expresses the awareness that the dead are alive and are allies of the living in the world here and now. It is clearly realized that the spirits do not eat and drink as the living do, and of course, the foods and drinks offered on graves or at shrines may be removed and eaten afterwards. Food and drinks left on graves, mausoleums, ancestral 'shrines' and even in homes for the ancestors are acts of faith and reverence. The acts demonstrate the faith that the dead, the living and the yet unborn are linked together. Hence the food to be eaten by the living must be shared with the dead kin.

Nana Ofori Attah II, and his elders at Kibi had these observations to make. According to them, the Odwira, the Ohum and Adaye festivals are not the worship of idols or gods. God is the source of all life and He is regarded as the greatest ancestor of human beings. Saying God is the greatest of ancestors, seems to suggest that the ancestors, contrary to their protestations, are worshipped. This is, however, denied. The ancestral spirits, it is held, are generally the 'elders' of the community that have been translated into the spiritual world.

Their meaning of som or osom, literally service of or to the ancestors, is identical to the som of osom of or to living elders and the great and this is one source of the confusion. Before the stools of the ancestors in the stool room, the chief who is served by his subjects, also serves and shows reverence to the ancestors whom he links with the living. He is Nana - grand dad or ancestor. Here, he is inferior, in relation to the dead chiefs, whose place he occupies.

In the view of the Kibi court, the ancestors need all the special treatment they get from men because they are able to act as interveners for the living. They are spirit and are therefore more able to get for the living the good things of life which, in their view, include prosperity, success in all undertakings, and children. It is believed that by acts of 'worship' - reverence to the ancestral spirits, men are able to present their petitions to God through them. The ancestors consider the petitions and present them to the Supreme Creator on behalf of their mortal living relations. By the acts, proper protection is obtained against evil forces. The ancestors are not by these acts, worshipped as gods but given due respect just as chiefs get their due respect from men on earth, since they are superior to their subjects. As the subordinates appeal to the chief for those good things of life he can supply, so they appeal to the ancestors for their needs which could only be supplied by the 'elders' in their 'superior spiritual plane of existence.' As through som (service) of the chief, the subjects implore their chief for help so through the som (worship) of the ancestors, petitions are passed on to God. We have, they say, total faith in the spirit ancestors for they established sound foundations for us and we are inheritors of their endeavours.

At Peki, a council of elders said that on festival days, special libation is poured and other acts of reverence performed in relation to the ancestors for their commemoration. A sheep may be slaughtered and the blood sprinkled on ancestral stools. The symbolic act of sprinkling blood on the stools helps to remind the living that they are or must be cleansed. At the Adae(s) - meaning (the sleeps) all the ancestors, and principally all the chiefly ones are specially remembered. The people of Peki like the Adas and, indeed many Ghanaians, believe that the land they occupy belongs to the ancestors who fought and won it for them. Hence these ancestors, therefore, qualify for special homage.

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1. Informants: Abusuapanyin (Clan head), Gidi Mensah, Gyasehene (the chief of the King's palace) Addo Donkor Tuafohene (Advance guard) Akotia III and G.V. Amoah, Esq.

Here again, the ancestors are believed to be mediators. They are not gods. At the same time one of their maxims is "Se wonnim wanya a, emmawo Nana a awoo wanya din." If you do not know the name of your father, do not mention the name of the ancestor who bore your father. The implication is that one cannot say one can reach God, if one does not even know one's dead kin - the ancestors - in other words, one cannot know God without knowing one's own neighbour.

Similar sentiments are expressed by the chief and linguist of Akwamu Kwanyako, Nana Anyanful and Kofi Aye respectively.

The evidence of Barfoo Afari Darko III of Afi near New Tafo categorically points out that the Obuo (respect) or Osuro (fear) or Osom (worship) of the ancestors stem from the fact that they are regarded as mediators between the lineage and the Supreme God. The belief in re-incarnation, the people say, makes it impossible that the ancestors whose spirits come back into the world through other people could be gods to be worshipped.

Nana Kwame Fori, Omahene of Akuapem had a mixed story to tell but the one thing came out clearly and that is, the ancestors are, in Akropong, not regarded as Anyame (gods). They are part and parcel of the people. They are different only in the sense that they are invisible and are, through their transition into the spiritual world, able to be of spiritual help to their living kin. They can, of course, be harmful, if they become dissatisfied with the living. They do this by withdrawing their protection from their living kin, thus rendering them very vulnerable to all sorts of ills. This is why the living honour them and ask them reverently to continue to bestow goodness on them whom they have left behind to continue the race.

The Adangme and Ga of Ghana hold similar views. Before their contact with the Akans of the forest principally in the 15th and 16 centuries, the Adangme and the Ga had, in the main, priest leaders

instead of the political chiefs they have today. Even in these tribes, the idea that the ancestors are worshipped is rejected. There is, however, confusion in the minds of some functioning priests at times and the ancestors are sometimes ranked with the other gods. Nene Lanimo Opata, of Shai, and Nene Dake of Ada, Nene Aninle of Osudoku, Nene Anorkwei of Prampram hold the view that the ancestors form a hard core of the forces through whom we secure our social cohesion, continuity, and blessings. They become in addition to other things, a mechanism of social control.

No less important are the ancestors to the people of Ho in the Volta region. Here, however, the part of the sacrificial meat that is left to the ancestors, according to my informant<sup>1</sup>, are the remnants, mainly, the bones. Even so, it appears the real function of the act of leaving bones on the graves or on sites supposed to be visited by the ancestors has been misconstrued by my informant, since he thinks only the bones are good for the ancestors, since they are dead.

The essential point really to be noted is that, people of this part of Ewe country do realise that the ancestors have some functional role in the lives of the living although to them, 'God created' spirits are the real forces that matter most. They believe very much in the world of magic and man made charms too.

All these evidences lead us only to a point in our attempt to understand the acts which constitute what we have called ancestor worship. The manifest and latent functions have been taken one for the other in many cases. In some cases, the real meaning of the acts are not known. The officials follow a tradition, and that is all they know.

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1. Togbe Afede Asor II, Paramount chief of Ho Asogli traditional area.

If by worship we mean great honour paid to anyone, then the term ancestor worship is very apt in the description of the acts involved in the cult. We have noted elsewhere that linguistically, *som* (Akan) *Dzamo* (Ga) *Dzam* (Adangme) *Subɔsubɔ* (Ewe) may mean worship which is honour paid to a great one or service and reverence. The same terms in the various languages have come to mean the type of behaviour we expect from men to God or His 'lieutenants'.

Of course, when we say "your worship" in the modern magistrate's court in Ghana, it does not mean we want to think of the magistrate as a god. It is a term of reverence. The overtones, in the practices of ancestor worship, however, suggest that there is something more to them than mere show of respect and awe. This is undoubtedly so, but it seems it cannot be said without reservations, that libation and all the features of the cult of ancestors in Ghana are acts of religious worship.

Again, the question of what is religion stares us in the face. It is rather too vague in this discussion. Going by Taylor's minimal definition - belief in spiritual beings "ancestor worship could still be an appropriate term but the definition is only minimal and not a standard one. It may be correct to think of ancestor-worshipping tribe as one in which the members feel a sense of dependence on the ancestors who begot them. In this, the sense of dependence on these beings or powers superior to man, may be viewed as an engagement in something religious. Definitely, the awareness of men of their ancestors provides a sanction on morality and conduct, and aids the smooth functioning of the community. The fear of the ancestors, and so the constant vigilance of people to respect the norms of the community may be labelled as being a feature of religion. This, the field material being collected does not seem to support. Ancestor reverence may be a means of social control, but social control is not all religion oriented.

As we have seen, the belief in the existence of the ancestors is very real in Ghana and many who have accepted other world religions do still believe in the importance of their ancestors. In a study of the

Lakpa<sup>3</sup> - the principal deity of the people of Labadi, the question was seriously raised why certain people who do not worship 'idols' (referring to those who believe in the existence of the Lakpa) should be barred from participating in Christian worship and rituals. What was bothering the people was that, there is now a strong feeling that the position of those who believe in the Lakpa is misunderstood. In the same way as most Ghanaian Christians believe in the existence of their ancestors and the help they are able to give by way of interceding for them, so they who are debarred from the Church are not idol worshippers but believers in the spirit of the ancestors. The destruction of this belief has not been effective and it is believed that where its destruction succeeds, it will do so at the expense, and disruption, of the life and community. Busia<sup>4</sup> suggests that moral and sexual laxity and weakening or ineffectiveness of moral sanctions of the community results where the belief in the ancestors and what they mean is destroyed among an 'ancestor worshipping' community.

A quick look at the core of Christian ideas of life after death seem not to be diametrically opposed to the Ghanaian belief in the eternal existence of their dead kin. Where the two systems of belief part ways is a matter of doctrinal details.

The belief in the hosts of past witnesses - the church invisible - who join the faithful living saints at love feasts and at the sacramental table are, to the Ghanaian, akin to the belief in the 'faithful ancestors'. Again the Christian does not believe that those of the invisible Christ's Church slay their client's adversaries. The Old Testament belief in this is similar, of course, to the belief of the ordinary Ghanaian, who when he is praying to his ancestors asks among other things, vengeance on his adversaries.

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3. The Lakpa - Unpublished paper. Draft in the Library of the Institute of African Studies, Legon (A.K. Quarcoo).
  4. Readings for Comparative Religion. The social function of Ancestor worship among the people of the Gold Coast. K.A. Busia.



Some of the material things which have been pointed at as evidence of the Cult of the ancestors being ancestor worship are the ancestor shrines and figures. It is pertinent to note that for most Ghanaians, a sculptured wooden or mud image is neither an idol nor image of God. Images may, after proper observations and ceremonies sometimes, be a medium for a spirit. Spirits are of many kinds - and may be spirits of natural powers - the earth, lightning, sun and moon, and, of course, there are the spirits of the ancestors. Figures which are called ancestral, satisfy deeply rooted psychological needs. Such figures range from forked sticks, which are called "spirit sticks"<sup>5</sup> or "fathers", or Nyamedua (God's tree) to mud or wood sculpture of human forms.

Ancestral figures may be compared in many respects, to the figures of the saints in some Christian Churches and cathedrals. The figures could be regarded, even as the Roman Catholic figures were classified about 1550-1660 by the council of Trent as biblia: idiota-- the books or Bible of the illiterate. In the context of ancestor figures, we may say they are items of visual aid for the living.

In this note on the ancestors, an attempt is being made to draw attention to this dimension of ancestor cult which points to the fact that the ancestors may not necessarily be objects of worship as gods by the methods used.

It is important to note, however, that there are many people who believe they are actually worshipping their ancestors everywhere in the tribes mentioned earlier on. This, from investigation, stems from the fact that ancestor cult has traditionally been accepted by people, and the real essence of it and rational assessment of the reasons for the practices and for participation in them have never been attempted by them. Those

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5. Forked sticks - in Lodagaaba - Jack Goody  
 Nyamedua - Akan  
 Mud figures - in parts of Adangme.

who know think it is all for the better if people think they are "worshiping" their ancestors and so do the things they should do with the requisite diligence and decorum. It is necessary then to bear this in mind in any field research on the purpose and significance of the practices that have been called ancestor worship in Ghana. There is the need, in looking at this phenomenon, for patient participant observation and analysis of both overt actions and psychological reactions. The whole of community life in the tribes mentioned in this paper have unifying sentiments and most of these sentiments are enshrined in religion which pervades all activities. Reverence for the ancestors and activities which help to keep men constantly aware of them, their deeds, their spirituality and, therefore, their ability to intercede for the living, take on, in many cases, a religious flavour. This is ascertainable from a study of the cosmologies of many tribal units in Ghana. Generally, there is the great Onyame (Twi) Ataa-Naa Nyomɔ (mother-father God) (Ga), Mau (Adangme), Mawu (Ewe). From the supreme being, the Creator, is derived all power, life and energy. The creator is the Universal, vital force. All things come from Him, and the real essence of things is made up of energy and power given them by the Creator.

It is this view and interpretation of things, which make the exact significance of many ceremonial, reverential or religious behaviour patterns not discreetly identifiable. Performances related to ancestors are in Ghana very alive. Very many Ghanaian Christians believe in the existence of the ancestors, which it appears, is not incompatible with the teachings they have accepted. Maybe, it should rather have a complementary effect. The practice of 'costly' memorial services<sup>6</sup> appears

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6. Some Christian denominations notably the Presbyterians and the Methodist to a lesser extent attempted to ban these memorial services in the last decade but failed hopelessly. Now most denominations exploit the situation to collect money for church work. No elaborate exclusive sermons are however preached for the bereaved, anyway.

to be a carry-over from the traditional elaborate funeral observances.

The suggestion, which needs to be examined, with a background of a little more field work, is that Ghanaians do not necessarily deify OR WORSHIP THEIR ANCESTORS. They believe the ancestors are spiritual beings. They are kith and kin of the living. They care for their welfare. They desire that the living should live well, according to the norms of the society, which they (the ancestors) helped to establish. They intercede for the living but withdraw from men when men do the things which they ought not to do. Belief in the ancestors, therefore, is a sanction on morality. What is principally involved in ancestor 'worship' is reverence to the ancestors. As often as the practices are observed, they are done in remembrance and reverence of men's kith and kin in the spiritual world.

The ancestors, in summary, occupy a special place in Ghanaian 'society'. From data so far, I suspect to describe the relationship between Ghanaians and the ancestors as 'ancestor worship' robs the relationship of the 'human character' that is paramount. The data we have examined suggests that Ghanaians think of their ancestors as the invisible part of the lineage even as Christians think of the Church invisible as part and parcel of the living saints. The ancestors are, then not worshipped but honoured. Victor Uchendu suggested this from his study of the Igbo of Southern Nigeria but he also said the ancestral honour was a type of a religion.

He writes 'They (the ancestors) are not worshipped, but honoured for their social status in the spiritual world, and more for leaving their children land on which the subsistence and other social achievements of the living are based. The ancestral honour is a religion based on reciprocity. There is loving reverence for the deceased ancestors, who are expected to come back to reincarnate and "do the living members what they did for them".'

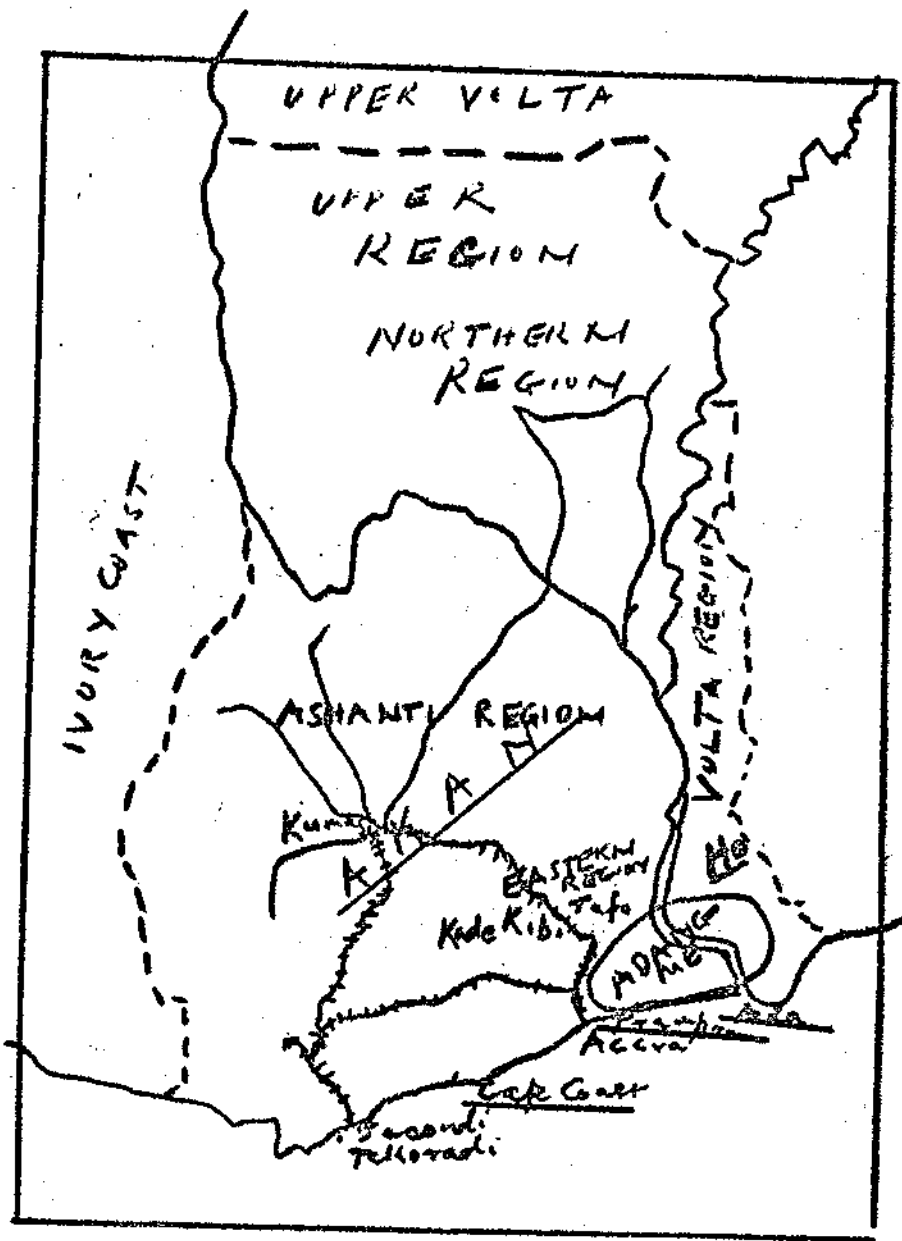
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7. Nigerian Field Vol. XXIX No. 1 January 1964, Page 33. The ancestral honour.

What he exactly means by saying the honour of the ancestors is a religion based on reprocity is not very clear but the rest of his discussion seems to point to the fact that he could not mean by his religion, that social behaviour in which God or gods are postulated, prayed to and worshipped. His finding about the honour for the ancestors among the Igbo is similar, if not almost identical to the case in Ghana.

This, however, means a number of things. It cannot be said that all the practices involved in ancestor reverence everywhere in Ghana will continue to stand, in spite of the trends of the cultural change, but the persistence of the belief derives from the real essence of the cult; namely honour and reverence of the dead kin who are, spirit-beings capable of interceding for, and giving favour or disfavour to the living.

A.K. Quarcoo.



100 miles