


Ancestors and African Neo-Pentecostals

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Background: Many Neo-Pentecostals accept the African cultural view that ancestors are active in the daily lives of their offspring. The question is asked whether such contextualisation of the Christian message is admissible.

Objectives: This article addresses the issue of contextualisation to make the Christian gospel more acceptable and asks whether it dilutes the message.

Method: The author uses comparative literature to research relevant resources.

Results: The article concludes that Neo-Pentecostals need to uphold the view that ancestors are not involved in or mediating for their offspring.

Conclusion: The church should utilise contextualisation thoughtfully and responsibly to ensure it does not dilute its mission and message.

Contribution: Pentecostals should take good care of the Christian message in applying it to African cultural customs.

Keywords: ancestors; function; Christianisation; syncretism; contextualisation.

Introduction

Social value

African religion and African culture are closely linked to how Africans live. Although customs vary among the different tribes, Africans share certain aspects of their culture that have assumed a universal status. Baëta (1968:301) argues that many Christians did not leave behind some of the beliefs and practices that traditionally formed part of their lives. Ancestor veneration is one of them (Agulanna 2010:284). Some African Neo-Pentecostals have continued in their belief that ancestors influence their lives directly and should be considered as a part of the spiritual warfare they need to engage in. It is argued that the intersection between Christianity and ancestors and their veneration represents some opportunities and various challenges.

Scientific value

Many Neo-Pentecostals view ancestors like the traditional African worldview, as directly involved in the daily lives of the living. They view it as a means to contextualise the gospel. In this article, the challenges of such views are set against the opportunities.

Conceptual framework

Pentecostal distinctives include the fact that Pentecostals regard the Bible as authoritative, necessitating the need to discount the adoption of cultural customs regarding what the Bible teaches.

Aim and objectives

To evaluate the acceptance of beliefs about ancestors and their veneration within some Neo-Pentecostal worship services. The objectives are to discuss African ways of viewing it to understand the role of ancestors within the cultural world and to explicate its use in Christianising practices in order to evaluate it biblically.

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the topical collection titled 'The Challenge of Syncretism in Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism', under the expert guidance of guest editors, Prof. Marius Nel and Prof. Mookgo Solomon Kgatle.

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Research methods and design

Study design

Ancestor veneration in some form or another is integral to most African tribes. The research question is: *How should the church respond to the phenomenon?* Is it a valid way to contextualise the gospel for Africans, or does it represent syncretism, the blending of different religious beliefs and practices?

Setting

Most African societies venerate the ancestors despite the effects of Christianisation and secularisation.

Study population

African people, especially Neo-Pentecostals.

Data collection

The study utilises a comparative literature study, meta-analysis of relevant resources and an interpretive phenomenological study.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

African views concerning ancestor veneration

'Ancestor' in Africa

'Ancestor' in anthropology refers in broad terms to dead progenitors of a family, clan or tribe who receive the homage of members of a related social group (Nyamiti n.d.:45–46). Africans believe their ancestors stay alive while the living members of the group remember and venerate them in regular cultic homage. The dead live in the underworld of spirits, consisting of all the ancestors (Sarpong 1974:22). This is a transitional stage to an ideal existence without any material hindrances; in this world, people do not cheat each other, and nobody experiences any physical pain or deformity (Amanze 2003:44).

The ancestral spirits live in the unseen world; however, they also participate and influence the world of the living. In this worldview, the perceivable and the non-sensible exist alongside each other. The two worlds are interconnected and interact with each other (Gyekye 2002:120). In other words, the dead in Africa are not dead but live without any material hindrances. Because they are dead and alive, scholars refer to them as the 'living dead' (Amanze 2003:44).

Reality of African ancestors

Sub-Saharan Africans view the community as exclusively consisting of people still unborn, the living and the dead who live in another state. The living dead live when and as long as the living remember them (Turaki 1999:178). The living is

responsible for remembering and caring for the dead, motivated by the contribution of the ancestral spirits in their lives. It explains the close bond the living have with their dead relatives (Turaki 1999:222). By burying the dead in an honouring way and remembering their names, the living share life with the dead.

Veneration or reverence of ancestors consists of caring for, remembering and communing with them. While it is vital that the offspring bring sacrifices and offerings to revere the spirits, they do not worship them (Mbiti 1978:178). However, Africans believe it is vital to honour and serve the needs of the ancestral spirits as they affect their daily lives beneficially when the ancestors are respected and venerated and adversely when veneration is neglected (Mitchell 1977:152), in the same way that a living mother or father can bless or curse their offspring (Idowu 1973:185):

Although ancestors are sometimes feared, the living expect from them care and protection from sickness, death or calamities, and the acquisition of various benefits, e.g. a long life, many children or great wealth. (Nyamiti 1984:16)

To summarise, ancestors are essential for Africans because they play an active role in their lives.

Some Africans also believe that ancestors can return in the family's children ('apparent reincarnation'; Idowu 1973:188). In any case, the deceased do not lose their identity but retain their status or personal qualities.

Position and role of ancestors in Africa

Family in Africa

Johannes Triebel (2002) tells that he once asked a reverend how long he had been living in Njombe in Tanzania. The pastor responded that he had been living there for 400 years:

Yes, we have been living here for 400 years, we Kiwovele, that is, my family, my forefathers – and therefore also myself-we have been living here for 400 years. Here is my home because here is my ancestors' home. (pp. 187–188)

It demonstrates how some Africans traditionally viewed the continuing interconnection and interdependence between their present lives and their ancestors.

To understand African veneration of ancestors, it is necessary that one should consider how the living and their ancestors are interdependent. The interdependence is illustrated by the African understanding of the family and how they look at law and order.

The family is important for Africans in the light of the principle, 'I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am' (Mbiti 1978:108). The 'I' is not essential, only the 'we'. Hence the proverb: Human being is family. Where people fit, what status they have and what they view as their values

and responsibilities are determined by their community. Without the community, no human being can exist (Triebel 2002:188). There is a link between the living and the dead because both share life. For that reason, the individual's life is inextricably a part of the life that has been streaming through the community since time immemorial (Sundermeier 1988:23–25).

Importance of ancestor veneration

Ancestors are a part of the reality of daily life, and Africans do not doubt their existence and influence. They expect ancestors to provide them with the missing information and wisdom they need in dreams and visions. Hence, the ancestors form an integral part of the community; they are the living dead who relate to the living and influence their lives (Mbiti 1969:25). The dead link Africans directly with the spirit world (Mbiti 1969:83), and Africans venerate the ancestral spirits but also fear and respect them as they are able to cause or prevent misfortune (Uchenu 1976:292).

A basic principle of African ethics is that Africans may not in any way disrupt or interrupt the stream of life. Only the ancestors, the source of life, can prevent it from happening. They are the foundation and reason for being. Africans' relationship to their ancestors influences their thinking, living and behaving. If people neglect the ancestors, their survival may become threatened as ancestors possess the power to bring misfortune on them. That may be the reason why people are ill, experience a famine or even die. Only by commemorating and venerating the ancestors, Africans can ensure that they enjoy the dead's benevolence (Triebel 2002:189).

On their part, the ancestors depend on the living to be remembered and venerated as a condition to exist as ancestors. 'Without cult the dead will roam about, they will be stripped of any communication with the living' (Ela 1987:29). For that reason, Africans are expected to sire a sufficient number of children to ensure that when they die, there will be others who commemorate and venerate the ancestors. Otherwise, the ancestors will turn into non-beings.

Additionally, ancestors maintain law and order by being the source and guarantee of Africa's ethical values (Mbiti 1969:83). As stated, offences to the ancestors by way of unethical behaviour result in misfortune, illness and death. These are ways and means the ancestors use to demonstrate their dislike of morally questionable behaviour. If anything in the very sensitive network of family relationships moves, it affects the whole network. When the ancestors become angry, it may even threaten the welfare and survival of the whole community, implying that everyone should take responsibility for re-establishing the lost harmony by appeasing the ancestors.

The community needs the morality represented by the ancestors as a guiding principle that shows its members the difference between right and wrong behaviour. It is necessary

for their peaceful coexistence. As an integral part of the reverence for and veneration of the ancestors, they are also expected to act in accordance with the sense of morality the ancestors represent. Scholars found that traditionally Africans do not look to religion as the source of their moral values and norms but to the ancestors for guidance (Gyekye 1995:131). The sole criterion of goodness in moral terms is what serves the community's well-being, in other words, doing what promotes social welfare, solidarity and harmony in human relationships (Gyekye 1995:132).

God and the ancestors act as people's motivation to act morally. Ancestors are not the source of moral norms but influence people to respond to moral norms (Morgan 2020:17). The moral undertones of the belief in ancestors are dependent on what it takes to become an ancestor. Those requirements motivate community members to strive to become good ancestors by acting in morally acceptable ways.

Becoming an ancestor

As stated in the previous discussion, 'ancestor' refers primarily to those who lived virtuously before their death, necessitating their offspring's veneration. Even a virtuous living chief or elder can be venerated as an 'ancestor' (Dzobo 1992:231). Only those who live a credible life, such as heads of families, clans or tribes, are honoured as ancestors. People who are morally bankrupt or die tragically or from a loathsome disease are disqualified (Zulu 2002:479).

Ancestors enforce a moral code and norms by blessing virtuous people and cursing immoral people (Morgan 2020:19). They act as the extra-mundane guardians of morality, ensuring the community's wellness (Wiredu 2010:36) and serve as 'sinternalised superegos as well as moral authorities' (Dzobo 1992:232). The ancestors demonstrated by their way of living how morally virtuous people live. They qualified for veneration from their offspring by living morally upright lives and hence earned the privilege to act as the moral enforcers of the behaviour of those living in the community. To live an exemplary life is to marry, have children, live in good health and die of natural causes in one's old age (Morgan 2020:20).

Practising ancestor veneration

It is necessary to find out why some people are sick or infertile or die. To do so, the medicine man is consulted. In many cases, the advice is to seek appeasement with the ancestors. The community is then responsible for respecting the ancestors by bringing offerings to their remembrance and contributing to the society's welfare by obeying the moral code. It is the precondition for them to experience success in life (Boyer 2020).

Members of the society enter burial places with respect, fearing the consequences if they violate them by cultivating the ground or grazing any cattle there. As a result, burial places had developed into small, sacred groves set aside for

the veneration of ancestors. The hierarchy of ancestors should also be respected. When need arises, the head of the family serves as the priest, bringing offerings and asking the ancestors for protection. When the whole community is affected, the village priest is responsible for the cult.

A sacred grove is a thicket of bushes with larger trees in the middle. There is no decoration or art to identify it, and its power is felt invisibly during ceremonies. In the middle is a fireplace leading to the living place of the ancestors, where only the priest may go. At the roots of a tree, pottery from previous offerings shows where offerings were made. The graves are not decorated or specially preserved (Triebel 2002:190).

The offerings consist of a big calabash of local beer, fruits from the garden and an animal without blemish, such as a goat, chicken or sheep. Only the innards of the slaughtered animal are used as offerings; the rest is used in a common meal for the involved persons.

Functions of ancestor veneration

Africans differ among themselves in how they view the status and role of ancestors. In most cases, they view ancestors as intermediaries before God. God alone provides for the needs and rewards worthy humans (Azaenya 1969:42). However, the ancestors serve to mediate between God and the living because they are morally superior to other dead people (Beyers & Mphahlele 2009:4). They qualify to communicate with God as they are god-like while their human-likeness qualifies them to communicate with humans (Amanze 2003:46). They stand at the end of a long chain of intercessors whose ultimate function is to intercede on behalf of humankind. To ensure they promote the community's welfare, it is essential not to annoy them in any way to prevent them from obstructing the welfare of the living:

[T]he living and the dead are related to each other by blood and their nearness to land (The land belongs to both the dead and the living and the dead are in the position where they can bless or curse the land. Their blessing leads to good harvests and their curses to periods of drought. Land is generally considered sacred because it belongs to the earth spirit and ancestors as well as the living community (Afeke & Verster 2004:45). Hence, giving away or selling property without consulting the spirits and ancestors first is considered as a serious offence. The expropriation of land by the state is also catastrophic for Africans due to the land's sacred character. (M'timkulu 1977:21)

Africans believe ancestral spirits are subordinate chiefs under God. As in human courts, they first take their affairs to a subordinate official who has been authorised to take the request to the higher chief or to the father who discusses it with the grandfather. In the same way, ancestors take their offspring's case before God (Hopgood 1950:67–68).

Family ancestors are called upon at critical moments of crisis, especially at birth, puberty, marriage and death or in the case of new undertakings such as trade or travel. Clan and tribal

ancestors are called upon in times of great national importance, such as the death of a chief (Amanze 2003:47).

Christianisation of ancestor veneration

As a rule, Protestant churches reject and oppose ancestor veneration. However, some stand neutral towards it while others, mainly individuals within the churches, attempt to accommodate it within the Christian worldview and liturgy (Theron 1996:40). Most do not accept it as a part of their liturgy, but there are some churches that attempt to integrate (a form of) ancestor veneration in their liturgy and practice (Bediako 1992:226), using Christological inculturation within the context of African metaphysical categories (Beyers & Mphahlele 2009:40). The ancestral Christ motif, as articulated by Bediako and Nyamiti, is utilised to contextualise Christ's uniqueness and mediatory role within African thought systems (Stinton 2004:135).

As the church cannot do away with the Old Testament and its veneration of ancestors, Bediako (1992:228) argues that the church has to confront the role ancestors play and the influence on their offspring and community. Bediako does not directly argue that ancestor veneration should be incorporated into Christian practice, but he explores and affirms African traditional religion's theological significance of ancestor veneration. He views it as an important cultural and religious resource for African Christianity. He does not promote syncretism but argues that the Christian message should be inculturated; ancestor veneration should be critically reinterpreted through a Christian theological lens.

The Old Testament's theology of ancestors and a practice invites the church to imaginatively integrate some of these practices in its theology (Bediako 1992:228). In Israel, ancestors such as Adam, Noah, Enoch, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and David inspired Israelites to aspire to the same character traits and moral behaviour as they demonstrated. It demonstrates the value and benefit of ancestor commemoration for Africans as well (Pope & Schmidt 1997:91).

It is submitted that Scripture interprets the past and establishes its validity for the present, implying that a theology of ancestors connects with Ancestor-Christology where Christ serves as the Lord among the ancestors. African Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals can and should realise a valid theology of ancestors by incorporating ancestor commemoration within their practice in the light of Christology, revealing the 'many-sided manner in which the ancestors have been part of the story of the making of Christian Africa' (Bediako 1992:228).

It starts with the doctrine of the community of saints as a theological datum, a fixed grid that consists of a Christian answers to the questions posed by ancestor veneration. Hence, the real essence of a theology of ancestors is not about the fate of the departed who were not Christians, but it

provides an interpretation of the past in a way that shows the present experience and knowledge of divine grace in the gospel, implying that the gospel has been pre-figured as a response to the experience of the transcendent in former times of African people (Bediako 1992:226).

African Indigenous Churches and ancestor veneration

A scholar like Idowu (1973:13) argues that ancestor worship results in some Africans worshipping two gods because they find it impossible to identify Christians' God with the traditional African God. This perspective influenced the origins of African Indigenous Churches (AIC), primarily in response to colonial missionary efforts and the desire for a religious expression that reflected African cultural, social, and spiritual traditions. They attempted to blend Christianity with their indigenous religious practices by incorporating African forms of music, dance and worship practices. Sometimes they include healing by means of divination and traditional medicines, prophecy, spiritual warfare, the veneration of ancestors and the use of indigenous languages (Berg 2003:195). Such groups include the Zionist Churches like Zion Christian Church (ZCC), Aladura Churches like the African Church and Church of the Lord and Ethiopian Churches like the Coptic Church of Egypt. The AICs were founded in Africa, by Africans, for Africans to worship in African ways and to meet African needs as Africans experience them (Turner 1979:10).

Within the broader Pentecostal and/or charismatic movement in Africa, there are different streams that share common beliefs in the work of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, healing and miracles although they differ in their nuances. African Classical Pentecostals originated from the Azusa Street Revival (1906) and are institutionalised and hierarchical with the focus on holiness, discipline and doctrinal purity. Charismatics evolved within mainline Protestant or Catholic churches in the mid-20th century and emphasised spiritual gifts, empowering lively worship practices focused on encountering God. Neo-Pentecostals emerged from the 1970s onward as African-initiated, independent churches led by charismatic, media-savvy preachers called apostles or prophets, emphasising the prosperity gospel, spiritual warfare, deliverance and prophecy and their influence cut across regions, environments and religious cultures (Orogun & Pillay 2021:2).

The views on ancestor veneration differ significantly between them (Bae & Van der Merwe 2008:1340). Both typically reject traditional African religious practices. Classical Pentecostals reject ancestor veneration as idolatrous and the product of demonic activity and demand a complete break with ancestral practices (Mofokeng 2024:4). They may even call for the destruction of traditional religious artefacts. They see the dead as spiritually inactive. In contrast, African Neo-Pentecostals are highly contextualised, and their view on ancestor veneration is more nuanced, sometimes referring to ancestors as 'familiar spirits'. Most do not practise ancestor

revelation but view ancestors as active in the generational curses, spiritual covenants or demonic oppression they can bring on people (Mofokeng 2024:8). With the lens of spiritual warfare, they focus on deliverance and curses to break the spiritual bondage brought on by the ancestors. Hence, their approach is more contextually adaptive.

Praying to the ancestors?

Do Africans pray to the ancestors? The invocation forms the centre of the ceremony as a means to communicate with the ancestors about the needs of daily life. The expectation is that the ancestors will respond with the blessings of success and fullness, perpetuating life's stream. Thiel (1984:73) defines prayer in terms of human beings in conversation with a superhuman power if that is the case, when ancestor veneration is practised, then the invocation of the priest can be interpreted as prayer. Although it does not necessarily include praise and worship, the invocation includes sharing daily life's challenges. In some cases, such requests may even be accompanied by sugar-coated flattery and praise (Morgan 2020:14). In the invocation, ancestors will be remembered and commemorated, and any invocation directed at God will be missing.

A contrasting view is that Africans view ancestors as human beings. While African worship is reserved exclusively for God, most African scholars argue that ancestor veneration is not to be confused with worship of God (Zulu 2002:476). The reverence or veneration, rather than the worship of ancestors, is an accentuated form of respect given to the living dead elders of a community (Wiredu 1996:35).

Jesus as ancestor?

An interesting argument is that Africans have accepted Christ because he is integrally a part of the African world and not because of Western missionaries' proclamation of the gospel (Du Toit 1998:56). Du Toit argues that ancestor veneration in Africa forms a remarkably uniform structural framework that can be assimilated into Christology without much difficulty. Christ's reign in the spirit world implies that he is the Supreme Ancestor. Mosothoane (1973:86) agrees and uses the term 'in Christ', which plays a vital role in the early church's thinking, as it refers to the relationship between the living dead and living believers. The church's communion is found in Christ, including the living dead. Hence, 'in Christ' is the 'key to Christianising the ancestor cult' (Mosothoane 1973:86). The bridge across the chasm of death is the belief in ancestors; the stance of 'in Christ' that defines the living dead implies that death cannot disrupt the family.

For that reason, the argument is that the celebration of the Eucharist should include the living dead with the living, implying the fellowship of living and dead Christians. The church should create a room for Africans to communicate with their (believing) ancestors during the celebration, and the names of ancestors can be repeated to affirm their participation (Mosothoane 1973:87).

Therefore, the local assembly should also be present when the family brings sacrifices and offerings to honour their fellowship with the ancestors. The clergy person should be the one who blesses the animal to be slaughtered in the offering. In this way, the church can integrate ancestor veneration (Afeke & Verster 2004:52).

As for Africans, the traditional family plays a vital role in how they arrange their lives, so Jesus cannot be understood without relating him to his family. To understand Jesus, an ancestral reading of his life and ministry is needed to develop an ancestral Christology (Wanamaker 1997:291). Jesus is the supreme ancestor to be honoured because he is greater than any other ancestor, given that only Jesus has God as his Father (Wanamaker 1997:292). Küster (1999:63–64) indicates the parallels between Jesus as living ancestor and the role of ancestors in an African context: he qualifies to be the supreme ancestor because he mediates life, is present among the living (Immanuel), is simultaneously the eldest, with the due respect of younger family members and serves to mediate between human beings and God. 'As [the ancestors] watch over the life of their descendants and continuously strengthen it, so does Christ continuously nourish the life of the believers' (Küster 1999:120).

It implies that Jesus' life and ministry are as important as for other believers as a person's quality of existence is secondary to the ancestry of the family. While he died to atone for human sin, Africans appreciate primarily his death as a condition for becoming an ancestor (Wanamaker 1997:293). His life after his death also differs from other ancestors because his existence is at the side of the Father. African thinking did not consider resurrection as a part of their eschatological expectation, and at most, it is interpreted as visionary visitations of an ancestor (Afeke & Verster 2004:53). However, the New Testament does not think of death as a transitional stage with the dead living similarly than during their life on earth but as a rupture, a dimensional borderline beyond which there is something entirely different from what the living experience (Schwarz 1979:172).

In contrast, traditional Africans view death as going into the realm of the dead and becoming a living dead, an ancestor. And what is essential in Jesus as Ancestor is that he blesses good behaviour and social order and causes misfortune for those who undermine the family. He is the source of benefit by giving and sustaining the lives of his descendants, the church (Wanamaker 1997:294). Christ leads the ancestors in their involvement with the living.

Context of traditional medicine, witchcraft, sorcery and divination

A challenge is that prayers and sacrifices to the ancestors quite often are associated with belief in traditional medicine, witchcraft, sorcery and divination. However, this is not true for all groups of Africans (Amanze 2003:53). The purpose of these practices is to find reasons for times of distress, illness, drought or other misfortunes and to unlock the secrets of the future. The ancestral spirits invoked by *sangomas* or medicine

men and women and witches act as intermediaries (Normanyo 2019:89). Hence, Pentecostals must discourage believers from relying on traditional medicines and charms to avoid curses and bring blessings to the living because they emphasise that Christ alone is the mediator between humans and God.

Biblical interpretation of ancestor veneration

How should Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals interpret biblical information on Israel's responses to ancestors in order to formulate a theology of their possible commemoration?

Some social anthropologists argue that ancestor veneration is a social and not a religious phenomenon because it follows on how Africans traditionally think about the family's functioning as a social unit. In other words, the veneration is not a religious act but an expression of social behaviour (Triebel 1993:93–96). It is a continuation of family relationship by remembering, commemorating and honouring parents beyond death, in obedience to the fourth commandment (Ela 1987:33). The offerings are then seen as signs of respect and symbols of the continuity of the family to enfold the command to love one's parents (Ela 1987:34). It is 'a means of communion and communication between those who are living on earth and those who have gone to live in the spirit world of the ancestors' (Idowu 1973:186).

However, such a view does not account for the fear that underlies the ancestor cult, which consists of the view that ancestors are directly related to one's fate on earth. A theistic view of God, as Christianity teaches, with belief in one God, cannot accept that ancestors have their own independent religious function, even if it is in subjection to Christ (Triebel 2002:193).

The traditional African perspective on ancestors is that they act as intermediaries, interceding for their offspring by bringing their prayers to God. As ancestors, they are near to God and can fully access all channels of communication with God directly (Mbiti 1969:83). As the king can be approached only through his councillors, so ancestors bring the requests of the living to God's throne. The offerings the living bring to the ancestors are then necessary to empower them not to go with empty hands before God. Ancestors serve as substitutes for the living and represent them to God.

However, though practices are diverse between different groups of Africans, when prayers are directed to the ancestors, they are the addressees. An invocation to God is missing. At the same time, the ancestors are venerated because they are the guarantors of life (Triebel 2002:193), viewed as the ones who bless (or curse) their offspring. Human life's fortune and well-being are dependent on them. The purpose of the cult of veneration is to bring blessings and good living to those who venerate the ancestors. According to Sundermeier (1988:143, 159), this aspect forms the central aspect of African religion, the centre of faith; that was why missionaries

traditionally rejected the ancestor cult as incompatible with the Christian faith. It does not fit with worshipping the one God (the first commandment).

Although the ancestor cult contains social aspects that reflect traditional African society, the religious interpretation implies that vital theological questions must be answered (Triebel 2002:194). However, in the practice of many Neo-Pentecostal Africans, built on the foreign experience of the contemporary American faith, miracle and prosperity (Orogun & Pillay 2021:3), the worldview behind the cult continues, viewing ancestors as actively involved in the lives of the living (Hwang 1977:14).

The question posed by the cult of ancestor veneration is whether such a belief can be amalgamated with and integrated into faith in Christ. Or does it represent syncretism and an incompatible contradiction?

Ancestor commemoration was indeed practised in Old Testament times by non-Israelites; hence, the prohibition of such practices in Deuteronomy 18:9–11 (Arnold 2004:203). Israel should avoid the casting of spells, consulting a medium or spiritist and consulting the dead. Isaiah 8:19 forbids them to consult or seek help from the dead (Lv 19:26; 20:27; Dt 18:9–13; Rv 21:8). Divination is not allowed (Arnold 2004:199–200).

Some African Christians view their tradition of ancestors and their commemoration in conjunction with practices found in the Old Testament. However, there is no indication in the Bible that ancestors influenced the daily lives of their descendants. Although Israel respected their ancestors, especially the patriarchs, they did not venerate them or offer sacrifices to them. Nowhere does the Hebrew Bible describe that the patriarchs in any way mediated for the people, as one finds in traditional Africa; Israel was the heir of the promises of the old covenant made to the ancestors and should worship and honour Yhwh alone.

Like African religion, the Bible acknowledges that humans keep on existing after death; however, in the New Testament, the righteous are with God, and the unrighteous will be judged and punished for their sinful lives. What the intermediate state will be is not clear from the Bible, but it seems that believers who die enter Christ's presence (2 Cor 5:8; Phlp 1:23; 2 Cor 5:1; 12:34) (Afeke & Verster 2004:55). The emphasis on divine lordship and Christ's mediation does not allow for any ancestor veneration. Christians' eschatological expectations also exclude the African way of seeing death as limited to the existence of some as ancestors.

Conclusion

It was argued that ancestors form a significant part of the world for some Neo-Pentecostal Africans, and their response to view the ancestors as influencing their daily lives directly is an integral part of their worldview in sync with how Africans traditionally thought about ancestors. The church must

acknowledge it and treat the reverence for ancestors with sensitivity. This implies that Neo-Pentecostals and Pentecostals will not merely condemn ancestors' commemoration but view it as a useful form of contextualisation. However, when it comes to ancestor veneration, based on the view of ancestors as actively engaged in daily living, they may not condone such practices.

The contextualisation of African customs to make the Pentecostal message relevant for Africans, as early Christians had to express their faith in terms of the Greco-Roman culture, is necessary, as a process to transform the Christian faith from structures and forms of expression grounded in missionary culture to those of recipient cultures (Mofokeng 2024:83). However, when it becomes a paradigm that does not distinguish between the heart of the gospel message and a dressing of it to make it relevant to African listeners based on fostering a relativist attitude, contextualisation will threaten the message's viability. Therefore, contextualisation requires to be reconsidered continuously.

The interplay of syncretism and ancestor veneration within African Pentecostalism presents a complex landscape of opportunities and challenges. Traditional ancestor veneration rituals cannot be adopted in Neo-Pentecostal worship, but the door should be left open to engage theologically in an informed manner with the practice of commemorating ancestors. Only in this way shall the African cultural heritage be considered seriously and can theology be authentically expressed in African terms. In other words, the African church should rethink ancestral relationships.

While it can enhance cultural relevance and community ties, it also risks doctrinal conflicts and identity crises. Balancing these dynamics is crucial for the future of African Neo-Pentecostal churches as they navigate their roles in rapidly changing social and spiritual contexts.

It is submitted that ancestor veneration is syncretistic when it attempts to blend and align religious beliefs and practices that are inherently contradictory (Sanou 2013:133). The interface of inculturation with the gospel message in this case ruins religious identities, unlike the translation of the Bible in indigenous languages or accommodating some local musical instruments and customs in the worship service (Tagwirei 2024:6). Hence, it is not possible for ancestor veneration to be admitted into Pentecostal practice because it represents an indiscriminate and uncritical incorporation into Christianity of inadmissible elements in its attempt to make it relevant for the cultural context (Nyuki & Van Niekerk 2016:387).

However, the opinion of Nigerian Pentecostal pastors, such as Enoch Adeboye (RCCG), who categorically characterise ancestor veneration as 'demonic covenants', promoting 'Spirit-led disinheritance' via deliverance prayers, is not true in an unqualified sense (Burgess 2021:47). There are positive aspects of ancestor commemoration that deserve the church's

attention. At the same time, it underscores the persistent conflict between the acceptance of indigenous customs and the commitment to a more conservative understanding of Christian theology among many African Pentecostals.

In modern times, African reverence for the ancestors is losing part of its essence and impact because of urbanisation and secularisation. However, many Africans still consider the veneration of ancestors as necessary because it serves as a moral uprightness criterion and a moral enforcement duty (Morgan 2020:29). Ancestors act as the moral conscience of the living that motivates them to serve the community's well-being. Their descendants are encouraged to exercise virtues that promote the well-being and continuation of the family lineage, avoid an unhealthy lifestyle, care for their children, avoid preventable accidents and insults to others, thievery, adultery, alcoholism, etc. Instead, it encourages them to be truthful, hardworking, respectful, trustworthy and merciful. These values are also biblical; hence, Pentecostals may consider encouraging believers to keep their ancestors in remembrance by following the examples of the virtuous ones. Especially, some Neo-Pentecostals strategically and for evangelistic reasons have been adapting the gospel message. Perhaps by recognising the value of ancestors as the guardians of moral behaviour, they can incorporate the reverence for ancestors to motivate believers to follow the (good) examples of ancestors in behaving in a morally correct way that also honours God.

However, the challenges presented by ancestor veneration should also be kept in clear view. It conflicts with core Pentecostal beliefs, such as the focus on continuing encounters with God through the Spirit, resulting in believers having a direct relationship with God. Veneration of ancestors threatens Pentecostals' identity because it incorporates some inadmissible elements from the African worldview that challenge the theistic view of God. Another challenge is the blending of beliefs that can lead to the exploitation of spiritual practices for commercial gain, such as the commodification of rituals. An example is some Pentecostal charismatic figures' use of so-called 'anointed' objects like a staff, clothing or anointing oil and water that can easily be misunderstood by Africans viewing it in the light of African religion. It is true that Mark 5:27–29 and Acts 5:15; 19:2 testify to the power of the touch of Jesus' garment, Peter's shadow and Paul's handkerchiefs that can bring healing. However, it is essential to emphasise that Pentecostal prophetic preachers may not present themselves as semidivine figures endowed with the same powers as traditional healers (Tagwirei 2024:12). It will undermine the sincerity of worship and diminish the spiritual significance of both Pentecostalism and ancestor veneration.

In conclusion, African Pentecostal theology should include the warning that the belief that ancestors influence the living and act to mediate for them with God is unbiblical and an infringement of the first command. Jesus is not another religious teacher and ancestor; he is the Lord of life with the authority to decide the fate of the living. And he alone can meet Africans' needs effectively. To view the deceased living

in a world in direct continuation with the present one is unbiblical. However, commemoration of the dead will always be an imperative, in keeping with the fifth commandment (Ex 20:12).

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