

The Effects of Ancestral Veneration on the Development of Adventist Faith in Tanzania

LUCAS NZUNGU RUGEMALILA

Lucas Nzungu Rugemalila

Introduction

Ancestral veneration in Tanzania cuts across World Religions: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion. The core theological foundation of ancestral veneration is the belief that “*only* a part of man dies, but the most primary and fundamental part of man, the divine spark in each person *never* dies.”¹ This “divine spark” is believed to be the eternal soul that survives death, which can be invoked by name by descendants. African Traditional Religion (ATR) adherents claim to have witnesses who experienced ancestral intervention in times of distress. Their testimony has strengthened the belief in ATR. Although the timeframe varies among Muslims, Islam teaches that Allah receives the deceased anywhere from three to forty days after burial; thus, ancestor veneration begins after forty days—called *Arobaini zake* in Swahili. This marks the beginning of celebrations for the departing spirit of the dead. With this theological disposition, Tanye argues that “death broadens one's existence and ushers one into special bond with the spirit world”² Simply stated, death decomposes material matter from humanity, but cannot affect the spark of life—the *soul*—because it belongs to the spiritual world. Tanye and Dzobo agree that life and death span into eternity. That means when one dies, one begins a new life in the world of spirits. McAnany adds that “ancestral veneration involve[s] rituals and practices surrounding the burial and commemoration.”³ Christian denominations in Tanzania differ on the theological background, but nearly all with the exception of a few such as Adventists, agree that the dead continue to live after death. This belief shapes and ushers them into ancestral veneration under a new term—saints veneration. They offer prayer through them and others. Adventists in the Mara Conference live within a community that uphold the practice, including some Adventists.

Ancestral Veneration in Tanzania

Ancestral veneration is widely practiced in all tribes of Tanzania. No person from any tribe in Tanzania can deny that there are forms of traditional rites in one's tribe which are meant to venerate the ancestors. The author's grandmother, Bamanya, an ATR adherent used to spit liquor on the ground while invoking the names of family ancestors saying, "Drink our ancestors-*munywe munywe abanyaluganda, iwe kitailongo onywe.*" Furthermore, apart from other connections, ancestral veneration is more associated with the graves of the dead ones. The spirits of the ancestors are believed to be harbored by the graves, mountains, waters, and forest or bushes. Graves are thought to be the home of the living dead. Legal precedent considers the grave of ancestors to be proof that their descendants are the true occupants of the land. Thus, Stavrakopoulou notes that "a grave serves as a medium of social, cultural, and ideological meaning communicated both among the living, between the living and the dead."⁴ Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere, a native of Mara-*Butiama*, claimed that ancestral veneration aided him in overthrowing Sir Edward Twinning of the British Empire from Tanganyika. He said it in his farewell speech to elders of Dar es Salaam on November 5, 1985. The speech was delivered in Swahili; therefore, the following is the author's translation in English:

One day Dosa came to me at Magomeni saying, "Today, the elders are calling you."

I asked, "Where to?"

"To Elder Jumbe Tambaza. They need you at night."

I said, "Okay, I will go."

Then I went. I found the elders seated. They called me their son and bid supplications on my behalf. I, being a Christian, they, all Muslims, offered supplications with incense. We finished. When we had finished, they said there were also *supplications* for the *ancestors*. They took me outside. When we had finished that of the Quran, now came supplications from elders—*traditional* prayers. They had a he-goat. They had dug a pit. They told me to stand up. I stood up. The he-goat was slaughtered while telling it, "Twinning you are done." Edward Twinning was the governor of Tanganyika at that time. Then I was told, "jump over." I jumped over.

Then the elders told me, "Go, from today Twinning is destroyed."

I was a Christian; they were Muslims. However, I was also knowledgeable in the tradition of sacrificial offering. Moreover, we were in mutual understanding with my elders. So, I jumped over and they told me, "Go home in peace. Twinning cannot do anything to you."

My elders, you remember we were going to Bagamoyo, at the *graveyard*, to offer supplications at the *graveyard* with my elders.⁵

It is not unusual to hear a prominent figure like the late president of Tanzania, Julius Kambarage Nyerere, a Catholic *Christian*, together with a number of *Muslims* incorporating traditional sacrificial offerings and supplications at a cemetery in connection with independence. The Pew Research Center reveals that, in Africa,

Muslims are more likely to believe in the protective power of sacrifice to spirits or ancestors than Christians; however, Tanzania is among the leading countries in this practice.⁶ The Adventist Church in the Mara region does not exist in a vacuum, but lives with other Christians, Muslims, and African Traditional Religion adherents.

Ancestral Veneration in the Luo part of Mara Conference

Of all the tribes in the Mara Conference, the Luo and the Jita are most notorious in ancestral veneration. However, the Luos are more inclined to the practice because they believe that the dead continue to live in another form and are interested in the affairs of their families. Thus, they are “needed by the living to worship them in order to receive favor, blessing, and protection from them.” Thus, Luos ritualistically value the veneration of the dead.

In an interview, Zefa Ayugi,⁸ a native of Luo land, shared that “the Luo in Mara venerate their ancestors at particular occasions, such as giving a name to a newborn baby.” The mother or any member of the family first receives a dream from the spirit world in which the ancestor appears, telling her to name her child the name of a certain ancestor. Then, the mother gathers the elders of the clan to disclose her dream. The elders listen carefully while asking questions to clarify the matter. Sometimes, the mother does not know the character in the dream, but the elders of the land know the character. The elders agree based on the description of the mother about the character she saw in her dream. Her description leads them to know whom among the dead appeared to her in the dream. Then, they ask the mother to name her child after the ancestor’s request.⁹

Furthermore, natural disasters are in most cases the reason for sacrificial offerings or *Liwa* for the ancestors. Following natural disasters like famines, thunder, earthquakes, and hailstones, the Luo elders journey to see a soothsayer to find out the cause. Then, they ask whether there are solutions to the problem. Commonly, the soothsayer asks for a sacrificial animal such as red sheep, goat, or cow. On the day of the sacrificial ceremony, people are asked not to plough the land. The sacrificial animal is not slaughtered, but strangled to death. The blood and some parts of the animal are offered to the ancestors while invoking the name of the family ancestor. The practice requires all members of the clan to attend regardless of their religious affiliation. This is where Adventists stand firm for their faith or lose it.¹⁰

Effects of Ancestral Veneration on Adventism in Tanzania

Adventists believe that when a person dies, their unconscious body remains in the grave, while the spark of life returns to God who gave it, and their soul ceases to exist. Generally, Adventists do not practice ancestral veneration. However, some individual members involve themselves in these practices, creating a dilemma for Adventist pastors in Mara. Church members who attend the ancestral veneration ceremonies often do not see any problem. In addition to being contrary to biblically-based Adventist beliefs, the practice poses further difficulty because practitioners frequently disappear from the church unnoticed. Some members return to their

secret cult, or join Muslims or Christians who embrace the practice.

Adventist members in the Mara Conference encounter financial challenges as well from the demands their ritualistic extended families who ask Adventists to pay heavy fines. They come to Adventist homes and confiscate cattle, sheep, and goats required to conduct veneration ceremonies. Sometimes, Adventists are flogged as a means to undermine their standing before the community. These practices affect members' ability to earn a livelihood.¹¹

Sacrificial offerings sometimes serve to weaken Adventist believers' faith when they appear solve the problem for which they are intended. In such cases, the community rises against Adventists. The traditionalists and other Christian denominations who venerate the dead, including Muslims, credit the ancestors while mocking Adventists. However, Adventists attribute these cases to the Devil. Nevertheless, there is a shaking among some Adventists whose faith is not well grounded in the scripture. Consequently, the Church loses members.¹²

Intervention in Ancestral Veneration in the Mara Conference

The Adventist Church in Mara has emphasized the teaching about the state of the dead. The fundamental belief "Growing in Christ" is also helpful to show that the Devil has no power over a Christian. Members are urged to abstain from traditional practices that bring them into contact with the veneration of the dead. These practices include, *arobaini zake* (the celebrations of the dead after forty days), widely practiced in Muslim communities. Adventist members are also part of the community where Muslim relatives and friends invite them to participate. Church members are also encouraged to avoid the use of some slogans such as *Uiweke Roho ya Marehemu Pema Peponi* which simply means rest in peace (R.I.P), which is widely accepted even in Adventists circles. The Swahili R.I.P is loaded with meaning. It technically puts the duty of pleading with God on behalf of the dead on the family of the dead. *Roho ya marehemu*—meaning the real person after death in a new state which cannot be seen but exist forever. "Pema Peponi" is a borrowed word from Muslims that means paradise. As much as possible, the Church urges members to avoid naming their children after the dead with the intention of appeasing ancestors because the practice is common and widely accepted as a means to continue the connection with the family ancestors. The Church also discourages practices like putting flowers on graves, which is borrowed from the West and is now taken as the primary indicator of ancestral veneration.¹³

Conclusion

Faith does not grow in a vacuum. Religious practices within the community have the power to shape individual members' faith. Many Adventist members come from varied communities of faith, which practice some form of ancestral veneration. Because the practice is community-based and accepted, not all Adventist members see harm in it. Ancestral veneration practice is powerful and appeals to human emotions, and therefore not easy to leave. Consequently, some members of the Adventist Church practice dual faith, one openly and the other

secretly. Church programs on nurture and retention seek to teach new members how to abstain from forms of ancestral veneration present in their communities.

The Bible prohibits both ancestral veneration and their worship (Isaiah 8: 19). He also sees the so-called spirits that attend the whole process of ancestral veneration and worship regardless of the practitioners as the disguise of the arch deceiver and his angels. Veneration is associated with worship and there is no way one can separate the two. This practice is at the center of African religious life therefore the details on the state of the dead should be compulsory to the new believers.

SOURCES

Donkor, Anthony Ephraim. *African Religion Defined: A Systematic Study of Ancestor Worship Among Akan*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010.

Katare, E. R. *Julius Kambarage Nyerere: Falsafa Zake na Dhana ya Utakatifu* Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: E. R. Katare, 2007.

McAnany, Patricia A. *Living With the Ancestors: Kinship and Kingship in Ancient Maya Society*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Miller, Tracy. ed. and Hilary Ramp. Editors. "Sub-Saharan Africa Religion Database." *Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*. Washington, D.C., 2010. Accessed September 27, 2018. <http://features.pewforum.org/africa/>.

Stavrakopoulou, Francesca. *Land of Our Fathers: The Role of Ancestor Veneration in Biblical Land Claims* New York: T. and T. Clark International, 2010.

Tanye, Gerald K. *The Church as Family and Ethnocentrism in Sub-Sahara Africa* Münster, Germany: Lit Verlag Munster, 2010.

NOTES

1. Gerald K. Tanye, *The Church as Family and Ethnocentrism in Sub-Sahara Africa* (Münster, Germany: Lit Verlag Munster, 2010), 115.
2. Ibid.
3. Patricia A. McAnany, *Living With the Ancestors: Kinship and Kingship in Ancient Maya Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 11.
4. Francesca Stavrakopoulou, *Land of Our Fathers: The Role of Ancestor Veneration in Biblical Land Claims* (New York: T. and T. Clark International, 2010), 1.

5. E. R. Katare, *Julius Kambarage Nyerere: Falsafa Zake na Dhana ya Utakatifu* (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: E. R. Katare, 2007), 85, 86. The original Swahili manuscript reads: Siku moja, Dosa akanifuata Magomeni (Dar es Salaam). Akasema: Leo wazee wanakutaka. Wapi? Kwa Mzee Jumbe Tambaza. Wanakutaka usiku. Nikasema haya, nitakuja. Nikaenda. Nikakuta wazee wameshaka; wameniita kijana wao kuniombea dua. Mimi Mkristo, wao Waislamu watupu. Wakaniombea dua za ubani. Tukamaliza. Tulipomaliza wakasema kuna dua pia za wazee wao. Basi wakanitoa nje. Tukatoka. Zilipomalizika zilikuwa za Kurani; sasa zikaja dua za wazee – za jadi. Walikuwa na beberu la mbuzi. Wamechimba shimo. Wakaniambia simama. Nikasimama. Beberu akachinjwa, huku anaambiwa, “Twining (Twainingi) umekwisha!” (Edward Twining alikuwa gavana wakati huo). Ndipo nikaambiwa: Tambuka! Nikavuka lile shimo. Hapo nikaambiwa na wazee: Basi nenda zako; tangu leo Twining amekwisha! Sasa mimi Mkristo; hao Waislamu. Na mimi mkorofi-korofi katika mambo haya (ya kutambika). Lakini tulikuwa tunaielewana na wazee wangu hao. Kwa hiyo nilitambuka pale na kuambiwa: Nenda nyumbani salama. Twining hawezi tena! Wazee wangu wengine wanakumbuka tulikuwa tunakwenda Bagamoyo. Kwenye makaburi kule! Tunapiga dua huko kwenye makaburi na wazee wangu.
6. Tracy Miller and Hilary Ramp, eds. “Sub-Saharan Africa Religion Database,” Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, Washington, DC, April 15, 2010, accessed September 27, 2018. <http://features.pewforum.org/africa>.
7. Anthony Ephraim-Donkor, *African Religion Defined: A Systematic Study of Ancestor Worship Among Akan* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010), V.
8. Zepha Ayugi is a Seventh-day Adventist pastor and native of Luo land, where he was raised and educated. On one occasion, he attended a traditional Kweche-Luo sacrificial offering and observed what he told the author.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Author’s personal knowledge as a stewardship director of the Mara Conference.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.

encyclopedia.adventist.org is an official website of the [Seventh-day Adventist World Church](#)

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000