



African Traditional Religion and Its Impact on Practices in Family Relations

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Introduction

- Pervasiveness of religion in Africa
- Impact of ATR on African Adventism
- African Adventism as a platform that affords both continuity and discontinuity of African traditional practices.
- Focus: Resiliency and pervasiveness of African worldview in the African life and centrality of ancestors in ATR.

Current Status and Popularity of ATR

- Africans depicted as superstitious but not religious.
- Popularity of Christianity and Islam has not displaced ATR.
 - It is taught alongside the two major religions in some schools.
 - 70% of the population in some Western African coast are adherents of ATR.
 - “Our religion today is a world religion embraced by over 100 million people in 28 nations.” Ambiola
- Africans may have converted but its worldview to a great degree remains unconverted.

Centrality of Ancestors in ATR

- Ancestors and Divinities (nature gods)
- Position of Human Beings in ATR
- Individual and the community
- African Anthropology

Centrality of Ancestors in ATR - ancestors and divinities

- Most cultures in West Africa include in their ontology divinities or nature gods.
- The belief in ancestors remains a main feature in Bantu religions found in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa.
- Most cultures in Africa communicate with departed loved ones
- No competition between divinities and ancestors.

Centrality of Ancestors in ATR - position of human beings

- Ancestors are closer to man than both divinities and God.
- ATR is anthropocentric
- Human Beings are always in the presence of ancestors.
- Man's strongest influences come from ancestors

Centrality of Ancestors in ATR - Individual and the community

- Center is not the man as an individual but the family and the community
 - The ontology of classical Africa is basically anthropocentric. The person is the center of existence not as an individual, but as family, as community. To be blessed implies having children and food, and to be healthy, but this is the case only if the whole community shares in it.” Oosthuizen

Centrality of Ancestors in ATR - Individual and the community

- Life is seen in the context of relationships
 - “Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his own being, his own duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and other people. When he suffers he does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when he rejoices, he rejoices not alone but with the kinsmen, his neighbours and his relatives whether dead or living. When he gets married he is not alone, neither does the wife belong to him alone.” Mbiti

Centrality of Ancestors in ATR - Individual and the community

- The role and status of the individual within the family is determined by age, gender and seniority.
- Exclusion from the family is worse than death.

Centrality of Ancestors in ATR - African Anthropology

- Ancestors are departed loved ones who are still alive
 - “The living dead is a person who is physically dead but alive in the memory of those who knew him in this life as well as being alive in the world of the spirits... So long as the living-dead is thus remembered, he is in the state of personal immortality. While the departed is remembered by name, he is not really dead.”
- It is through the family that remembrance takes place.

Centrality of Ancestors in ATR - How does one become an Ancestor

- Ancestorship conferred by the living and it depends on their continued willingness to honor it.
- Qualification include the following:
 - Old age
 - offspring
 - good moral life,
 - funeral rites,
 - a good death excluding epilepsy, and death by accident.

Centrality of Ancestors in ATR - how does one become an ancestor

- The following are disqualified... their death is an inestimable loss:
 - Children
 - Unmarried
 - Married with no children
 - women

Role of Ancestors in the Family

- Birth
- Marriage
- Morality

Role of Ancestors in the Family - *Birth*

- There is sacred link between the life of the new born and the past generation which cannot be broken.
- Conception is viewed as a result of blessings and benevolence of God and the ancestors.

Role of ancestors in the family - Marriage

- African religion allows no bachelors or unmarried women
- The dead and the living meet at the point of marriage
- Childlessness is not viewed as a personal tragedy but a communal catastrophe.
- Sterility and barrenness on the part of the wife is the single greatest cause for divorce.
- The more children one has the better.
- Polygamy is not unusual

Role of ancestors in the family-

Morality

- Ancestors are guardians of the family affairs, traditions and ethics.
- African ethics exists to serve life and is more vitalistic than legalistic.
- Respect for parents and hierarchical order takes center stage in African ethics.
- Incest is regarded as one of the most evil acts.
- Pre-marital chastity was strongly encouraged.
- Extra marital affairs are not regarded as a serious moral deficiency.

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Impact on Family Relations - Positive

- Respect for parents and acceptance of their authority.
- Respect for marriage and the concomitant belief in the undesirability of divorce.
- Respect for family as a whole and not just the nuclear family.
- Respect for purity and chastity among those who are not yet married.

Impact on Family Relations - Negative impact

- The family that the Bible recognizes is composed of the living only, the dead have no part among the living.
- Relationship between the husband and the wife as exclusive and any form of extra-marital unfaithfulness is prohibited.
- Polygamy is the result of sin and fallen cultures
- Singlehood as a curse or sin.
- Marriage is an ideal but should not be made an imperative
- Having children is not a command though regarded as a blessing.

Conclusion

- The Adventist Christian community guided by the biblical principles is expected to discard those influences that are contrary to the Bible, while embracing those that are affirmed in the Bible.



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