

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN YORUBA INDIGENOUS  
RELIGION AND SAINTHOOD IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH**

**BY**

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YEAR: 2015

I, ADEOSUN Deborah Ibukunoluwa, hereby authorise the copy of my thesis in part or whole in response to request from individuals and/or organisations for the purpose of private study or research.

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**CERTIFICATION**

This is to certify that this research was carried out by ADEOSUN Deborah Ibukunoluwa (Registration Number ARP11/12/H/1428) in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Arts in Religious Studies under my supervision.

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## DEDICATION

This academic research is dedicated to the memory of my late father, Engineer Michael Ayinla Adeosun.

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## ABSTRACT

The study identified and categorised ancestor worship among the Yoruba and the veneration of saints in Roman Catholic Church in selected Yoruba towns. It compared the elements and discussed the similarities and differences in ancestral worship in Yoruba indigenous religion and veneration of saints in Roman Catholic Church. It also examined the significance of ancestor worship and veneration of saints to the spirituality of adherents in the two traditions. This was done with a view to finding comparative elements in ancestor worship and the veneration of saints in Yoruba Indigenous Religion and the Roman Catholic Church respectively.

The study employed both primary and secondary sources of data collection. The primary source included participant observation and semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted with five purposively selected ritual specialists from each of the cults of Egungun in Òşogbo and Ibadan, Sàngó in Ọyó, Òsun in Òşogbo and Morèmi in Ilé-Ife. The selected cults of ancestors were chosen because of their prominence in Òşogbo, Ibadan, Ọyó and Ilé-Ife, which were core traditional Yoruba towns. In addition, two purposively selected Catholic priests and devoted members were interviewed in churches at Òşogbo, Ọyó, Ibadan and Ilé-Ife. The selected towns had Roman Catholic Churches with massive followership, and their spaces were well adorned with images and icons of the saints. The differences in the number of interviewees in ancestor worship and sainthood was because there were variations in ritual practices in the ancestral cult selected while there was infinity in the practice of the

eneration of Saints in Catholicism. The secondary source included books, journal articles and the Internet. The data collected were analysed using the sociological and comparative approaches.

The results showed that there were two categories of ancestors in Yoruba Indigenous Religion which were family and community (deified) ancestors, and three categories of saints in the Roman Catholic Church which were Acclaimed, Canonized and Patron saints. The study revealed that ancestor worship and the veneration of saints were similar because they were practices aimed at seeking the mediatory help of the ancestors and saints. It also found out that both practices differed in terms of the relationship between the ancestors and saints, and their devotees. It further found out that the practice of ancestor worship and the veneration of saints was significant to the spirituality of the adherents because they strengthened their faith in both traditions.

The study concluded that there were several comparative elements in ancestor worship and the veneration of saints which included belief, rituals, sacred objects and symbols, cult custodians, ties between the ancestors/saints and their adherents as well as speciality of the ancestors/saints in specific causes.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background to the Study

The death of a parent, guardian or spiritual mentor usually has a great impact on the lives of the bereaved loved ones. The children, wards or followers, as the case may be, most often feel a need to ensure that the cordial relationship once shared with the dead does not end as a result of their death; and they do this probably because of the need to ensure that the legacy of the deceased lives on or because they believe that the deceased have moved on to a new plane of existence where their only duty is to provide assistance and guidance for those they left behind.

In most world religions, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, Judaism, death is seen as an end to the physical existence of life – it is the separation of the spirit from the body - and a transition into the afterlife. Thus conceived, it is a rite of passage that translates human beings from a physical realm of existence into a spiritual realm of invisibility.<sup>1</sup> The consequence is to organise rituals to ensure a safe passage of the deceased into the afterlife, as well as bid the dead farewell into the spirit world.

The belief in the immortality of the soul exists in the doctrine of Yorùbá Indigenous Religion and Christianity. Babatunde Lawal, in explaining the concept of immortality in Yorùbá Indigenous Religion, posits that death to the Yorùbá is not the end of life rather it is the dematerialization of the vital breath or soul and therefore a transformation from an earthly existence into a spiritual existence.<sup>2</sup> This bears similarity with the core of the Christian faith

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<sup>1</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, (London: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1991), p. 124

<sup>2</sup> B. Lawal, “The Living Dead: Art and Immortality among the Yorùbá of Nigeria” in *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 47, No. 1, (1977), pp. 50-61

which also hinges on the teaching that there is life after death. The Christian doctrine emphasises that the human soul is immortal; hence, life is a continuum; a journey into the eternal home, that is heaven, for those who believe in Jesus Christ and had lived a holy life.

In the experiential world of humans, death has a critical impact on the living, who experience the absence of the deceased and may be looking for different ways and different means to re-enact and protect the relationship they once shared with the deceased. One of such ways of re-creating relationships is through ancestor worship and the veneration of saints. Both practices are aimed at honouring the dead and at the same time seeking their intervention in this-worldly affairs. Ancestor worship and the veneration of saints are religious practices that help to ensure that the relationship shared with the deceased ancestor/saint is not terminated by death; rather it continues in the ritual processes explicating their roles in the lives of people connected to them. In other words, through special rituals and rites of remembrance, the relationship with the dead continues.

Ancestors are dead family members, national heroes or leaders who are deified and worshipped by their living descendants. The practice centres on the notion that specific progenitors, after death, possess supernatural capabilities that can continue to directly affect the living descendants positively or negatively.<sup>3</sup> The conception of the family is thus extended to incorporate figures in the afterlife,<sup>4</sup> specifically those who can be venerated for interventions that bring success in trade, farming, war, fertility of human beings and animals, healing from sicknesses and diseases, and in keeping evil and misfortunes away from them.

In Yorùbá indigenous religion, the daily life of the individual, the family, clan, village, town or ethnic group is governed by the goodwill of the ancestors as well as that of other

<sup>3</sup> E.B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A definition*, (London: Fountain Publications, 1991), p. 184

<sup>4</sup> J.A. Adedeji, "The Egungun in The Religious Concept of the Yorùbá", in E.A. Ade Adegbola (ed.) *Traditional Religion in West Africa* (Ibadan: Sefer, 1998), p. 117





deities.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the need to worship the ancestors is for the continual wellbeing of the community, a means to avert evil and misfortunes which might result from the loss of their goodwill. Each family maintains the cult of their ancestors - the most recently departed head of the family, at which the eldest member of the family officiates, while at the community level the entire community worships the spirit of deified ancestors who are usually community leaders and founders, war lords and national heroes that were an integral part of the religious milieu of their community and whose influence are continually recognized.<sup>6</sup> Their heroic deeds, such as wars fought and won, exemplary leadership displayed and acts of selflessness done which earned them a position in the religious pantheon of their community, are passed from one generation to another through socialization. The chief priest or head of the ethnic group officiates in the worship of tribal ancestors.<sup>7</sup>

The most dramatic demonstration of Yorùbá ancestral worship is the *Egúngún* (masquerade). It represents the collective spirit of the ancestors, and it is a major belief in Yorùbá Indigenous Religion.<sup>8</sup> According to Lawal, Yorùbá people believe that it is through the *Egúngún* mask that the soul of the departed ancestor returns to the earth in a physical form to inquire about the welfare of the living descendants.<sup>9</sup> The word *Egúngún* has become a symbolic representation of dead ancestors, and in most communities certain period of the year is devoted to Egúngún festival, which implies the worship of ancestors.

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<sup>5</sup> J.F. Ade Ajayi and E. A. Ayandele, "Emerging Themes of West African Religious History", in E.A. Ade Adegbola (ed.) *Traditional Religion in West Africa* (Ibadan: Sefer, 1998), pp. 446-455

<sup>6</sup> J.S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, (London: Heinemann Publishers, 1980), p.4

<sup>7</sup> Lawal, "The Living Dead", pp. 55-56

<sup>8</sup> Lawal, "The Living Dead", p. 57

<sup>9</sup> Lawal, "The Living Dead", pp. 57-58



The civilising tendencies the West brought to Africa, particularly the globalising forces, have greatly affected the regard initially accorded to ancestors and their involvement in human affair.

Yet, one can see the veneration of saints in Catholicism as a

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