VENERATION OF ANCESTORS IN EDO ONTOLOGY; IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICAN COMMUNALISM

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Abstract
While highlighting the import of Enikaro (Ancestors) as enshrined in the religious life of the Edo people and the attendant effect on solidarity and kinship ties in the family and community life; this essay attempts to draw some connections between the act of veneration of ancestors and the robust communal spirit enshrined in African Socialism. Employing the critical analytic approach, the paper observed that this ancestral veneration could rightly be called the true religion of the Edo people, given its prevalence. However the almost extirpation of this robust tradition in contemporary family communities of the Edo Nation is having its toll on the moral values that are characteristically African, especially the sense of communalism. From the analysis, part of the reason why there is deficit in our value system, especially the sense of solidarity among kinsmen, was attributed to the almost disappearance of this practice that acted as a veritable vehicle for uniting the entire extended family and society. It recommended for some points of regeneration and integration in contemporary African life in order to achieve the sense of oneness that has almost disappeared from their existential reality.

Key Words: Veneration, Ancestors, Ontology, Communalism, Edo, Tradition

Introduction
African Religion is a central discourse in contemporary African Philosophy. Early European discourse on Africans and their denial of any rationality in all aspects of their lives did not spare the people the major defining characteristic of their lives which someone has described as ‘deeply religious.’ Ethnographers and cultural Anthropologists like de Brosses, Edward Tylor, James Frazer, Evans Pritchard, Levy Brulh and a host of others, in the past, described Africans as sub human creatures. Samuel Baker even went to an extreme, when he asserted: “Without exception they are without a belief in a Supreme Being, neither have they any form of worship or idolatry; nor is the darkness of their minds enlightened even by a ray of superstition. The mind is as stagnant as the morass which forms its puny world.” (Evans-Pritchard ’16). A turning point commenced with Bantu Philosophy; thanks to the author and Belgian Priest, Placid Tempels, who revolutionize not only European perception of the African peoples; but also African scholars themselves to lunch a ferocious assertion of their value systems and the beauty of African studies. It was in this light, with regard to African Religion, that one would appreciate the input of writers, like: Bolaji Idowu, John S. Mbiti, Olusegun Oladipo, Okot p’ Bitek, Samuel O. Imbo, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, to mention but a few. For these scholars Africans had a very high religious sense. Infact Okot p’ Bitek maintained that religious knowledge was the key to understanding the culture of the people. According to him:

The religion of a people is perhaps the most important aspect of their culture. What they believe governs their lives. It provides their ‘world view’ ... the general direction along which they live their lives, and relate to each other and the universe. It guides them in their conduct of war and peace. It is the basis of their behavior towards one another. The knowledge of the religion of our peoples is the key to the knowledge of their culture (Wiredu 364).

Similarly Bolaji Idowu maintained that:
Because traditional religions permeate all departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and the non religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament (2).

In 1973, Prof. Bolaji Idowu identified the main structure of African Religion to include: Belief in God, Belief in Divinities, Belief in Spirits, Belief in Ancestors, and Belief in the practice of magic and medicine. The focus of this essay is to examine some implications of Ancestral veneration for communal ties. To achieve this, the paper shall clarify some key words like Edo, Veneration, Ancestors and Communalism. Then we shall see the veneration of the dead (ancestors), this will be followed by the Edo Ancestral veneration, wherein we shall see the origin and rites. This will be followed by an affirmation of the relevance of communalism in contemporary African society. The paper shall then conclude by reflecting on some of the implications of Ancestral veneration on communalism. Some of the key terms include: Edo, Ancestors, Veneration, and Communalism.

**Edo**: The term Edo has an historical background. According to J.U. Egharevba, Edo was the slave that saved Oba Ewuare (1440-1473) from being killed (2). So as to immortalize him, Edo became a name for Benin indigenes. On the other hand, 'Benin' is a name that serves as territorial name (e. g. Benin City, Benin Empire or Benin Kingdom) and its usage predates Edo. Apart from serving as the indigenous name of Benin City, Edo can be used today equivocally: It is referred exclusively to the language spoken by the Benins, who historically are the Edo people as distinct from the other inhabitants of Benin Empire. It can also be used as a linguistic label comprising all the languages and dialects spoken in various communities, whose inhabitants have migrated from Benin, many years ago. The origins of the people are lost in Myths and antiquity, while some hold that they migrated from Sudan many centuries ago, (Ebohon xvii); the people themselves believe that the Kingdom was founded by one of the sons of Osanobua the Supreme Being (Ebohon 5). Worthy of note is that today they occupy the Edo South Senatorial District of Nigeria.

**Ancestors**: This refers to any person from whom one is descended. Etymologically it derives from the Latin: 'ante', meaning 'before'; and 'cedere', meaning 'go'. Antecedere, meaning to precede; or antecessor, meaning predecessor, or literally “fore-goer.” Ancestors therefore means one who goes before, the parent or an antecedent, that could be grandparent, great-grandparent, great-great-grandparent, etc (Online).

**Veneration**: From the Latin venerari or venerat, meaning adored or revered. From there we have the English venerate and the noun veneration. It means reverence, profoundest respect, or the act of showing respect, consider hallowed or exalted, or be in awe of. It came from the Greek word Dulia (douleia), meaning slavery or servitude. A servant shows a sort of respect to his master. (Online).

**Communalism**
Communalism may be defined as the doctrine that the group (that is the society) constitutes the focus of the activities of the individual members of the society. The doctrine places emphasis on the activity and success of the wider society, rather than, though not necessarily at the expense of, or to the detriment of the individual. (Gyekye 318) The Africans to a large
extent emphasize community life and communalism as a living principle of which the basic ideology is community-identity which aims at producing and presenting the individual as a community structured self and a culture bearer. Communalism is not only unique to Africans but could also be found in America, Europe, Australia, and Asia.

**Veneration Of The Dead**

There is this bond of love that exists among members of the same kin, such that even when a member dies the others left behind albeit mourning their deceased member try to immortalize his or her memory. This is why the African definition of a family needs to be highlighted and should aid our understanding in the relationship between the living and the dead. Here the family is seen as a natural and spiritual union in which the living and the dead commune with each other in all its extended roots. It is in this regard, that Okolo would describe the African as a ‘being-with’ (1), with others, with his ancestors, with God etc; and Nwoko averred:

African traditional society is a society where the individual is always considered a free, integrated member of his community, a communion person. It is a society where individualism is considered a taboo, where each member takes the interest of the community as his own. His pride is community is power. The more united he is to the community, the more he sees the community as a mere extension of the family (72).

It is in the light of this that one would appreciate the evolution of the veneration and respect for the deceased members of the family in almost all ancient cultures of the world. This is based on love and respect that members of the kin show towards their dead relatives and friends. Another reason for this is the general belief in life after life. Even in the Jewish culture. When Yahweh is addressed as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob by generations who lived more than a thousand years after the Patriarchs had died; there is the connotation of the general belief in life after life. Others are of the opinion that the divinities as we have in some deities were actually extra ordinary humans who possessed magical powers such that the circumstances that led to their mysterious transition warranted a kind of maintenance of diplomatic relations particularly by close associates, or clans, or societal members. A good example in Edo pantheon is Oba Ewuare the great the 12th Oba that reigned in Benin kingdom. His original name was Ogun but after his death, because of his magical and esoteric powers he became a hero deity, and therefore seen as a powerful intercessor to the Supreme, on behalf of humans. There are many theories of this belief, but we shall not be going into the various forms, however suffice it to mention that this is the general background to the veneration of the dead. This belief is further supported by a strong belief in the capacity and ability of the dead to influence what goes on in the world especially what happens to their kins; since they enjoyed a kind of continuous and supernatural existence. Although there is no generally accepted theory concerning the origins of ancestor veneration, this socio-religious phenomenon appears in some form in all human cultures documented so far. The philosophy behind the Egyptian mummies is very much related to this belief.

**Veneration of Enikaro (ancestors) in Edo Ontology**

Edo religious life is very complex (Bradbury 52). It involves not only the dead but the Supreme Deity, other deities associated with the natural environment or with human skills, ‘hero’ figures that provide the focus for a village or village group cults, reification of the components of human personality, and so on. Ebonho lists 42 of such hero deities, (12); not to talk of other deities like Olokun, Iso, Esu, obiemwen, Ogiwu, etc. Communication with the dead however accounts for a high proportion of all ritual activities and every kind of social group forms a congregation for the worship of its dead in some form or other. Ancestor
veneration was a part and parcel of the normal and ordinary life of the Edo. It is important to distinguish between two kinds of veneration: Individual named ancestors with specific genealogical reference and collective unnamed ancestors or predecessors of the members of a corporate group, clan or town. In the case of the latter they are referred to as Edion (Bradbury 37). It is the individual genealogically defined ancestors who are the object of the domestic ancestor cult and the major subject of this essay.

When a man dies, his eldest son after performing the burial rites, sets up an Altar in his honour. (Bradbury 54), or if the dead man was himself an eldest son, adds a carved staff to the existing altar. The altar consists of a mud built platform on which are placed carved staves (Ukhurhe) and one or more brass bells, and in the case of people with high rank, wooden or brass heads, ceremonial swords, and other objects, like the finger nails of the deceased and a little hair. These last two elements are believed to have everlasting properties. These are carefully wrapped and then inserted into the heart of the mud Altar. The eldest son is the priest of his father, interceding with him on behalf of all the latter's patrilineal descendants, and through him with his lineal male ancestors as far back as he can remember. There is however a second priest, the eldest surviving brother of the deceased, who must be present at all important sacrifices and prayers to represent himself and his descendants in the male line, his brothers and their descendants and his sisters (Bradbury 55). It will be noted that in accordance with the principle of primogeniture, and since ideally every man should have a senior son, there is likelihood of fission of the veneration of Ancestors. Altars could also be set up for deceased mothers, but this was not prevalent; they were done specifically following instructions from some divinations. The effective ancestor veneration unit therefore including the young children and the surviving brothers and sisters of the living dead, is from two to four generations in depth though more remote collaterals may be present at sacrifices and prayers may be made for them.

The dead father is conceived as standing in much the same relation to his descendants and their dependents as does the head of an extended family in this world. He punishes such offences as incest, the adultery of wives, quarrelling and stealing within the group, bringing sickness and even death upon the offender and his close kin. (Ebohon, 27). Members suspected of wrongdoing are frequently ask to take oaths upon the shrine to prove their truthfulness. offerings including: kola nuts, palm wine, chalk, and pounded yam are made regularly and are accompanied by prayers for the welfare of members of the family. In times of sickness and other catastrophes, goats and fowls are sacrificed. Finally there is an annual festival called Eho, at which all the patrilineal descendants of the dead father and his father and their wives kneel one by one before the altar, present kola nuts and other offerings and pray for the wellbeing of themselves, their husbands and wives and their children. Married daughters return home to take part in Eho. Patrilineal collaterals and other cognates may be present but they do not kneel before the altar. The kola nuts are divided between the worshippers who break up small pieces and scatter them on the Altar while praying for themselves. The senior son then sacrifices a goat (or a cow if his wealth and rank justify it) and a cock which are cooked and eaten. Other rituals include: ringing of the bell, summoning a solemn assembly, sprinkling of the blessed water, and white chalk; as a kind of sanctification of the assembly, the great call of the Enikaro, Prayers with kola nuts, pouring of libation, slaughtering of the victim, cooking of the food, social interactions, eating of the meal, thanksgiving prayer, and finally the Oba’s prayer.

The collective ancestors or predecessors of a group are known as Edion, which it will be noted is the name of the senior age grade in Edo villages (Bradbury 240). The Edion spirits are thought of both as the original occupiers of the village land and as all the Edion who have since lived and been buried there. All villages have Edion shrines (oguedion), which contain an altar decorated with ukhurhe, some are large buildings in which meetings of the village council are held. The odionwere, as the priest of the Edion makes regular offerings
there and his influence with the Edion spirits is a powerful sanction, particularly with reference to his control of the age grades. Promotions through the age grades are made in the oguedion, and the odionwere is invested there.

The concept of Edion is not however confined to the collective ancestors of a village community. In some communities each ward has its own oguedion. The family and households has its Edion too for whom a cow or goat is sacrificed during mortuary rites and to whom libations of palm wine and pieces of kola nuts are often offered. In most community shrines and hero shrines of other deities, there are subsidiary altars to the Edion that is to the past worshippers of the deities. The palace associations have their Edion altars, at which offerings are made regularly at promotions and the investiture of new title holders. In the same vein, the ancestors of the Oba have significance for the whole nation. At the annual Igbe festival, there is a day that is set aside for the veneration of the ancestors of the Oba (Ugie-erhoba).

Finally there are the Edion of the whole Edo nation (Edion-edo) represented by a carved staff which is in the keeping of the Esongban, the second ranking Eghaevbo n'ore, who is also known as odionwere Edo. Sacrifices are made to Edion-Edo in times of national catastrophe. In all of these one would notice ancestral veneration as cutting across all families to extended families, to the clan, to the community and the entire Edo nation. Even in some specific shrines of certain deities like Ogun for example, the Altar representing the ancestors (earlier worshippers) is also present. Bradbury talks about unincorporated dead (‘ghosts’ of several varieties) and those dead who have been assigned ‘constitutional' positions with regard to the living, by a deliberate act of reincorporation (231). Both kinds interact with the living but they are distinguished from each other by the attitudes and behavior of the living towards them. In general, it could be asserted that while relations between the living and the incorporated dead have a strong positive, moral component; ghosts are dealt with almost entirely in terms of expediency. The incorporated dead are accepted as acting justly in their demands upon the living, who are morally obliged to submit to their authority and to sustain them; they are also believed capable of conferring positive benefits.

Rite of Veneration: Apart from the annual Eho festival of family reunion which was a compulsory ceremony once in a year; there is also the regular veneration, which for some families is daily why some others observe it every work day, and some others observe anytime they are embarking on a journey or an important project. The veneration consists in taking kolanuts and wine going before the Altar and then offering prayers with the kolanuts and wine and depositing some particles of kola nuts and some little quantity of wine on the altar as libation. What comes across in all of these is the fact that this practice of veneration has a way of cementing the community in one big bond of brotherhood. From the Hall of fame of the various ancestors, one could see the visible links between one family and the other. The implication for communalism is the upholding of the values of the common good of all the people.

African Communalism
While most scholars like: Polycarp Ikuenobe, Aborisade Olasunkanmi, J.K. Kigongo, Kaphagawani, B. Abanuka, Kimmerle have all emphasized the hallmark of African communalism to mean the emphasis of the community over the individual; and was at the hallmark of African Socialism, few have opinionated, that communalism is the bane of development in the continent. Here Tunde Obadina is of the opinion that outsiders were not fully integrated into the communal life; in other words they were viewed as enemies (online). Clashes between indigenes and settlers have also been attributed to communalism. The Kenyan Political Scientist, V. G. Simiyu opined that hate and struggle were characteristic of
the African past. (online) The fact is that even in a typical nuclear family, hate and struggle could still be present. In the Holy Book, we read how Cain killed Abel his brother because he was jealous of the acceptability of the latter's sacrifice (Gen. 4:8). Extremists are found everywhere, even in the best democracies in the world. Humans would continue to contend with issues of deviant behaviours in the society. Therefore the aberrations noticed in the African past cannot destroy the salubrious cultural and religious tradition. These human imperfections that are found everywhere humans are, must not become the epitome of the point that is being made. Attention must be drawn to the good aspects of communalism.

All over Africa, people have migrated to settle in other communities and were fully integrated into the main stream life of the community and continue to do excellently well. The ethics of mutual help and of caring for each other is founded on communalism. (kimmerle, 4), decisions based on consensus, all inclusive democratic participation, sense of belonging, sense of solidarity, sense of security. In a word, communalism guaranteed life insurance for the members of the community. It is not just only a member that has right to those things that belong to the community but the community is the home of those non-affiliated as it becomes an all inclusive ambiance of being. Human history and societal history are replete with stories of migration and integration; cross cultural and inter-tribal marriages, etc. This would not have been possible if there was no guarantee of integration into the main stream cultural life.

An Appraisal
In recent years our understanding of the nature and significance of the veneration of African ancestors has been greatly advanced by the work of a number of British and American anthropologists. Among them Fortes, Middleton and Goody, have all emphasized the connection between the identity and behavioural characteristics of those dead that are chosen as objects of worship, and the distribution and character of Authority in both the domestic and political domains of the society. Accordingly, the distribution of authority ... is linked with the computation of the genealogy and with officiating at sacrifices (Bradbury 230.).

From the foregoing, it is important to note that religion is a relationship between an inferior and a superior, the human person and God. A relationship that acknowledges one Supreme Being, who is the creator of the heavens and the earth and everything both invisible and visible. A religion that also confers Authority on the heads and imposes duties on the entire community. One implication here for communalism is the fact that such ethos are taking very seriously because it is connected to the supernatural. Unlike the worship of other deities, the role of Ancestors as forerunners in the race before humans are compulsorily acknowledged by all the members of the community. It was the only religious aspect in the culture that cuts across everybody irrespective of the fact that one was an adherent of the Olokun cult or the Ogun cult or the Esago cult, etc. No wonder Feuerbach observed that religion is identical with the distinctive characteristic of human beings, which is self-consciousness (16). This consciousness for the Edo is one that holds tenaciously to the dictum that 'Osa gienwen agbon', 'God is the one who sent me to the world.' It follows that when one is sent on an errand it is very logical that one comes back to report to the sender. In this connection one must be very diligent in carrying out the ethos of the community, here the ancestors are helpful in ensuring that their kins are doing what is required of them, hence their close association and general involvement in ancestral veneration. In other words one must uphold the communal identity.

Veneration of Ancestors, like other deities was the best and most frequent means the Edo man could relate with the Supreme Being, whom he perceived as Terrifying and Fascinating. The ancestors act as intermediaries between them and the Divine. There is a strong belief that the role one played in life is also the role one continues to play after life. This is why veneration of ancestors was a strong religious act that one could term their national religion since everyone was involved. In other words the Family
head and priest today, continues to play that role even after death. The role of an intercessor that he played why he was alive would also be played in the realm of the Ancestral spirits. There is in Edo ontology this conscious communion of souls (both living and dead) among members of the community. This is precisely the reason why the Edo takes the act of veneration ancestors very sacrosanct.

Several reasons could make him do this: upholding the tradition of the elders, for general wellbeing, response to a perceived threat of a pestilence, to avert an upcoming evil, special difficulties, particular requests, etc. Olusegun Oladipo believes that there are many distortions and misrepresentations and the correction of these must be the task of African Philosophy of Religion. (Wiredu 361) However the interest of this Essay is in the capacity of the act of veneration of ancestors to unite the whole of the extended family. In the past the unity was very formidable such that in requesting for specific work to be done it was much easier to assemble people; and responses by kinsmen and women were very prompt.

Contemporary African society that has been lacerated by other extraneous factors, coupled with a large dosage of secularism has rendered the veneration of Ancestors almost nonexistent. No wonder Kwame Nkrumah observed many decades ago that: “...Africa society has one segment which comprises our traditional way of life, it has a second which is filled by the presence of Islamic culture in Africa; it has a final segment which represents the infiltration of the Christian tradition and culture of Western Europe into Africa, using colonialism and neo colonialism as its primary vehicles. These different segments are animated by competing ideologies...." (68). the implications for communal ties has also been enormous. The African today sees himself as individuated human being rather than an aggregate of personalities. What this means is that the society even at the grassroots level can no longer really act as one. Chinua Achebe lamented that “our clan can no longer act as one … and we have fallen apart.” It is also obvious that crime has increased because the aggressor does not see anything wrong in attacking a 'stranger', who in the real sense is actually his kinsman or woman. The dictum of I am because we are has almost lost its value hence the sufferings and the predicament of the African people. How would one explain in Nigeria today the needless and insane killings in the North East perpetrated by brothers against brothers? Again the exploitation of the Southerners by politicians from the same place is inexplicable. Other ills like: Kidnappings, armed robberies, extortions, intimidations, etc. defy logic and is anticommunal. In most African States, individualism has replaced unity of purpose that carries with community spirit, the interest of every man. This accounts for the diehard quest for personal power at any price; high rate of unjust and immoral practices, a culture of tyrannism, self-centeredness, social unrest, exploitation and wanton corruption.

While not advocating for the extremely clannish and tribal mentality, contemporary African Philosophy should fashion out remedies to revamp communalism in the society and clear it of all attendant weaknesses, the need for a renewed consciousness on the relationship we have with one another as epitomized in our common ancestral heritage would certainly be a potential breakthrough. Here Ancestral Veneration as evident in Edo Ontology could become a philosophy of social change. Change from egoism to altruism. Tempels noted this fact some decades ago that: “This concept of separate beings of substance ... is foreign to Bantu thought...” (58). More so in Africa the individual does not exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. (Mbti 108). Is this the case today? The facts are obvious.

**Conclusion**

It is the highly considered opinion of the writer that even though the tradition of venerating ancestors is gradually going into oblivion because of the advent of obvious extraneous factors, the need to catch in on the strength of this practice could help in the solidarity that is
currently pursued by politician, policy makers, and shakers of the society. While Emphasis may not be put on the breaking of kolanuts and the pouring of libation, the point of emphasis could be our common brotherhood and a deep bond of unity and solidarity amongst members of the venerating unit specifically, and the Nation at large. This no doubt would promote a spirit of harmony, inter-dependence, and concern for the well being of one another, growth and development in the continent. In a word: It would awake our communalism.

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