

A Critique of Alamu's 'The Place of African Ancestors in The Age of Modernity'.

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Abstract

The thrust of this paper is a critique of the work of Alamu, on the place of African Ancestors in the age of modernity. It also sets to inform the public that despite the coming of Western civilisations and globalising forces, African Ancestors are still relevant to those who hold them in high esteem. Africans venerate Ancestors because of the crucial roles they are playing in the community. They are the intermediaries of the people, seers, and they abate calamities coming to their loved ones. They also bring good fortunes in the community and to individuals. But, the advent of Christianity and Islam brought a drastic shift from the tradition of revering African Ancestors to pledging allegiance to the Ancestors of either Christianity or Islamic religions. The methodology is qualitative. The study argues that it is on this ground that, the African Ancestors became mute to the social ills in the society. The work rejects the idea of letting the Ancestors to rest, since today in Nigeria, the Nationalists are treated as Ancestors by naming Federal institutions, roads, and other important establishments after them. The paper concludes that Ancestors cannot be laid to rest in this age of modernity, because the place of Ancestors in African society varies. There are family, clan, community, and ethnic group Ancestors, and all are working today based on the role they are saddled with. Their quietness to social ills does not mean they are weak.

Keywords: Alamu, African Ancestors, African Traditional Religion, Age of Modernity, Venerators

Introduction

Belief in the ancestors occupies an important place in African Traditional Religion. This belief is based on the African belief in the immortality of the soul (Fatokun 135). According to Parrinder (Parrinder 24), “all Africans believe in ancestors as ever living and watchful.” Awolalu also said:

The ancestors constitute the closest link between the world of men and

the spirit world and they are believed to be keenly interested in the welfare of their living descendants. They are regarded as presiding spiritually over the welfare of the family.... The living has the confidence that they live in a world in which their ancestors are interested and over which they are watching (Awolalu 61).

As a result of African's strong belief that ancestors have supernatural powers, they are often venerated and invoked in times of special needs to seek their blessings or avert their anger (Parrinder 135). Similarly, rituals and ceremonies are often observed in remembrance of them to ensure their continuous watch over the living members of their families. With civilisation, however, African heritage of preserving the memory of departed good parents have been Christianised in the form of "outing and memorial services: Practices which are not in the New Testament, but a development from African culture orientation. At any rate, the African belief in ancestral spirits provides the sanctions for the basic work in the social structure. The ancestral cult serves as a source and guarantee of the tribe and custodians of the society (Fatokun 135).

Alamu gave us the highlights of the roles of Ancestors in the society. It is obvious that Ancestors are the intermediaries between the living relatives and the Divinity. They protect, ensure morals, avert calamities, punish offenders, bless the upright etc. All these were mentioned by Alamu, but the muteness of Ancestors towards unchecked immoralities in the society today, propelled Alamu to say Ancestors should not be venerated or remembered by their living relatives. Alamu did not put into consideration the advent of Christianity and Islam; the fact that most of the Traditional Religious Adherents would have converted into any of the two religions. This paper is against the submission of Alamu that Ancestors should be left to rest. Instead, Ancestors should be venerated, honour and celebrated, because they are active in the activities of the living relatives, despite the globalisation or civilisation in the world today.

Understanding African Ancestors

According to Alamu, the root of religion is the absolute dependence of human beings on the supernatural powers, capable of aiding them in time of trouble. The essence of this, makes Africans believe that, they can commune with their ancestors, who have enhanced powers associated with their newly acquired status and particularly as intermediaries between man and Supreme

Being (Alamu 50). One thing that Alamu should have noticed here, based on the intermediary roles of the ancestors, is that, they are not independent, but subjected to God, who is the ultimate guardian of the morality in the African society. This means that, they do not have absolute power to ensure morality; they take their moral instruction from the Supreme Being, and act according to the Supreme Being's order. Ancestors are departed spirits who are honoured as a result of their long, good, spectacular and extra-ordinary lives (Dopamu 28).

The deceased who are truly members of the families on earth; but they are no longer of the same fleshy order as those who are still living in the flesh on earth. They are closely related to his world; but are no longer ordinary mortals. Because they have crossed the border land between this world, and the super sensible world, entering and living in the latter, they have become freed from the restrictions imposed by the physical world. They can now come to abide with their fold on earth, invisibly to aid or hinder, to promote prosperity or cause adversity (Idowu 187).

In view of the submission of Idowu, Awolalu and Dopamu also added that since the ancestors are no longer visible in the physical sense, some elements of enhanced power is attributed to them. Death has given them more potentialities, and has greatly enhanced their dignity, power, and prestige. They possess considerable power both for good and for evil. Sicknes and misfortune of every kind can be attributed to the influence of those offended among them (Awolalu and Dopamu 55).

These show how powerful the ancestors are in the African communities. Though dead, yet influence the activities of the living for positive or negative side effects, depending on the role the living play. Mbiti called them the living dead because they are the closest links that men have with the spirit world. Their living family members still have them in their minds and it is believed that the ancestors come around to eat and relate with the living” (Mbiti 83). These roles that the ancestors play in the African communities are what make the people to venerate them or remember them in their daily activities.

Qualifications of the African Ancestors

On the aspect of the qualifications of one becoming an ancestor, the work makes it known that death is not the end of life, as such, the African living dead are not totally cut off from their descendants. As a matter of fact, the African

living dead have an endless fellowship with the living in the community. With this submission of the introduction on the qualifications of the African ancestors, it kicked against the conclusion of Alamu's work that the ancestors should be left to rest completely.

Alamu tells us that for one to become an ancestor, one would have to live a good life, live to a ripe old age, die good death and accorded full burial rites. The work tells us that burial is the last and the most important stage that gives one the right of him/her becoming an ancestor in the community. The work also did say that proper burial is a requirement for admission into the communion of the ancestors. People who are not properly buried revolve around (Alamu 51).

One of the fundamental things that Alamu fail to discuss and that is very important in making someone to have the right of becoming an ancestor is the issue of offspring. Without offspring that would give the deceased a befitting burial, such an individual will never become an ancestor in the African community. It is in view of this that Awolalu said that: "Offspring is one of the qualifications that one must possess in order for such a person to become an ancestor (Awolalu 54)." This implies that without offsprings, one cannot become an ancestor. The work also fails to say whether a young person can become an ancestor, but Idowu made us to understand that: "young people who live a good life, die a natural death and have offspring can become an ancestor."

It is also believed that social status of the dead determined the type of burial that will be given to such a person. A woman would be buried with her immediate needs such as necklaces, earrings, clothing materials, food and utensils; a hunter with his weapons; a royal personage was accompanied by a retinue of attendants and servants who were put to death at the time of burial. Alamu failed to mention this burial aspect in details in his work.

A lay man will not be able to know what it means to die a good death from the African point of view. And how can one die a bad death or what type of death is classified as bad death? Alamu failed to bring to the knowledge of those within and outside the religious field, what it means to die a good death and what kind of death is classified as bad death. To this, Awolalu said: "Children and Youths who die a premature death, barren women, and all who die a bad death such as *Ayelala*, *Sango* or *Soponno* (*chicken pox*) victims, are excluded from becoming ancestors. On the other hand, if one's death is not as a result of *Ayelala*, *Sango* or *Soponno*, his/her death is a good one (Awolalu 54).Abimku

also said: “among- the Eggon people, anybody who dies as a result of accident cannot become an ancestor, because it is a curse, however, natural death makes one to become an ancestor (Abimiku 15).”

The writer has no problem with the issue of addressing the wrong notion of some people or foreign scholars who see ancestral veneration as worship. The work of Alamu has justified itself by kicking against the issue of saying that African Religion is ancestral worship, through the work of Dopamu, Idowu and Gyekye as cited by Alamu. He also rightly pointed out the relationship between ancestors and their relatives. According to him, ancestors live beyond the mundane and are venerated by their children or relatives, and are included in the religious hierarchy of Africans and are charged with the responsibility of acting as the go-between of the living and the super sensible world. The ancestors maintain a healthy relationship with their families and provide for the family their needs and make sure the families live in a way that is in line with the ethics and norms of the community or the family. As a result of the benevolent attitude of the ancestors, the living in return, offers food and drinks to them (Alamu 50). This study quite agrees with Alamu on this aspect of the role of the ancestors to the living.

To keep these ancestors alive in the minds of the people, there are festivals that are set aside for the appreciation of the ancestors. Alamu stated that among the Yoruba, they have the *Egungun* and *Oro*, while communal ceremonies are also carried out in some communities, in honour of the dead. Among the Igbo, it is known as *Mnuo*, *Adac*; among the Akan, *Uda* in Ekpoma, Obazu in Aoma, and among the Edo (Alamu 51). The Eggon people have what is known as the *Ashimu* festival (Capro Media, 90).

Veneration of Ancestors among the Africans

The ancestors constitute the closest link between the world of men and the spirit world and they are believed to be keenly interested in the welfare of their living descendants. They exercise protective and disciplinary influences on their children. They are the guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethnics and activities. An 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. It is, therefore, believed that the ancestors can be of tremendous benefit to the children who keep them happy and who observe the family

taboos; but can be detrimental to the disobedient and negligent children. The implication is that the ancestors expect their descendants to care for them by making offerings of food and drinks (Awolalu 61).

These African ancestors were heroes in their lifetime. They had positively influenced lives, brought development, and liberated people from imperialism. In order to remember them, schools or markets are created in their honour. If one were to examine this statement, submitted by Alamu, it could be concluded that those who fought for independence like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Tafawa Balewa, Ahmadu Bello, Herbert Macaulay among others are national ancestors, that liberated the Country from British imperialism and brought development to Nigeria. October 1st of every year is set aside as a day of celebrating Nigeria's Independence, which serves as a festival in honour of Nigerian forefathers (i.e. Ancestors).

Alamu should have come out like this in his work, since he mentioned the positive influence of lives, development and the liberation from imperialism. The work fails to let us know that our political or independent fathers are the ones that suit this statement in the above expression. Those who fought for Nigeria independent are always remembered and every October 1st is set aside as Independence Day celebration, and remembrance of those who fought for Nigerian's independence. Places like roads, hospitals, schools, air ports, stadia, etc. have been named after them, and they always serve as a reference point to present leaders in times of good governance. Ancestors are also referred to as moral paragons because they uphold morality and are custodians of traditional morality. This is absolutely true as far as ancestors are concerned. According to Awolalu and Dopamu:

Belief in ancestors supplies sanctions for public morality. They are the guardians of traditional morality. They, therefore, demand a high sense of respect for the traditional law and custom. The living must live as they have lived. It is believed that just as the living parents have power to punish disobedience in the youth or dereliction of filial duties so also the neglected or offended ancestors can punish their offspring for moral offences, and they can bring disaster upon the whole family (Awolalu and Dopamu 56).

On the issue of festival in honour of ancestors, Alamu concluded that celebration of the ancestors is a common place rehearsal in African Religion. The veneration of ancestors aids the adherents spiritually, especially as regards

healthy and cordial relationship with the spirit world. He further added that ancestral veneration is performed either annually, biannually, monthly, bi-monthly, or anytime especially by the heads of the immediate families, priest, priestess or clan heads, depending on the occasion. The study agrees with the conclusion of Alamu on celebration of ancestors.

The Dilemma of the Ancestors in the Age of Modernity

Dilemma is a situation in which one has to choose between two undesirable things or courses of action. It is apparent that African ancestors are the spirit of the departed who are remembered and honoured with great festivals. They participate in virtually all that is taking place in their immediate families and the communities in general, if it is in line with the religious values laid down by them. They gain high spiritual status endowed with powers, which the living do not possess. Contrary to the submission of Alamu that the ancestors do not show concern and kindness to their subjects, Idowu said:

The mention of invocation of ancestors in connection with the practice of medicine is a common feature in the practice of medicine in many parts of Africa. It is an accepted practice that apart from God and/or the divinity, the ancestors who first practice medicine or who were past masters reveal in dream to their loyalists or fellow family members medicine for curing different kinds of diseases (Idowu 200).

The statement of Idowu negates the submission of Alamu, by saying ancestors do not show concern and kindness. Today, African medicine is highly patronised by foreigners, and it is even more effective than some foreign medicines in this age of modernity. This is to show how kind the ancestors are even in the age of modernity. The ancestors are referred to as “moral paragons” in which case they are the custodians of public and traditional morality in their community. However, it is no longer true today that, ancestors still have virtues. Alamu said ancestors are morally bankrupt as a result of the fact that some moral problems such as stealing, incest, sorcery, witchcraft, killing, maiming, disobedience, adultery, false oath, hatred and lots of others have assumed dangerous and unprecedented dimension. He further said that, these moral problems which are supposed to attract sanctions by the ancestors are allowed to soar and remain unchecked.

Alamu failed to note that a lot of women have died in the process of

giving birth, especially in the rural areas as a result of adultery. This is still in practice in most of the villages. While a lot of people have died because of their stealing habit through the use of fetish powers by the original owners of the stolen properties. This has helped to enhance morality in the community. In the aspect of disobedience, Ogunade kicks against the submission of Alamu that the ancestors do not check immoralities that occur in their community. According to Ogunade, “No disobedient person or child prosper in the community, and for one to prosper and flourish, obedience is the way out, especially to the elders (25).” This is to show that disobedience is not left unchecked as Alamu said. Though, one cannot dispute the fact that, immorality is unchecked by the ancestors, his work failed to prove if with the advent of Christianity, some adherents of African Religion converted to Christianity and stopped practicing African Religion in time of honouring or venerating the ancestors. This shows that they are no longer bound to the ancestral guidance and moral check-up, but to the foreign God who does not seem to punish immediately.

According to Awolalu, “Only the devotees of Sango face his punishment if they steal, lie, practice witchcraft and sorcery” (35). This shows that if you are not his devotee, he cannot punish you. It is obvious that the ancestors act only according to the subjects that are under them. The ancestors today are blind to the endless challenges being faced in the society, since people's allegiance is no longer to them. Alamu posits that the people expect much from them, but today the reverse is the case because people's lives depend on multifarious variables. These variables are both endogenous and exogenous in nature. It is endogenous in the sense that the problems people cause for themselves, emanating from the inability of the family or head of the family, to provide for needs of the family. Also, the problem of bad leadership, harsh economic reforms, political uprisings, and social unrest cannot be solved by the ancestors. Even the living, who are caught in the act of immorality, go scot – free without sanction from the “moral paragon”.

Alamu failed to understand that the society have shifted from the political system that makes the ancestors to have power to control or check the morality in society. Why should the ancestors be involved in the system of government that they knew nothing about? Political leaders today do not swear by the ancestors, *Sango* or *Ogun* like it's done among the Yorubas, *Amadioha*

among the Igbo and *Ashimu* among the Eggon; instead, when taking oath of office, the Bible or Quran is used. The ancestors can only ensure morality if they have been involved, or oath is taken in their name.

Just like what the Bible says, “If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and seek my face, I will hear their cry and heal their land” (II Chron.7:14). This shows that if Christians refuse to reverence God, He will not intervene for them in times of trouble, calamities and famine. So it is with the issue of the position of ancestors in Africa, in this age of modernity. We cannot rule out the fact that the ancestors are not acting today in our world. The issues of HIV/AIDs, Lassa fever, Ebola, Hepatitis, COVID-19 in our society today, premature death and suffering in the society, could be as a result of the work of the ancestors. In one of the roles of the ancestors, it is believed that if they are neglected, they can bring calamities in the land; which harsh economic reforms and out-break of all kinds of diseases can be attributed to. All these are seen as punishments from the ancestors in this Age of modernity.

In African traditional religious belief, the ancestors are consulted through the oracle before any functions is performed. Lately, human beings have taken over the position of the ancestors; they no longer consult the oracle so as to know the mind and choice of the ancestors concerning certain issues affecting the community. Money is used to determine who becomes a king by the king makers. The kingmakers speak their minds instead of the minds of the ancestors. Where are the ancestors? If they are still the “living-dead”, it means they are crying for justice, reinstatement and restoration (Alamu 55).

How can the ancestors cry for justice while they are the ones that ensure justice in the community? One thing that Alamu failed note is that, with the advent of Christianity and Islam, most of these Kingmakers are either Christians or Muslims, and the king could either be a Christian or a Muslim and not a member of African religion. The ancestors would not be the ones to deal with the person that collect money in order to elect a king, but the God of Christianity or Allah of Islamic religion; since they are now answerable to the God of Christianity or Allah of Islam. Though, it is believed that it is their wish for them to be reinstated and restored, yet, if the people fail to do so, they will fold their hands and watch.

In quoting the worlds of Kofi Awoonor, Alamu said:

The gods are crying, my father's gods are crying for a burial..... For a

final ritualBut they that should build the fallen shrines have joined the down marchers singing their way towards Gethsemane..... The gods cried, shedding claying tears, on calico; the drink offering had dried up in the harmattan and the fetish priest is dressing up for the Easter service (Alamu 55).

If the gods are crying for burial, it could mean that they were not given a befitting burial that will ease their journey to the abode of the ancestors. In view of this, they will continue to cry until the befitting burial is given to them. In a nut shell, their crying does not mean that they want to be laid to rest and forgotten in life completely, but the burial that ought to be given to them should be done. Another problem with the quotation of Kofi Awoonor is the wrong terminology used in describing the chief priest or traditional priest by calling him fetish priest. This is to show that, his writing has been influenced by the Western or foreign description of what African Religion is all about, which could also be the reason why he is saying that the gods are crying for final burial in order for them to be a forgotten issue.

Alamu concluded by saying the ancestors should be laid to rest since they cannot help people anymore, and because human beings have taken their position. Even if it is true that the ancestors no longer help today in the community, it is not a reason for one to say that the ancestors should be laid to rest. If Jesus that is the ancestor of Christians exist and Christians Religious scholars never write Him off despite the hardship, suffering corruption, outbreak of different kinds of diseases and with high rate of immorality same sex marriages among others, why should Alamu say that African Religion ancestors should be laid to rest?

Alamu should have suggested a way of bringing back the lost glory of the ancestors if at all it is true, just like the way some African scholars like Dopamu, Awolalu, Idowu, Mbiti, Parrinder etc...., have written on the need to revive African Traditional Religion. Ancestors are among five-fold Principles of African Traditional Religion which is one of the pillars of African Traditional Religion.

Conclusion

Contrary to Alamu's conclusion, ancestors should not be laid to Rest in Peace. The issue of farmers-herders clash, Fulani/bandits attacks in some African communities led these communities to invoke the spirit of their

Ancestors to fight for them. The role of the Ancestors in defending their living relatives was seen during the Eggon-Fulani crisis in Nasarawa State. The Eggon people invoked the spirit of their Ancestors (*Azhili*) to help them fight the Fulani militia and it was so. This recent development makes it clear that Ancestors are still active in the role of defending their people. Festivals by ethnic groups are still been observed today in honour of the Ancestors. Above all, in the moral vision of African Religion, God is the ultimate guardian of the moral order of the universe (Dopamu 28). More so, Nigeria Independence fighters who are now the Ancestors of Nigeria, are being remembered by Nigerian leaders today because of their contributions to the country. Even though they seem to be insensitive to the abnormalities that are going on in the country, we cannot come to a point of forgetting them. Ancestors in African religion are also of these categories: the family, clan, community and tribal Ancestors. These Ancestors are not ignorant of the separation of power; they work strictly on the role they are saddled with. This obviously shows that Ancestors cannot be laid to rest as Alamu concluded in his work, they can be consulted for help when the need arises.

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