

Cult of the Ancestors and Saints: A Liturgical Evaluation

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Abstract

This article is entitled “Cult of the Ancestors and Saints: A Liturgical Evaluation”. The paper is premised on the fact that over the past 100 years, amidst the confusion and darkness surrounding the Church's attempt to evangelize the African culture, a few ideologies have aided the Church. Some scholars like Sarpong and Obijiaku will subscribe to ancestral cult as one of them. The philosophy behind the Ancestral cult of the African (Igbo) experience is anchored on the basis that their ancestors are at the Headquarters in the spirit land. Mbiti rightly corroborated that Africans are “religious people” who hold firmly to the cult of their ancestors and to the worship of other major and minor divinities. While not condemning outright what sustained their fore-fathers/fore-mothers in faith, the Church can use the values of African spirituality in the life and liturgy of the Church in Africa. Areas where this inculturation and contextualization can be experimented include the liturgy of baptism, at the Christian prayer for the dead, and of course, in celebration of the feasts of All Saints and All Souls. In all, through critical liturgical catechesis therefore traditionalists could come to understand fully the place of the dead in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Keywords: Ancestors, Saints, Liturgical Evaluation

1. Introduction

In recent years, literatures on ancestral cult in Africa have reached gargantuan proportions. Analyses of the insights have been attempted by scholars from nearly every direction, including the psychological, the sociological and the theological (Sarpong, 2011, p. 46). But the liturgical evaluation is minimal. This paper offers some points of clarification about the cult of ancestors and saints from a liturgical perspective. Through comparative, descriptive and critical analyses, the paper is premised on the fact that over the past 100 years, amidst the confusion and darkness surrounding the Church's attempt to evangelize the African culture, few ideologies have aided the Church. Some scholars like Sarpong (2011, p. 159) and Obijiaku (2014, p. 81) will subscribe to ancestral cult as one of them. Mbiti rightly describes Africans as “religious people” who hold

firmly to the cult of their ancestors and to the worship of other major and minor divinities (1975, p. 24). They have a strong belief in the supreme God whom they do not omit in their traditional prayers and worship. Since the ancestors are nearer to them, they believe their problems could be solved very easily. The ancestral cult as a consequence ranks supreme in their traditional religion and worship. It is the ancestral cult that determines the extent of intermarriages. This is because people who originate from a common ancestor keep together. The right relationship between certain villages makes it impossible to intermarry.

This paper therefore evaluates the right way to understand the values of the African spirituality and tradition coupled with the desire to understand more this long spoken issue on the traditional cult of ancestors and how it is related to the Christian cult of saints. Saints are believed to be alive in heaven and are still in communion with the living. The critical evaluation of this paper therefore argues on the need to integrate the positive values of African spirituality and discard the negative and dangerous philosophies of life associated with it; to see how Christian faith, belief and practice can illumine these rich religious and cultural values for a better understanding of the cult of saints. In his recent Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis pungently states: "Through inculturation, the Church 'introduces people, together with their cultures, into her own community,' for "every culture offers positive values and forms which can enrich the way Gospel is preached, understood and lived.' In this way, the Church takes up the values of different cultures and becomes *sponsa ornata monilibus suis*, 'the bride bedecked with her jewels' (cf. Isa 61: 10)" (Pope Francis, 2013, no.116). Africans should understand the teaching about the saints with the aid of the data already provided by their strong belief and conviction about the ancestors. By way of correlation, the paper will then make a critical evaluation in the African context and bring the Christian message to bear on this concrete situation of African cult of ancestors. This paper also makes proposals on how the Church in Africa can use the values of African spirituality in the life and liturgy of the Church in Africa.

2. Cult of the Ancestors at a Glance

According to August Comte, "Humanity is made up more of the dead than the living" (Quoted by Pham Quynh, 2014). This incisive remark by the French positivist philosopher is still true in the African continent than in the Western world. The cult of the Ancestors indeed holds an important place in the family and social life. Conceptual understanding of the cult of ancestors helps us to relate the ancestral cult to sainthood. First, by cult we mean a definite form of worship or of religious observance. It is a particular religious group centred around some unusual belief, generally transient in duration and featuring some exotic or important ritual and other practices. Etymologically, cult is from the

Latin *cultus*, which means care, adoration; and derived from *colere*, to cultivate, to till, to worship (Hardon, 2014). Granted that there are discernible discords among African scholars in their understanding of the criteria that make one an ancestor, for instance, Metuh outlines five criteria for becoming an ancestor, namely: old age, offspring, good moral life, funeral rites and good death (1987, p. 147). On his own part, Mbiti argues that even children and barren women have a place in 'ancestors' (John Mbiti, 1975, p. 85). Sarpong further x-rays ancestors (and ancestresses) as the departed members of a clan, a town, a chiefdom or the nation (2011, p. 147).

However, the common denominator in the understanding of the concept by scholars, revolve around the understanding that ancestors are those deceased relatives and members of the society who are venerated by the living. They are those who died recently and are sometimes called the *living-dead* (John Mbiti, 1975, p. 83). Ancestors are believed to have continuous influence over the living members of the immediate kinship unit (John Lukwata, 2011, p. 8). In his celebrated book, *Comparative Religion: Christianity and other World Religions in Dialogue*, Omoregbe states that in the African Indigenous Religion, ancestors occupy the place of saints in Christianity. The family unity is so strong that even death cannot break it up. The strong family ties continue beyond the grave" (1999, p. 66).

In fact, many religions of the world hold in high esteem people who live heroic lives and have passed on. The Hindus call them *Rishi*; Jews call them *Sadiq/Tzadik*; Islam calls them *Wali*; Buddhism calls them *Achat* or *Bodhisattva*; Traditional African Religion adherents call them Ancestors and Christianity calls them Saints. In Igbo land, the ancestors are called *Ndichie* (those of the old), *Nna anyi ha* (Our fathers), *Ndi Mbu nandi abuo* (the first and the second people, that is, those of antiquity), *ndi gboo* (the people of long age) [Madu, 1997, p. 67]. Furthermore, Madu rightly states that: "In as much as cult is paid to the ancestors, there are other yearly feasts in honour of the ancestors and the other deities of the African pantheon" (1997, p. 67).

Two major elements characterize the African concept of ancestorship, namely, the natural relationship between the ancestors and his earthly relatives and the supernatural or sacred status acquired by the ancestors through death. The natural relationship can be based on the parenthood or more rarely brotherhood. Thus we can talk of parent or brother ancestorship. This ancestorship can also be founded on common membership in a clan or tribe. One can rightly say that the basis for natural relationship can be consanguineous or non-consanguineous. Such natural ties continue to exist after the death of the individual. This communication between the ancestors and the living relatives is expressed through prayers, invocations and libations.

In this light Madu stated that offerings and sacrifices are also made to them (1997, p. 67). The living expect from their ancestors guidance and protection, which involves also providing for the living their physical, social and biological needs, to mention but a few. This paper however is an assessment of the honour done to the ancestors and saints from the liturgical perspective. We now turn to the interface between the ancestral cult and sainthood.

3. The Interface between the Cult of Ancestors and Sainthood

The liturgical cult of saints and ancestors are realities for the contemporary society. The veneration of the saints is not to present somebody who is faultless or sinless, but a person who is passionate and single-mindedly dedicated to prayer and good works to serve as a model in the heroic Christian life. Thus, the saints are heroes and champions of Christian tradition of righteousness. The Catholic Church teaches that she does not make or create saints, instead she recognizes them. She makes a distinction between adoration (*latria or adoratio*) which is exclusively reserved to God alone; and veneration (*dulia or veneratio*) which is accorded to saints, and *hyperdulia* which is reserved for the devotion to Mary. The saints are not worshipped or adored but venerated. In fact, the title, saint (Latin *sanctus* and its Greek translation as *Hagios* mean saint or the set apart one) [*The Chambers Dictionary*, 2007, p. 1346] refers to a person who has been formally canonized by the Catholic Church and is therefore believed to be in Heaven. As the Church recognizes them, she establishes a feast to commemorate their heroism and that informs the development of the cult of saints. There is a correlation between the cult of sainthood and ancestors. Both play roles as models and intercessors. The teachings of Jesus in the gospels find a living application in the lives of the saints and ancestors. Their life-styles facilitate examples to follow. It is a common tradition to encourage the faithful and the neophytes to emulate their patron saints, that is, the name of the saints they chose for themselves at their baptism, confirmation and religious profession. Moreover numerous collects and prefaces of the Roman Missal ask that the faithful must emulate the saints.

On the other hand, the Church seeks the intercession of saints in her liturgy. The Conciliar Document, *Lumen Gentium* states clearly: "It is most fitting therefore, that we love those friends and co-heirs of Jesus Christ, who are also our brothers (and sisters) and outstanding benefactors, and that we give due thanks to God for them, humbly invoking them, and having recourse to their prayers, their aid and help in obtaining from God through his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, our only Redeemer and Saviour, the benefits we need" (1987, no.50). According to Chibuko, they do not usurp the role of Christ in any way in their mediatory role. Rather they assume a different status to Christ. They could be said to have excelled in the practice of virtues. Ancestors are regarded as having left testimonies of their good lives. Having acquired that status of ancestors, they

assume the function of mediation between God and their living descendants (1999, pp. 99-100). The people believed the ancestors have survived death and to be living in a spiritual world, but still taking a lively interest in the affairs of their families. They believed the ancestors watch over their families like the "cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1). They are concerned with everything that affects the family; its health and fertility are of interest to them (Parrinder, 1974, pp. 58-59).

Philippe Rouillard gave the order through which this is done: The first one consists in addressing praises and prayers to God with saints, as we do by singing the Sanctus of the Mass "with the angels and all the saints." A second approach, the most frequent in the liturgy, consists in praying to God, relying on the saint's intercession; innumerable collects for the feast of saints asking for their intercession. A third approach is a direct address to saints. The Middle Ages and modern times have very often followed this method (Cited in Chupungco, 2000, p. 310). It is not alien to African culture to ask ancestors to intercede for the faithful, since the ancestors are at par with gods in playing an intermediary role between the supreme God and the people. Nwabekee maintains that ancestors can come to the people's aid in times of difficulty. So a typical traditionalist prays to his ancestors and pours libation to them (1995, p. 125).

The liturgical celebration of saints is complemented by Christian devotion expressed in extra-liturgical form, which does not only improve the Christian relation to saints but also enhance their prayer life. The saints are popularized by their devotees who develop an apostolic life enriched through the spirituality they developed in the process. Consequently the prayer groups established in the Church to honour the saints are called spiritual societies (also called popular piety, popular devotions, devotional societies, pious societies or religious societies), as such a Christian is not totally committed unless he or she belongs to one of these spiritual societies since the spiritual life of the faithful revolve around these pious societies.

4. Philosophy behind the Ancestral Cult: The Igbo (Nigerian) Experience

It is now time to turn our attention to the philosophy behind the ancestral cult. By philosophy we mean a reflection that seeks to offer rational explanation of the mysteries of existence. The philosophy behind the Ancestral cult of the African (Igbo) experience is anchored on the basis that their ancestors are at the Headquarters in the spirit land. The Igbo people, formerly known as the Ibo, are an ethnic group of south eastern Nigeria, located in Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states of the nation. They speak Igbo, which includes various Igboid languages and dialects. Igbo people are one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa (Lizzie, 2008, p. 32). They have a saying that "somebody whose

brother/sister is in heaven cannot go to hell," as he/she will always intercede on his/her behalf. With specific reference to the ancestral cult in Igbo land, Arinze opines: "If you ask the Igbo why he worships the ancestors, he will reply: 'They are in the happy land of spirits, and as they are in the Headquarters, they will not forget their children.' No Igbo father would leave his child hungry" (2008, p. 36).

Accordingly in Igbo tradition, the elders are seen as representing the ancestors and as possessing *Ofo* the symbol of authority. Therefore they are accorded respect. Respect of elders by the younger ones is part and parcel of Igbo tradition. Respect for elders in Igbo culture is an important value upon which the conscience is formed. To buttress this, Onyema writes: "People learn not only to respect their parents but also their elders be they from the same family or from another. This respect for elders passes on to respect for authorities also. Due to the importance of respect for elders and those in authority, children are taught to observe this duty from onset" (2009, p. 275).

Traditionally, the Igbo society believes the death of an Igbo paves the way into the spiritual realm of the ancestral cult. Unless one dies, the way to the spirit is not a possibility. The philosophical underpinning is that funeral rites are so carried out to facilitate the access to this spiritual union. *Ndigbo* generally believe that the souls of the dead members of the community cannot rest or find repose unless proper burial rites and ceremonies are performed. This is usually applicable to the ripe old age and not to the young people and children. The death of the latter is regarded as great calamity, which cannot get any attention from the gods. One significant factor that determines if a person should receive cultural funeral is the relationship one has with the society. If one dies when separated from the society, the society denies such a person a befitting burial. On the other hand, those who die but are in good relationship with the society are accorded funeral rites. What makes one be in good relationship in the community includes when he has not transgressed the law of the land (*Omenala*) and taboos of the land, such as deliberately killing a fellow town's man (*ochu*), etc. When one dies in good relationship, the person is buried in a cultural way with the full rights and privileges.

The burial usually takes place in the evening. When the person is a titled person, the society delays the public announcement until the family partially puts things in order. For the non-titled, wailing begins immediately as the announcement is not delayed. In the case of a titled person, the other titled men of the village, his in-laws and relatives are to be officially informed first before it is made public. Because of the strong belief with the spiritual world, the traditional funeral rites of *Ndigbo* from the preparative period of purifying the corpse to its burial have a communal connotation. The body is washed with

special prayers and with incantations, by special people in order to enable the body be presentable before the ancestors. The 'umuada' wash the dead body with special prayers and incantations in order to make it presentable before the ancestors, an indication that he or she originated from among the people who love and care for him or her. Usually, there is the first burial "ili ozu" which is done soon after the death of the person. There is also the second burial called "ikwa ozu" deriving, as Mbefo says, from possible missionary misunderstanding (Mbefo, 2001, p. 39). This takes one year after the death of the person. It is also known as *Igba Okwukwu*. In this direction, Basden opines: "... Among the natives the custom is known by two names. Those on the West side of the Niger speak of it as 'Inu-ozu' (to bury the dead), while those on the Eastern side term it 'Ikwa-Ozu' (to mourn, cry, for the dead). The deceased has already been buried amidst lamentation but with little ceremony ... " (Basden, 1966, p. 120). The philosophical import is the strong link that the dead person is introduced with due honours to those with whom he now associates in the spirit world (ancestors). For Ndigbo, it is not enough that one lives a good moral life or gets a befitting burial, the person must also be buried within his community. The belief is that such will enable the spirit to find rest in order to join the ancestors and reincarnate in the family.

5. Critical Evaluation of the Ancestral Cult

As has been mentioned above, the sacred or supernatural status of the ancestor is the consequence of his death. No one is regarded as ancestor unless he led a morally good life on earth. For an ancestor is a model of behaviour for the living and source of tribal tradition and stability. From the oral interview by the writer, he discovers that to be an ancestor, one must attain a marital status with children (male in particular) and must die a good death at a reasonable old age. For them, any form of bad death disqualifies one from full traditional burial ceremonies, *ipso facto*, one cannot enjoy in the cult of the ancestors. Such deaths arising from swollen body, leprosy, dropsy, epilepsy, lightning and small pox are in this category. Others include child birth, suicide, falling from tree, to mention but a few. He should merit and be given full traditional funeral rites, which climaxed by the second burial rites. Consequently, scholar like Lukwata opines that there are some positive values and negative trends when objectively reviewed in relation to liturgical celebrations (2011, p. 8). Pope Paul VI in *Evangelization in the Modern World* rightly states: "Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life" (2007, no. 63). The Fathers of the reformed liturgy of the Second Vatican Council also instruct that the people's way of life should be given a prominent position, provided this way of life is not inimical to the substance of the faith. The Council Fathers maintain that: "Anything in these

people's way of life which is not indissolubly bound up with superstition and error, she studies with sympathy, and, if possible, preserves intact. She sometimes even admits such things into the liturgy itself, provided they harmonize with its true and authentic spirit" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 1987, 37).

i. Positive Values of Traditional Cult of Ancestors

The following are some of the positive values of the ancestral cult in the Nigerian traditional society. These are nevertheless exclusive to the Nigerian situation. They could be noted wherever ancestral cult is fostered. They are not manufactured by or introduced *ex nihilo* by the traditionalists. They can help people to appreciate the effective ways of Christian witness towards sainthood. And so, the first outstanding positive value is that ancestral cult symbolizes seniority and ritualizes filial piety. In the family or clan, the person who holds the staff of authority enjoys the right and honour of eldership. He is to be respected and honoured. He may be the least intelligent in the community, but his position as representative of the ancestors invests on him political, social and religious authority over the group. He is addressed in Igbo language as *Nna anyi* (Our Father) or by any other title he has according to local tradition like *Akajiofo* (the hand that holds the staff of authority); in a Ghanaian language as *Nana* (elder) *Abusupanin* (elder or head of the family or clan) or by any other title according to local tradition. This right of seniority is not contested because he is the custodian of the traditions and norms of the family or clan. His office or position commends respect and honour. "Relationship with the ancestors symbolically expresses submission to the prevailing social relationships and justifies acceptance of the established order by expressing it sacrally" (*Pro Mundi Vita Bulletin*, 1977, p. 13).

Secondly, the cult of ancestors as an institution in the society provides a powerful incentive to keep the fourth commandment: honour your father and your mother. It helps children to develop a healthy relationship with their parents. It helps those who do not have respect for their parents and elders to change for the better for fear of the wrath of the deceased parents and elders. Thirdly, the veneration of ancestors in the traditional society promotes the law of love and solidarity among the community. It is on the basis of this strong practice of venerating the ancestors that the custom of extended family relationship system finds its unwavering root. To avoid the anger or displeasure of the ancestors, family members carry out their obligations towards other members of the family. Kins and kins of the same ancestral lineage are their brothers' and sisters' keepers. They help to provide for the needs of each other, support and correct them always. Living in the society is both communal and an individual affair as a result of the conscious awareness of the ancestors who take interest in the affairs of the community. There is also respect for life and property of others.

Furthermore, the value of festivals associated with the cult of ancestors form a healthy and natural forum for the community to interact freely and share life together. Yearly feasts in honour of the ancestors and the other deities of the African pantheon like the New Yam festival in Igbo land is a good example (Mbogu, 2012, p. 195). Having settled their differences, the community reconciles with neighbours. They then advance to celebrate the festivals with joy, peace and harmony. Both the living themselves and the ancestors are actually involved in the affairs of the living relatives.

Besides, the practice of the cult of ancestors enhances special respect and care for each community or family is attached to the graves of dead relatives. Roads are hardly constructed through cemeteries as that would be seen as desecration and disturbance to the peace of the dead who are believed to inhabit in the graves. For the same reason, in cultivation of farmlands they try to avoid cemeteries or individual graves on private lands. The critique or controversies as to whether the graves are truly the abode of the dead is not our concern here. Ancestor veneration gives incentives to prayer and constant awareness of the existence of the life hereafter. Thus they affirm the existence and the universal governance of God, which liturgical celebration extols.

ii. The Negative and Dangerous Values in Ancestral Cult

Nonetheless, there are other negative and dangerous values, not to be cherished and promoted. They cannot be seen as sources of preparation for the Gospel (*preparatio evangelica*) because they do not contain precious *seminar verba* to unravel the depths of the African Christian as well as foster the universality of Christianity. They have no worth in terms of money or other goods to be exchanged in this era of New Evangelization. Some of these negative philosophies of life, wisdom sayings and proverbs are also criticized below. One of them is the criterion of using marital status as a qualifying condition to become an ancestor. It denies those who renounce marriage for a higher good (cf. Matt 19:12) like priests and religious men and women, opportunities to be ancestors. And that contradicts the design of God that some would give up the possibility of marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, in anticipation of life of the world to come where there would be no marriage (cf. Matt 22:30). Related to this is the issue that one must have children and especially male children who are a gift from the Lord and are not created by human beings. This requirement also denies the power of God as if it is within the capacity of humanity to bring forth children and male children for that matter. This whole idea ridicules the power of God and at the same time questions the freedom of God which is his essence. Humans tend to take laws into their hands and claim for themselves infinite powers such as creation, which are not within their reach. For in the scripture, it is asked: "Can any of you for all his worrying, add one single cubit to his span of life?" (Matt 6:27).

Another related problem is the belief in the reincarnation of ancestors. This doctrine stands in contradistinction to the belief in heaven and the general resurrection of the dead at the end of time. Since this belief of reincarnation has it that the graves remain the abode of the dead and the dead can come back again to the world in the form of a child, it denies the existence of heaven and the belief that all will rise at the end of time as Christ rose from the dead.

Also the criterion whereby only males and aged qualify to become ancestors in the traditional set up denies the place of women, youth and children in the ancestral world. What would be the fate of women and children who led good moral and upright lives? This belief denies the equality of humanity before God. By virtue of our baptism, there is no more Jew or Gentile, free or slave, man or woman. All are equal before God (see Gal 3: 28; Col 3:11).

Another negative value is that the way someone dies, matters. Whether someone dies through accident or as a result of what they call abominable disease, which eclipses him from ancestorship should not be our concern. They should not be over-emphasized. From the fullness of revelation in Christ it is the good life one lives, the love of God and neighbour that should be the criterion for ancestorship like in the case of Christian saints. This also contradicts the violent death of Jesus and those who shed their blood for the gospel. It is the manner of life one lives that matters and not how one dies.

Another outstanding issue is what the traditional African considers as full funeral rite to qualify people as ancestors. Some cases are very awful and very much devalue the dignity of human beings. This refers to chiefs or titled men who were buried with slaves alive. This was done on the strength of the belief that whatever the place of honour which these chiefs enjoyed while alive, they would also continue to occupy and exercise in the spirit world. Hence they were buried with their tools according to their trade and with one or two slaves who were either killed or buried alive with the chiefs so that the slaves might continue to minister to them in the spirit world. This is quite inhuman and violates the 5th commandment of God, "Thou shall not kill." It is the inalienable right of every person to preserve one's life. No one has any right, except in extreme case of defence against an unjust aggressor, to take the life of another person.

Finally, the practice of pouring libation and offering sacrifice to ancestors and seeking their help as if they are an end in themselves is also a negative value that goes against the principle of liturgical worship. This would amount to deifying the ancestors. Ancestors are intermediaries between the living on earth and the Supreme Being. Ultimately, it cannot be gainsaid that the essence of the values in the traditional ancestral cult is for the sustenance of the institution. In the

light of liturgical inculturation, the Church purifies the positive values and discards the negative ones that cannot be accommodated. In this way, the values of the traditional institution of ancestral cult will be integrated.

6. Celebrative Moments of Ancestral Cult

Consequently, it has been pointed out above that the traditional cult of ancestors has some values that may be transformed and integrated into the liturgical celebration of the cult of the saints while the negative trends are discarded. One cannot rule out *mimesis* (remembrance) from liturgical celebrations as uncelebrated event falls into dungeon of history of passive participation. But the liturgical celebration is the public worship of the Church to God. It should be more than such a passive participation. In the spirit of active, full and conscious participation advocated by the reformed liturgy of the Second Vatican Council, there is need for celebrative moments of ancestral cult to be all-involving. "The participants are not simply spectators or silent observers but doers in the action by responding, praying and worshipping. The Council Fathers insist that one who attends liturgical worship should be actively involved in the celebration" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 1987, p. no. 14). The participation must engage the whole person with all the faculties required: mind, heart and soul as well as body with tongue and lips, hands and feet, arms and legs, etc.

The great Apostle of the Gentiles, Paul teaches that "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). Many ancestors, saints in the Christian understanding lived exemplary lives and made remarkable contributions to the Church. It is proper that the people keep alive their heroic deeds and identity as models for other Christians. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council clearly articulated this view: "For our own greater good and good of the Church, we seek from the saints example in their way of life, fellowship in their communion and the help of their intercession" (*Lumen Gentium*, 1987, no. 53). There is no better forum to remember these "illustrious sons and daughters" of the Church than in liturgical celebration, which also provides unequal atmosphere to ask for their intercession. By celebrating the passage of the ancestors from earth to heaven the Church proclaims the paschal mystery achieved in those who have suffered and have been glorified with Christ; she proposes them to the faithful as examples drawing us to the Father through Christ, and through their merits she pleads for God's favour (Lang, 1989, p. 569). By celebrating the anniversaries of the ancestors, the Church proclaims achievement of the Paschal Mystery in the Ancestors who have suffered and have been glorified with Christ.

It can be said that in the celebration of the cult of the ancestors, the paying of honour by the Churches, is on the basis of the recognition of the supernatural

excellence of those members of Christ who are believed to be in heaven and consequently constitute as intercessors and imitators. The ancestral cult, far from detracting from the prerogatives of Christ, serves to glorify his redemption for the earthly merits and heavenly powers of the ancestors that derive their efficacy from his Paschal Mysteries. For Thomas Aquinas, this implies no essential addition to his mediation but a realization of its potentials and a subordinate cooperation of his members in the application of the fruits of his redemption (Thomas Aquinas, 1980).

7. **Cult of Ancestors and Liturgical Inculturation**

A celebrated proverb, among the Igbo in Southern Nigerian, would say: “when you are talking to a child about a toad, you point at it lest it may be mistaken to be a stone.” Let us now concretize this paper with a model application of the ancestral cult seen with the tortuous history of the Rite Zairos (RZ). From its inception in 1969 to its final approval in 1988 by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments under the official title of “*Le Missel Romain pour les Dioceses du Zaire*” (Roman Missal for the Dioceses of Zaire) the rite is in itself a fascinating and sobering lesson on liturgical inculturation and ecclesiastical politics. Our focus here is how the RZ integrated the cult of ancestors into the Eucharistic liturgy. Recognizing the communion between the living and the dead of the ancestors, and between the Church in heaven and the Church on earth, the RZ opens the celebration of the Mass with an invocation of the saints and the ancestors, usually in the form of a litany. Egbulem explains: “Most tribes of black Africa would not begin a public ceremony without invoking the ancestors, who are believed to exercise real control over the living and under whose surveillance people live. By beginning the celebration with the invocation of saints and ancestors, the Zairean Mass identifies the Christian assembly as the meeting place between the Creator, the ancestors and the living” (Egbulem, 1996, p. 59).

It is interesting to note, with Egbulem, that what is new in the RZ is “the place in the liturgy at which this invocation is made as well as the fact that the ancestors are asked to become part of a celebration in which many of them never shared in their lifetimes” (1996, pp. 59-60). As the priest's invitation to the people before the invocation makes it clear: “Let us unite ourselves to all the followers of Christ who have left this world and are resting from their tiredness in the presence of God. Let us unite ourselves to those who, even if they did not know Christ in their lifetime, did however seek God with a sincere heart. Aided by God himself, they did his will; they too are with him. Together with all those who sleep in peace, we form one single family. May this Eucharistic sacrifice gather all of us into one family before God” (Egbulem, 1996, p. 60).

The memory of the ancestors is repeated in various places of the Mass especially in the second part of the Eucharistic prayer in which the Church prays for those who have died in the hope of the resurrection. The invocation of the ancestors (and not only the dead in general) and the invitation to them to participate in the Mass (which goes far beyond offering suffrage for them) represent a successful attempt at liturgical inculturation in which popular piety and the liturgy are harmonized with one another. They also go beyond the Director's bedrock and often repeated principle that "formulae proper to pious exercises should not be commingled with the liturgical actions. Acts of devotion and piety are external to the celebration of the Eucharist and of the other sacraments" (Egbulem, 1996, p. 13). Fortunately in this case, the incorporation of popular devotion to the ancestors into the liturgy has enriched the Eucharistic celebration immeasurably by making it a truly and genuinely local act of worship.

8. Conclusion

We have attempted to explore in this paper the framework of the cult of the ancestors and saints from the lenses of liturgical evaluation. The treatment of the topic is far from exhaustive, yet this little contribution would hopefully advance the discussion in the right direction exposing the values of ancestral cult in African spirituality. The Church's veneration of the ancestors and saints is thus a necessary part of its life and work. Otherwise there would be a danger of looking upon sanctity as an abstraction. Pope Francis opines: "When properly understood, cultural diversity is not a threat to Church unity. The Holy Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son, transforms our hearts and enable us to enter into the perfect communion of the blessed Trinity where all things find their unity. He builds up the communion and harmony of the people of God" (2013, no.116). The ancestors and saints help us to see how the gospel message can be incarnated and lived in many different ways and under many different social and historical circumstances, as against the scholars like Okure who said that Africa is a martyred continent (2003, p. 39). However, it is important to emphasize the fact that the honour the Church accords the ancestors and saints does not in any way undermine the supremacy of God.

While not condemning outright what sustained our fore-parents in faith, we have made suggestions how the Church can make use of the good values of their culture in the life and liturgy of the Church in Africa. In this way, inculturation and contextualization can be experimented upon and may come under the aspects of the Church's life: liturgy of baptism, confirmation, religious profession, at the Christian prayer for the dead, and of course, in the celebration of the feast of all saints and all souls. The paper strongly suggests that in the Church the feast of all saints be so organized that those who in the traditional way would want to pay reverence to the worthy ancestors be

incorporated. On the feast of All Souls, the liturgical assembly should arrange prayers for their dead parents and relatives.

Through critical liturgical catechesis therefore, traditionalists could come to understand fully the place of the dead in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This critical role of liturgical theology frees the power of speech in the Christian community so that in fidelity to tradition, it may express the *kerygma* of Jesus Christ and the community's faith in the given of contemporary experience. Elsewhere, the writer argues that the essence of this critical liturgy is not just to instruct people, but also to receive feedback from their voices (Emmanuel Anagwo, 2010). It recognises their life-experience as an authentic source of Christian reflection on the world. Thus, it will diminish the dependency of the faithful upon the structures of the hierarchical Church and lead to a profound transformation of the Christian community in accordance with Jeremiah 31:34. It opens the possibility of critically evaluating not only our Christian lives and aspirations, but the tradition we have received and appreciate the teaching about the saints with the aid of the data already provided by their strong belief and conviction about the ancestors. All in all, the writer agrees with Mbefo that: "Only the Africans themselves can rise to this challenge by assuming the responsibility imposed by their knowledge of their past. This is the knowledge of the influences both positive and negative that has gone into their making. By working to integrate these influences creatively and fruitfully, they would be poised to reshape the destiny of Africans and their continents in a way that lends balance and stability to the current experience of chaos and disarray. One may support that such a reconstruction of the African project must exploit the metaphysical vision that has always been associated with Africans" (2011, pp. 18-19).

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