

**EXPLORING THE SUFFERING OF ANCESTORS: IS PAIN AN INTEGRAL ASPECT
OF THEIR LIVES?**

Obedben Mmesomachukwu Lumanze
West African Advanced School of Theology
Owerri, Nigeria

Abstract

In most African societies, people believe that death is only a transition. It is only a means of passing from the world of men to the world of spirits. Though many have written on the concept of ancestors and ancestral cults in Africa, few have tried to delve into the issue of their potential connection to suffering and pain. This inquiry delves into the realms of African spirituality, philosophy, and cultural beliefs to unravel the complexities surrounding the potential anguish of those who came before us and its implications for the nature of evil and human suffering. The author employed a qualitative research design to carry out the study. Hence, interviews and surveys with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds or belief systems were done so as to gather qualitative data on their views, experiences, or beliefs regarding the potential suffering of ancestors. The findings show that in many African cultures, people believe that an ancestor could suffer if, for example, he breaks the rules of the cult of ancestors or neglects his older ancestors while alive. Some of the ways they can experience suffering include hunger, shame, and exclusion from the cult or gathering of their ancestors, mockery, and emotional pain.

Keyword: *African, Ancestor(s), ATR, Suffering, Igbo, Yoruba, Akan*

Introduction

To begin this discussion, the author must confess that the issue at hand is controversial for the following reasons: First, the author is still alive. He is not yet dead and thus has not become an ancestor. So then, the question is: How does he know what happens to ancestors? How is he sure that what he or others think they know about their ancestors is true? Should people rely on subjective experiences and evidence for such a matter as this? Are there ways one can be sure of what he thinks he knows about the hereafter? Second, is the issue of generalization and harmonization: Is it possible to study, generalize and harmonize all that different peoples in Africa believe about their ancestors in a single study like this?

An exploration into the connection of ancestral heritage, evil, and suffering thus raises metaphysical questions about the nature of existence and the enduring impact of African ancestors. Most African societies have long grappled with the concept of ancestors and their potential connection to suffering and malevolence. Within this discourse lies a contemplation: Do ancestors suffer? This inquiry delves into the realms of spirituality, philosophy, and cultural beliefs to unravel the complexities surrounding the potential anguish of those who came before us and its implications for the nature of evil and human suffering.

Understanding the relationship between ancestral influence and the existence of suffering reveals layers of introspection about the human condition and the possible continuance of pain and

affliction across generations. Moreover, understanding the possibility of ancestral suffering opens the door to broader discussions about the collective human experience and its intergenerational impact on our present lives.

Since this is qualitative research, interviews and surveys with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds or belief systems were done so as to gather qualitative data on their views, experiences, or beliefs regarding the potential suffering of ancestors. This method helped in understanding personal perspectives and cultural variations related to the topic.

Historical Setting

Africa is blessed with rich, diverse, and amazing cultures and religious heritage, and of course, recently, many are beginning to appreciate this fact. African culture and traditional belief systems are so rich, diverse (complex), and deeply rooted that one cannot easily explain or broadly generalize them. Maxey and Danfulani (2019) affirm, “Much of the strength of Africa comes from its diverse and amazing culture and history” (p. 1). Because of the above facts, the author admits that it is nearly impossible for one to study firsthand, all the ethnic groups, tribes, cultures, and traditional worldviews in Africa and present them in one single volume.

Though in this paper, the author made an attempt to present the traditional beliefs of most African tribes about the state of their ancestors as a single subject matter, that does not necessarily mean that all African peoples have the same idea about what happens to their ancestors in the “land of the dead”. However, because research has also shown that in most cases, there exists a close relationship or connection between what Africans believe about these “living dead” (ancestors), this study is therefore possible.

What is African Traditional Religion (ATR)

Before going into details about the issue at hand, it is important to define what ATR is and then briefly talk about African cosmology in order to give this study a proper background.

African traditional religion is an interesting religion. It is the indigenous faith, practice, and religion of African people that was here with us long before the advent of Christianity, Islam, or any other foreign religion. It is the religion that our ancestors practiced, which is very much with us. It thus needs no apologetics to establish the fact of its existence and survival in Africa. ATR, whether we like it or not, has been a concomitant of almost every sphere of African society and institutions from time immemorial, and I do not think that will change. The fact must be faced: ATR and culture are so inevitable and inescapable in every sphere of our lives, activities, and institutions. In fact, it is deep down in the nature of every African. And, no matter how people try to ignore or neglect it, it will continue to serve Africans better than some of the other religions.

The author believes that not all aspects of African culture or religion are “evil”. ATR is not altogether “demonic” or “fetish”. People must acknowledge that it helped and has continued to help maintain communal unity among African people. Corroborating the above views, Gary and Danfulani (2019) remark that ATR “has perpetuated customs and ceremonies that have given stabilizing continuity from generation to generation”. According to them, “it has enforced codes of

Flash: Journal of Philosophy, Religion & Peace Studies Vol. 12. No. 1, 2023
Special Issue: Engaging the Philosophy of Paulin J. Hountondji

morality that have contributed to the survival of African societies... [and also] has provided solace and hope to many living with a sense of helplessness....” (p. 20).

Understanding African Cosmology

Having a good understanding of African cosmology is very important in understanding why Africans believe in the cult of ancestors referred to as the “living dead” by John S. Mbiti. Below are some of the ways Africans view the universe:

First, in many African traditional worldviews, the universe is often thought of as being divided into three kinds of places: the sky (heavens), where the Supreme Being and some divinities exist; the physical earth (including water bodies, mountains, and so on) where humans and animals live; and the underground world, where the ancestors, dead people, and some spirits live. Though many African tribes often differentiate the physical world from the spiritual world, the majority of the tribes also have this concept that the world is “one world” that is indivisible, as one touching the other. Hence, for such people, the world is like a drum, whereby when one strikes any part of it, the vibration is felt all over (cf. Onwubiko, 1991; Turaki, 2008).

The above idea is probably what makes many to believe that after death, one continues to live as part of the living community but in another plane; far, but very close to the living. According to Turaki (2008), Africans do not see any difference between the physical and the spiritual worlds. For them, they are not separate “but one and interdependent and provide a holistic view of life” (p. 163). Accordingly, in African cosmology, there is no clear boundary between the physical and the spiritual world; hence, dualism was foreign to us until Christianity came.

Second, in African cosmology, the world is not only inhabited by physical (visible) beings; there are also spiritual (invisible) beings that inhabit the earth. And just as living beings move around on earth, these spirit beings also move around. During my childhood, we were told that just as human beings move around, go to market, and play together, spirits and ancestors also do the same. My late grandfather told us the shocking but real story of a woman whose little child was crying profusely. Though she tried to pacify the child, he cried more. The woman then cursed him and said, “May *Amadioha* strike you”. Immediately, the child fell down and became unconscious. After much effort to resuscitate him, he died, and when the woman’s husband went to inquire from a native doctor (*dibia*) what killed his son, he was told that *Amadioha* killed him because, as he was passing that night, he heard the woman asking him to kill her child.

In Africa, though the invisible (spiritual) world is the world of the spirits, divinities, ancestors, and the “Supreme Being,” what happens there dictates or influences the actions and/or activities of the living here on earth. These spiritual beings are actually the ones in charge of the universe, both the spiritual and physical worlds, and they can be dangerous as well as benevolent to the living (Gehman, 2001).

The Inhabitants of the Spiritual World

It has been noted above that in African cosmology, the spiritual or invisible world is inhabited by divinities, good and bad spirits, the ancestors, and the Supreme Being. According to Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), in Africa, there are three main categories of divinities: first, we have the primordial divinities that were there from the beginning. They had existed with the “Supreme Being” right from when the universe was created, and in fact, they participated in the creation. Second are the deified ancestors. These were legends—people who lived extraordinary lives and later became canonized or “deified as gods.” For example, in the Yoruba pantheon, “*Jakuta* was the original thunder divinity of Yorubaland. “*Songo*, on the other hand, was the fourth king of Oyo. But he was so powerful that he became deified after his death, and in his deification, he acquired the attributes of *Jakuta* and became the thunder divinity of Yorubaland” (p. 73).

Finally, there are some natural forces and phenomena personified as divinities. Thus, Africans believe in myriads of such spirits invading the earth. They are everywhere, often associated with rivers, trees, animals, caves, forests, and many other natural elements.

Furthermore, Africans believe that there are numerous “spiritual or unseen powers, which may or may not be linked to specific divinities and spirits” (Fuller, 2001, p. 80). Many Africans believe that such powers were originally created by God, and they can be consulted by the living. Again, the above facts show that for traditional Africans, the spiritual world and forces are real. This idea is deeply entrenched in the mind of every African, including Christians and Muslims. It is a common saying among Africans that “the spiritual controls the physical”. Hence, Africans do not joke with anything “spiritual”, since physical matters or events are often necessitated or imposed by spiritual or unseen forces. Physical experiences are easily judged from a spiritual perspective. Evil and human suffering are seen as something caused by unseen forces.

The Concept of Man in Africa

Furthermore, we cannot talk about the “ancestors” and what happens to them without understanding African conceptions of human beings. African understanding of human nature is significant in understanding why they believe in ancestral spirits and in the cult of the ancestors. This understanding is also what informs how Africans live and why they perform some burial rites or rituals for the dead. Many African-aged parents will often tell their children, kinsmen, and wards not to allow them to be “put to shame” when they die. That means they are to be given the full burial rites that the culture specifies.

Traditionally, many African peoples believe that humans are basically made up of material and immaterial components, that is, the soul or spirit and the body. However, Turaki (2012) gives a detailed explanation:

African Traditional Religion tends to identify four basic components of human nature: Breath, is a vivifying principle, a life force which links each individual with other life forces in the universe and is in vital relationship with them. The destiny soul, which is an emanation or spark of the Creator within the individual. The ancestral guardian spirit that is incarnate in the individual and links each individual with the life force of the clan, family or other human group. The unique individual created by God (pp. 64-5).

Flash: Journal of Philosophy, Religion & Peace Studies Vol. 12. No. 1, 2023
Special Issue: Engaging the Philosophy of Paulin J. Hountondji

It is important to note that many Africans believe that the spirits and souls of people were often in existence somewhere before they were born into the physical world. According to Fuller (2001), though Africans “know that a child is conceived through the union of a man and a woman, the spirit, character, and even appearance of the child come from the soul being incarnated.” The belief in reincarnation and transmigration of souls is deeply rooted in African thought. In many African cultures, people believe that God did create human souls once in an “unspecified previous time.” However, He does not continue to create new ones, but that people continue to be born and then reincarnate- and the circle continues (cf. Mbiti, 1969).

Many Africans also believe that an unborn person can choose his or her own destiny, parents, or place of birth even before being conceived in the mother’s womb. One of the interviewees told the author that her younger brother once scolded her for saying he eats too much. According to her, the boy told her that he accepted being born into that family because, while in the “unseen” world, he used to see their mother often buying plenty of foodstuffs from the market. So, he became interested and accepted being born into the family.

Among the Igbo and Yoruba, for example, when something bad, like untimely death, happens to someone, they say things like, “That is what he or she chose before leaving the spirit world” or “That is what the individual agreed with his or her Chi before coming into the world”. In Igbo philosophy or worldview, someone’s Chi (personality-soul or spiritual-double) is given to him or her by [G]od before the person was born into the world. This Chi doubles also as a guardian angel and follows one throughout his or her life here on earth. The Chi knows everything about the individual. The Igbo, Yoruba, Urhobo, Edo, Idoma, Akan, Ga, Ewe, Fon, and Luo among other tribes in Africa, all believes that every human being born into this world derives his or her personality-soul, essence, and destiny from the Creator-spirit (*Chi-neke* in Igbo) (Awolalu & Dopemu, 1979, pp. 155-170).

African Concepts of Death

In most African societies and cultures, the beliefs about death and what happens when people die are similar. First, generally, in many African cultures, people believe that the unborn and the dead are all part of the community of the living. Omosade and Dopamu (1979) affirm, “The cycle of life commences from the conception of a child and ends at death. Thus, in the life of a man, his birth, puberty, marriage, and death are important turning points” (p. 28). Africans thus believe that death is only a transition. It is only a means of passing from the world of men to the world of spirits. Lewis (2013) affirms that in the African cultural context, death is usually a transition from the material world to the invisible world, where the spirit and essence of the person are not destroyed. That means, at death, people still retain their personality and/or essence.

Second, African people believe that the dead are often re-united with their ancestors. Commenting on African traditional beliefs about human nature, Turaki (2012) affirms, “It is traditionally believed that when someone dies, their physical body rots in the grave but their spiritual element lives on and joins the living dead, provided the deceased is given proper burial rites and is

remembered by his or her descendants” (p. 66). Though while the good people join the community of the ancestors in the underworld; the ghosts of the bad people hover around and may cause harm to the living. Fuller (2001) acknowledges, “Ghost are the restless spirits of people who did not receive proper ritual burial or who died shameful deaths like hanging, drowning, loathsome diseases or in pregnancy” (p. 31). However, when the dead are given a proper burial, they transcend to the netherworld and deliver the messages of the living to the older ancestors.

Third, Africans believe in what they call “good” death and “bad” death. A good death is when one dies in good old age and gives birth to children, males and females, who bear his name. He is said to have died a “good death”. Bad death has to do with premature, untimely, and painful deaths such as the death of a child or young person is seen as bad death. Also, deaths caused by evil spirits and/or spiritual attacks, sicknesses, and accidents are all categorized as bad deaths. In such instances, the dead do not receive full funeral rites but are buried “with purificatory and expiatory rites to appease the divinities concerned” (Dopemu & Awolalu, 1979, p. 254). Other types of bad deaths include the death of a pregnant woman or when one died while delivering a child; suicide, if one was murdered in cold blood; drowning in a river; and the like. Fourth, when one dies in Africa, he or she is not just buried anyhow; some traditional practices and rites must be done in order for the soul of the departed to rest in peace. Often, many cultures in Africa have their own version of rites before the dead are buried. Mbiti (1969) affirms that in Africa, “there are many, and often complicated ceremonies connected with death, burials, funerals, inheritance, and the living dead, among others” (p. 149).

Africans carry out these burial and funeral rites because, first, they believe that people do not just die without a cause. Second, they believe that the spirit of the dead can harm or help the living. Also, they believe that how the dead were buried can determine their status in the underworld. Thus, if he was not given a “befitting” burial, he may be despised by the other ancestors in the underworld. For example, in Igbo land, when an elderly man or woman dies, the children or wards are to buy cows or big goats as the custom demands, to bury him. If they were not able to do so and someone else dies after some time, such a family must not bury him or her with a cow until they first buy one and slaughter it for the older ancestor. If, by peradventure, they go ahead and kill any cow for the person who died later, they will have problems and may even start dying one after the other.

As earlier stated, many traditional Africans, like the Igbo, Akan, Tiv, Luo, Bapedi, and Yoruba, among others, believe in the reincarnation and transmigration of the spirit of a dead person. In Africa, it is very common to witness or hear of incidences whereby the spirits of some people who died before their time go to live in another town or area in some kind of visible body, where they can marry, have children, and live normal lives, thus fulfilling their normal lifespan. But if someone who knew them before and who knows they are dead sees them, they disappear.

Of course, many of such stories are real, even though some may argue otherwise. People have claimed that they saw dead relatives, friends, or wards somewhere. One of respondents, Chuyum affirmed that among his people (the Babarki tribe in Bermeda, North West Region of Cameroon), the transmigration of the spirits of dead is normal. According to him, the spirits of dead people can relocate to a different place, where they live their normal life. There are also cases whereby such spirits would be disturbing or terrorizing the living. Chuyum notes that in such cases, a

Flash: Journal of Philosophy, Religion & Peace Studies Vol. 12. No. 1, 2023
Special Issue: Engaging the Philosophy of Paulin J. Hountondji

strong witch doctor would be consulted to bring back the dead person's spirit into the grave. As the grave is opened and the body of the dead person excavated, the spirit of the dead will be cast back (via magical means), into the body and then the corpse would be buried back. If the spirit had traveled to a far place, a native doctor would have to travel there and guides it back to the grave (Oral interview, 12th December, 2022).

Also, among the Bayangi, a very powerful tribe in the South West Region of Cameroon, it is a common experience that when one dies, he comes back again to continue living. In fact, it is their traditional or cultural belief that when someone dies, he relocates to somewhere else. This experience is very real to these people. Among them, it is common to hear stories of people dying and relocating to somewhere else, where they would work and then send money to their families. Such "living corpses" will even inform their families that they are the ones sending the money to them, and the families will be happy that the dead are fulfilling their cultural obligations. They do not have a problem with such events; it is a normal thing for them. In fact, according to Chuyum, this experience is part of what keeps the Bayangi culture and tribe very strong: even in death, the dead still assist the living (Oral Interview, 2022).

Who are the Ancestors?

Finally, we have come to the core point of the subject matter: Who are the[se] "ancestors?" Though, all along in this discourse, we have been mentioning the word, let us discuss who these "living dead" are. In a simple way, the ancestors are those elders (great-grandfathers), patriarchs, and progenitors of families, kindred, clans, and tribes who, though dead long ago, are still remembered, venerated, and respected by the living. In some cases, or cultures, people would set a day apart to remember and celebrate their ancestors. On such a day, they would specially greet (eulogize) their ancestors, pray to them to preserve their children, and pour libations to them.

As a child, I have witnessed such ceremonies in my culture. Then, my maternal grandfather, who used to be a renowned native doctor and the eldest person in our community, would be the one to announce such dates. The ceremonies were often done before the new yam festival, and people (especially the elders in the community and title holders) would gather to celebrate the ancestors of the land. They would perform some rituals to appease the earth goddess (*Ala/Ani*) and the ancestors. Moreover, as mentioned above, Mbiti (1970) calls the ancestors the "living-dead".

The Yoruba call these ancestors *Baba-nla* (the great fathers), the Igbo call them *Ndiichie* or *Ndibunze*; the Igalas call them *Okwoikwo* (the great parents); while the Akan and Fon call them *Samanfo* (*Nsamanfo*: old or ancient people) and *Tovodu* respectively (Nwafor, 2017). In Swahili, they are called *Mababu*, *Voorvaders* in Afrikaans and *Okhokho* in Xhosa. As earlier noted, different African societies and cultures have divergent but similar views about who these ancestors are. Moreover, one common belief among Africans is that death is not the end of life.

Africans believe that after death, people continue to exist somewhere, either in this world or in the netherworld called the "land of the dead". They can be harmful, malevolent, or benevolent, depending on how the living relate to them and also depend on their nature and character traits while alive. Thus, many traditional Africans respect their ancestors the same way they respect divinities,

gods, and goddesses. Though many often think that Africans worship their ancestors. The truth is that they do not necessarily ‘worship’ these ancestors as gods or divinities; they only venerate them. Bolaji Idowu somewhere argued out this point, namely, that Africans do not practice ancestor worship. Though sometimes the veneration given to these ancestors may be so intense that it seems to be equated with worship; however, in African religious thought, there is a difference between deities, divinities, and ancestors. A good example that comes to mind is the Roman Catholic practice of Marian devotion. The Catholics would argue that they do not worship Mary but only venerate her. Also, Catholics venerate the saints; they do not necessarily worship them as God.

Among the Bapedi ethnic group located in the central district of Sekhukhune, in the Limpopo province of South Africa, there is this general belief that if their ancestors are not properly venerated, they can attack the living. But if they are properly venerated, they can be benevolent and kind to the living. They can invoke their names on some occasions, either for cursing or blessing (Lebaka, 2018).

Among the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, the living can invoke the spirit of an ancestor to plead his or her cause and to fight his or her enemies. They can also invoke their names while saying prayers. According to Chief Benjamin Agu and Ogu Ikenna, such prayers are only effective if the person saying them, is innocent. It is only when one’s hands are “clean” that the ancestor answers his prayers and pleads for his cause. But if otherwise, the ancestor can harm the person by invoking his name with unclean hands (Oral interview, 17th December, 2022).

Many times, while praying to the ancestors, the Igbo person (in most cases, the family head) would tell his ancestors not to instigate other ancestors of the clan to attack them due to their shortcomings; rather, they should always intercede for them in the cult of ancestors. Africans thus believe that dead relatives continue to relate to their kinsmen who are alive.

Ancestors as part of the family

As already noted, in Africa, the family or clan is not only made up of the living; the dead are also part of the family. According to Ige (2006),

In the African belief system, the family is made up of both the living members and the ancestors. The ancestors are still present, watching over the household and the property of the family. They are the powerful part of the clan, maintaining a close link between the world of men and the spirit world...They are guidance of family affairs, traditions, customs, ethics and morality, health and fertility. They punish cases like incest, stealing, adultery, bearing false witness and other moral vices. They are regarded as elders of the family and they reincarnate into the family (p. 27).

Ige’s above observations are true; in Africa, since the ancestors are still part of the family or clan, nothing is done (whether traditional marriage rites or ceremonies, eating and drinking, festivals, burials, and so on), in a family or clan without acknowledging and respecting them. A traditional Igbo man, for example, cannot welcome his daughter’s suitors and eat kola nuts with them without first acknowledging and giving his ancestors their own kola and drink.

Before they eat the kola or drink wine, the host must appreciate the ancestors, praise them, and then pour some libation to them, for they must also share in the joy of the living. No important

Flash: Journal of Philosophy, Religion & Peace Studies Vol. 12. No. 1, 2023
Special Issue: Engaging the Philosophy of Paulin J. Hountondji

traditional ceremony is done in Africa without first acknowledging and involving the ancestors. They are part of the community. And whenever anything goes wrong, they intervene. Their presence is always very real. They often stand for justice and fairness. Africans believe that their ancestors were very powerful, sincere and just. What makes an ancestor powerful is the time of death and his achievements or traits while alive.

Qualifications to become an Ancestor

In many African cultures, becoming an ancestor is not automatic upon death. Many Africans believe that not everyone who dies becomes an ancestor. So then, the question is: What qualifies one to become an ancestor upon his death? First, the person must have led a good life while alive. Evil and dangerous people- thieves, murderers, treacherous fellows, and so on- do not become ancestors upon their deaths in Africa.

Second, the celebration of a second burial by the children of the deceased is also important in making the dead join the cult of the ancestors. Ige (2006) avers that it is this second burial that enables the deceased to enter into a place of rest where he enjoys the company of other ancestors. "If the second burial is not done, some Africans believe that the deceased soul will remain in a dirty place and will not be properly cared for in his new world. Failure to accord a deceased ancestor a second burial could make him torture the living relatives" (p. 30).

Do Ancestors Suffer?

This question is, of course, a difficult one to answer. It is a question one may not be able to fully answer, inasmuch as he is still alive. No matter the data and experiences one may claim to have, it is certain that the spiritual world and what happens in the hereafter are complex and cannot be fully determined by the living. Though the living would claim to sometimes relate to their ancestors, dead relatives, or loved ones in their dreams or witness ocular evidence of hauntings, movements, and doings of the dead, such experiences, though real in some cases, are not sufficient to determine the situation of things in the land of the dead. What actually happens there will continue to remain unclear to the living until we crossover to meet them.

Be that as it may, in answering the above question, the author is going to rely to a great extent on subjective experiences and evidence and the feedback from respondents. Generally, Africans believe that their ancestors are in eternal bliss; they are thus resting and do not suffer since they have now become powerful beings. However, among some tribes, like the Igbo, Yoruba, Akan, and many others, the actions of the living can warrant their ancestors suffering in the land of the dead. According to some of the interviewees, they have witnessed situations whereby dead people in their villages sent messages to the living via dreams, village heads/priests, and witch doctors or mediums, telling them that they were suffering in the land of the dead because they had not been accepted into the cult of their ancestors or that some of the deities they worshipped while alive needed to be appeased. In such cases, the living would have to perform some rites or rituals for the soul of the dead to have rest. The above claim was confirmed by Mr. Kwame John from the Akan tribe in Ghana,

Liwakala James from the Bemba tribe in Zambia and Jatta Bakary from the Mandinka ethnic in the Gambia (Oral interview, 19th December, 2022 via Whatsapp voice calls).

However, in cases whereby an ancestor brought in or covenanted his children to a particular deity and then the children snub such deities by refusing to venerate and acknowledge them regularly, such deities may be forced to attack the person that brought them in- that is, the ancestor[s] in the land of the dead. The deity may punish the ancestor for the sins of the living, and then the ancestor would have to send messages to the living to appease such a deity (Agu, Oral interview, 2022).

Reasons for and Kinds of Sufferings

Ancestors can suffer in different ways and for different reasons. First, when they break the constitution or laws of the “cult” or community where they are, they can be punished. Many of the interviewees acknowledged the fact that the land of the dead (that is, in the spiritual world) is an organized community. And just as we, the living, have constitutions, norms, ethos, and rules in the physical world, there are also laws in the land of the dead. According to one of the interviewees, Chukwuemeka Nwosu, “The land of the dead is a whole community that has principles. The dead are highly principled than the living. In that place, there seems to be hierarchy and authority” (Oral interview, 12th December, 2022). Agu affirms, “Over there, laws are strictly enforced and any ancestor who breaks any of those laws will be punished. Breaking certain rules over there can thus warrant an ancestor to suffer. The older ancestors are often the ones that enforce the laws/rules of the “cult of the ancestors” (Oral interview, 2022).

Second, an ancestor may be reduced to a slave or punished in the land of the dead by older ancestors. This happens if such an ancestor has refused to honor his older ancestors or has declined to pour libations on them while alive. This kind of punishment is not often perpetual; it is usually for a specified time after which the ancestor would be pardoned and then formally welcomed in the midst of the older ones. The above view is common among the Igbo tribe. Hence, it is common to see people pouring their drinks or dropping a small portion of their meals on the ground before taking them. For them, this is necessary because the ancestors are to always be remembered.

Third, if their children or family members refuse to perform a “second burial” for them, an ancestor may be dissociated in ancestral cult meetings. He may not be allowed in the midst of other ancestors whenever they are meeting. According to one of the respondents, a particular ancestor in his village had to send messages to the family members to perform some rituals so that he would be welcomed and accepted in the midst of others whenever they gathered. According to him, the older ancestors placed him beside a “burning fire,” where he was forced to inhale smoke. Whether these experiences are true or not, one cannot tell. However, based on the responses of the interviewees, these experiences are common among Africans.

Another reason why an ancestor can suffer is when the children refuse to venerate and/or sacrifice to a deity he had brought into the family and covenanted them to. This point has already been mentioned above. In most cases, such a deity may become jealous, locate the ancestor in the land of the dead, and make sure he suffers for the sins of the children. However, this idea, according to Nwachukwu, is not always the case. He notes that since the ancestors have become spirits or powerful beings, no deity will be able to punish them unless they break any rules over there; then it is

Flash: Journal of Philosophy, Religion & Peace Studies Vol. 12. No. 1, 2023
Special Issue: Engaging the Philosophy of Paulin J. Hountondji

the duty of the older ancestors to punish the offender(s) (Oral interview, 2022). In turn, the ancestor would send a message to the living to warn them. Personally, I have heard of such cases in my own community. And if the children refuse to obey such messages, a lot of ugly things will begin to happen to them, including premature death.

Furthermore, as earlier noted, Africans believe that when their ancestors are not acknowledged, venerated, sacrificed to, fed, and appreciated, they may experience suffering where they are. In fact, in some cultures, it is believed that an ancestor can be mocked by other older ancestors in cases where their children abandon them and do not venerate or pour libations on them. Confirming this claim, Obinna Ugo, Agu, James Oluwadare, Caleb Mwakitalika, Nana Kofi Silas and Samuel Akrong, among other respondents, noted that the negligence and/or disregard of ancestors by the living is part of the reasons why many people are experiencing hardship and untimely and even premature deaths today. According to them, such people's ancestors are jealous and not happy with them because they are not well fed and appreciated (Oral interview, 13th December, 2022). According to Ugo and Agu, the ancestors can be jealous that the living are enjoying themselves while they (the ancestors) are suffering from hunger and living in despair where they are. Consequently, such ancestor(s) who may not bear the shame and embarrassment may be forced to leave their abode and begin to wander about, thereby becoming malevolent to the living.

Conclusion

So far in this study, it has been established that African culture and traditional belief systems are rich, complex, and deeply rooted, and that the spiritual world is very real to Africans. The paper also has explained who the ancestors are and what qualifies one to join the cult of ancestors after death. It is very clear from the study that the ancestors are taken as part of the family as they always ensure that justice and equity reign in the land; hence, Africans respect and fear them.

In conclusion, this study has made certain that, though Africans believe that their ancestors are resting, there are some cases whereby an ancestor can also suffer. They suffer when they break certain laws or rules in their cult or community, when the living refuse to acknowledge, venerate, and pour libations to them, or when the deities they had brought into their homes while alive are no longer worshipped by the living (children). Some of the ways they can experience suffering include hunger, shame, and exclusion from the cult or gathering of their ancestors, mockery, and emotional pain.

References

- Gary, M., & Danfulani, U. H. (2019). *Juju Vs. Christianity*. Lagos: WATS Publications.
- Turaki, Y. (2008). *Christian and Biblical Analysis of African Traditional Religion*. Bukuru, Jos: ACTS Books.

Exploring the Suffering of Ancestors: Is Pain an Integral Aspect of their Lives? – O. M. Lumanze

Onwubiko, O. (1991). *African Thought, Religion and Culture*. Enugu: Brigard Memorial Seminary.

Gehman, R. (2001). *African Traditional Religion in the Light of the Bible*. Bukuru: ACTS.

Awolalu, O., & Dopamu, A. (1979). *West African Traditional Religion*. Ibadan: Onibonoje Press.

Fuller, L. (2001). *A Missionary Handbook on African Traditional Religion*. Bukuru, Jos: ACTS Books.

Turaki, Y. (2012). *The Trinity of Sin*. Bukuru, Jos: ACTS Books.

Mbiti, J. (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann.

Lewis, K. (2013). "Discourse-towards a Pan-African psychology: Drums rolls for a psychology of emancipation." *Journal of Black Psychology*, 39, 223-231.

Mbiti, J. (1970). *Concepts of God in Africa*. London: SPCK.

Nwafor, I. (2017). "The living-dead (ancestors) among the Igbo-African people: An interpretation of Catholic sainthood." *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 9(4), 35-42.

Lebaka, M. (2018). "The art of establishing and maintaining contact with ancestors: A case study of Bapedi tradition." *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 74(1), 4871. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74:1.4871>.

Ige, S. (2006). *An Encyclopedia of The Arts Vol. 10*(1), 26-31.

Lists of Interviewers

S/N	Name	Occupation	Tribe	Date Of Interview
1.	Mr. Chuyum Benjamin	MA Student	Bayangi, Cameroon	12th December, 2022
2.	Chief Benjamin Agu	Business/Traditionalist	Igbo, Nigeria	17th December, 2022
3.	Ogu Ikenna	Native doctor/traditionalist	Igbo, Nigeria	17th December, 2022
4.	Rev. Kwame John	Priest	Akan, Ghana	19th December, 2022
5.	Liwakala James	Researcher/Lecturer	Bemba, Zamb	19th December, 2022
6.	Jatta Bakary	Missionary	Mandinka, The Gambia	19th December, 2022
7.	Dr. Chukwuemeka Nwosu	Lecturer	Igbo, Nigeria	12th December, 2022
8.	Oluwadare James	Lecturer	Yoruba,	13th December, 2022

Flash: Journal of Philosophy, Religion & Peace Studies Vol. 12. No. 1, 2023
Special Issue: Engaging the Philosophy of Paulin J. Hountondji

			Nigeria	
9.	Caleb Mwakitalika	Researcher	Bantu, Tanzania	13th December, 2022
10.	Nana Kofi Silas	Licensed Minister	Ashanti, Ghana	13th December, 2022
11.	Samuel Akrong	Traditionalist	Ghana	13th December, 2022