THE THEOLOGICAL VALIDITY OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN IGBO LAND

Rev. FR. Christian O. Ele, PhD
General Studies Division, Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Agbani, Enugu State, Nigeria

Abstract
Ancestor worship is prevalent in traditional religions across the globe. It has been resilient in the face of contemporary values in economics, politics, science and technology, arts, formal literacy and revealed religion that tend to truncate its presence or obliterate its existence. In Igbo land, which is the local context of our study, ancestor worship has inherent values that are positively pragmatic, morally justifiable and culturally noble. These values, without prejudice to the negative traits which must be expunged necessarily, are akin to the gospel of Jesus Christ. These good values are the meeting points of Igbo religion and Christianity. This paper discusses the theological validity of ancestor worship in Igbo land. In other words, it seeks to investigate whether or not ancestor worship has any theological value in its orthodoxy and orthopraxis as found to exist among Igbo people of Southern Nigeria. This study is necessitated by the increasing number of Igbo Christians who are in the Church but have not left the ancestral shrines, venerations and feasts. This phenomenon of double allegiance has bred crises in more instances than one. The findings of this paper hold robust and optimistic convictions that ancestor worship as a valid theological datum in Igbo religion can through inculturation process become an Igbo Christian Culture. The necessary consequence is that Christianity becomes a way of life in Igbo society with deep roots and abundant evangelical harvests. This work therefore recommends what should be done so that Igbo Christians will remain authentic Igbo people and authentic Christians. At the same time. The methodology employed in this study is historic-descriptive. This means that ancestor worship as a religious phenomenon in Igbo land is described and interpreted using the adherents’ values and practices in this socio-religious context as a frame of reference.

Keywords: Theology, Theological validity, Ancestor, Ancestor worship and Igbo land.

INTRODUCTION
The African has been described as homo religious Africanus, and understandably so because the religiosity of the African is strikingly deep. The traditional African is nothing without his religion. In other words, his religion is his existence. Major Arthur Glyn (1907) articulated this idea of religiosity of the African in his The Lower Niger Nigeria and its Tribes, thus: They are in the strict and natural sense of the word truly and deeply religious people, they eat religiously, drink religiously, bathe religiously and even sin religiously. On this Mbti J.S. (1980: 1 – 2) gives further insight. For him, Africans are notoriously religious….Because traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion...

The world of the African is a world of tripartite categories namely: inanimate, animate and spiritual beings. Each of these and as a connected whole, according to the conscious thought pattern of the African, exerts much influence on his cosmology and thus gives rise to his ideology (experience) and consequently the body of values held in high esteem in his scheme of things. The African’s value system is the determinant of his actions, what he desires and his undesirables. Religion, more than any other factor, influences the feelings and thought-pattern of the African. Thus, religiosity is a cardinal African traditional value. In this connection, Mbti J.S., cited by Ele, C (1996:10) observed that in
African Traditional Religion has various elements: Belief in the Supreme Being, existence of the human soul and life after death, moral sense of good and evil, justice and truth, existence of myths which convey certain basic truths about man’s experiences in his encounter with the visible and supersensible world and the existence of spirits and ancestors. This body of belief system moderates their creed and code, cult and life within the structure of religion. In the African cosmology of time, there is a continuum; a strict interconnectedness between the past, the present and the future. As Ekechukwu, A. (1982:9) aptly put it; in traditional African concept of time, “the past, the present and the future intermingle in shaping one’s destiny since ‘the living dead’ and even the unborn form a Spiritual Community”. This idea points out the phenomena of death and life after death as factual in African Traditional Religion as found in all other world religions. The African believes that the dead are living and so, there exists no trace of doubt in his mind about man’s survival of death. A concrete evidence of this observation is vividly seen in ancestor worship which, in the main, is the interacting medium between the world of the living and the world of the spirit.

This paper discusses the theological validity of Ancestor worship in Igbo land. Theological validity in this context implies the study and interpretation of the ancestor worship, our subject matter, from the categories and perspectives of Christian Theology. Both Ndi Igbo (Igbo people) and their religion relate to God, Chineke (creator), Chukwu (Supreme God), the Fons et Culmen, Alpha and Omega, Beginning and the End (Apocalypse 1: 8), the source of all they are and have. As theology is a discourse on God, it has to cut across human condition. In this light, ancestor worship could be studied and interpreted in theological terms. Therefore, Igbo Religion which is a specimen of African Tradition Religion represents the specificity of the Igbo quest for God, the Ultimate Reality; it is their response to the divine in their world view. Even if the Igbo perception of God in their indigenous faith is imperfect and of a lesser degree compared to the revealed religion in Christ, it has seeds of the Word (Logos Spermatikoi) which constitute the preparatio evangelica (preparation for evangelization) in Christ. Without the theological interpretations, connections and intersections in both religions, evangelization would have been too difficult among Ndi Igbo. These meeting points either as seeds of the word or preparatory positive elements of Igbo culture constitute permanent valid theological contents which Christianity must evangelize essentially so that it takes deep roots among the Igbo people. Until Christianity becomes the culture of Igbo people, it would be continually understood as foreign and the roots would be shallow. These shallow roots explain why Ndi Igbo have welcomed Christianity and its good news of salvation but a good member of Igbo Christians who have left the shrines of indigenous religion have not yet reached the holy temple of Jesus Christ. And a good number who have reached the church are still in the ancestral shrines as ardent worshipers.

This work shall have fulfilled its objective if its contents that are expository and the conclusions drawn from the entire discourse could stimulate the process of inculturation of ancestor worship in Igbo land. The theological synthesis, as the effect of Christianization, would contribute in huge measures to authentic Igbo Christianity.

2.0 ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN IGBO LAND

The ancestor is a departed spirit who stands in peculiarly close relation to the tribe or the family: the life of the latter has been derived from him and because he still exists, he remains in a sense, one with it. These ancestors thus are superintendants of their family affairs but because they are in the domain of the spirit world, the communion and communication with them is made possible only at the spiritual level. (Idowu, E.B; 1980: 179-184). The ancestors, according to Mbiti J.S., are the “living dead”.

Among the Igbo, the belief concerning ancestors according to Anih, is linked with the Igbo metaphysics of man. Man is a duality, he is a composite of body and soul. The soul survives death but the body decays. This immortality of the soul, therefore, highlights the question of the “dead” yet “living”, hence the “living dead”. As immortal souls, the ancestors are ubiquitous and discharge their functions everywhere. To buttress his point, he agrees with Egbujuie, I. that the ancestors.

...are everywhere in that invisible permeating and enveloping cosmos... with their great powers, now that they are gods; they protect and bless their living ones all the more effectively. They also have power to punish evil done with some affliction or illness. Their presence is felt by all.(Anih, S. 1995: 96).
This shows that, as Ezekwugo C.U.M. (1973: 156) wrote, the ancestors do not fail in their duty of fighting to protect their living children and of increasing their families with new arrivals. This they do with more fervor and than even the gods, for the living are their own offsprings. It is their faithfulness in the duty of ‘bringing’ children that has kept fanning high the flame of Ancestor worship in Igbo land, if not in the whole of West Africa.

The Igbo belief concerning ancestor worship is intimately linked with their value of filial piety. Buttressing this point, Obi, C.N. (1988:41) asserts that ancestor worship among the Igbo people is the ritualisation of filial piety. It comprises beliefs and practices that are directed towards the predecessors. Thus it is the transposition to the religious plane of the relationships of parents and children. They regard ancestors not as mythical beings but as a line of named, identified human progenitors. For them, ancestor worship is peculiar in form, consisting of sacrifice and prayers offered to expiate of offences or to atone for ritual neglect. The Igbo family structure and the fact of inevitability of death but with a firm credo and high regard for individual and community continuity promote this dead-and-living interaction and encounter in worship.

Worship, etymologically speaking, is an anglosaxon derivative (“woerd-sip”, “woerd-sip”, honour; from worth, meaning “value”, “dignity”, “price and the termination” ship; lat. cultus) which in the general sense is homage paid to a person or a thing. In this sense, we may speak of hero-worship, worship of the emperor, of demons, of the angels, even of relics and especially of the cross. (Cabrol, 1913:71c). Worship includes the attitude and activity designed to recognize and describe the worth of the person or thing to which the homage is addressed. It thus connotes a range of meanings covering the whole of reverent life, embracing piety as well as liturgy. (Emefie, Ikenga-Metuh, 1985: 80).

In traditional Africa, there exist cultic forms which express their response to the divine invitation hic et nunc in the experiential encounter in vocalization, singing, dancing, sacrifices, and other symbolic ways through which this response could be simply or elaborately expressed. In Igbo traditional Religion, the worship of the Supreme Being is different from the worship of the ancestors which in turn is different from that of other spirits in degree and importance. E.G. Parrinder (1962: 65-66) expressed this idea thus:

Perhaps the African attitude to the different classes of spiritual beings might be expressed approximately in terms used in Roman Catholic Theology. Latria is used to denote that Supreme Worship which is due and accorded to God alone. Dulia is the reverence and homage that should be paid to saints and angels. Hyperdulia is used of the special homage paid to the Virgin Mary.

Osadolor, Imasogie (1985:35-36) writes that Ancestral Spirits are worshipped under three categories. They are worshiped either as apotheosized heroes by virtue of their extraordinary exploits and powers and have been elevated to the status of divinities or secondly as collective spirits of the departed members of the clan or ethnic group. This is what Farrow calls “ghost worship” and the festival “all souls festival”. And thirdly, as departed members of the immediate patriarchal family. According to Arinze, F. (1970) in his Sacrifice in Ibo Religion ghost worship is to ensure that those ancestors who due to time factor, can no longer be identified with particular families are not forgotten altogether.

We agree with E.G. parrinder whose words apply also to all Igbo people who “believe that their lives are profoundly influenced by their ancestors, and this belief has far-reaching sociological consequences… Sacrifice has to be offered to them at regular intervals, or when a diviner indicates”. (Parrinder, E.G; 1962: 57). In this work, “worship” should be understood as “veneration”, “filial piety” and could be used interchangeably with these terms.

Ancestor worship is not an exclusivity of Igbo society. It is practiced in different ways around the world - other parts of Africa, Asia, Oceania, Europe, and Afro-Diasporic cultures. It is a phenomenon found too in different religions. In Judaism for example, God is God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, He is God of our ancestors, the God of our fathers, God of the living and not of the dead (Matthew 22: 32, Mark 12:27, 2 Chronicles 20: 6, Deuteronomy, 1 – 11, Acts 7: 32). In Islam, veneration of the dead has:

a complex and mixed view on the idea of grave shrines and ancestor worship. The graves of many early Islamic figures are holy sites for Muslims, including Mohammed, Ali, and a cemetery with many
companions and early caliphs. Many other Mausoleums are major architectural, political and cultural sites, including the National Mausoleum in Pakistan and Taj Mahal in India. However, the religious movement of Wahhabism views this veneration of graves as a form of idolatry. Followers of this movement have destroyed many gravesite shrines, including in Saudi Arabia and in territory controlled by Islamic state (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, “veneration of the dead”, P.10)

In Christianity, ancestor worship is viewed from the three dispositions of vehement opposition, neutrality to acceptance and adaptation or inculturation. Ancestral veneration cannot be neglected by church authorities, Scholars of Religion and theologians because of its existence, resilience and permeations in the societies that exert influence on the global economy, and in the thought patterns of many who are termed civilized, christianized and literate. In the next sub-section we shall know who the ancestors are in Igbo land.

2.1 WHO ARE THE ANCESTORS?

“Ancestors are the living-dead” according to J.S. Mbiti. This statement raises some curiosity. This is because, the African people generally believe in the life after death, therefore, all the dead children, women, men, girls and boys-are living. But not all these are ancestors. However, it remains true to their perceptions that the ancestors are dead and they are living. So, over and above this curious observation the focus of our study under this section includes the qualities of an ancestor, the making of an ancestor; what actually makes one attain the ancestral status is differently outlined according to different African societies. There are some basic constants, though.

The ancestors are not alive in the physical sense. Therefore, death is one of the indispensable credentials for attaining ancestorhood. However, death alone and in itself does not confer ancestorhood; it is in conjunction with other factors. This death must be at a ripe old age and quite natural. Death regarded by the people as unnatural like suicide does not confer ancestorhood.

In some areas in Igbo land, marriage and procreation constitute essential credentials for the status of ancestorhood. Every male adult is expected to function patriarchy and lineage continuity through marriage and procreation. Marriage confers maturity and responsibility in Igbo society. Someone who remains a bachelor or spinster perpetually is regarded as a social failure who could not reproduce his or her anthropological kind. This is social immortality which perpetuates the family line by procreation. It is only by the acceptance of Christ and his values that one could see celibates among Igbo Roman Catholics in deacons, priests, religions men and women, bishops and even cardinal. Otherwise, barrenness and infertility are totally abhorred in Igbo society. As Ele, C.O. (2016: ) wrote:

The sociology of the family is patrilineal without prejudice to dots of matrilineal exceptions. Reproductive health is seen as virility, vitality, fertility and generative powers. As pregnancy and gestation are celebrated actively or passively, publicly or privately, infertility and sterility on the other hand are understood as abhorrent and loathsome in both grave and significant proportions. In more families than one, infertility has led to the breakdown of peace, turned sweet love of darlings into sour grape of hatred and in some extreme cases, bred divorce. The explanation of these painted situations is found in the suffocating space which these Nigerian peoples and their cultures give to barreness in their societies. These same ancient cultures have gender discriminatory dimensions in their enthronement of a male child as an – heir – necessity. In other words, any marital union that generates only a girl child or only females is perceived as one without an heir. In typical African traditional societies such as the Igbo specimen, the family membership begins in the remote past of the ancestors, includes all the living in the present and stretches elastically to the infinite future of the yet unborn. So, impotence is understood as an adversity that exhibits the unwanted package of possible lineage obliteration.

Marriage, therefore is a social institution that is sacred and presents procreation as its necessary raison detre. Therefore, marriage is heterogeneous among the Igbo people; it is between male and female, so that procreation would be possible.
There is a link between procreation and ancestor worship. The living and the dead are in communion through the ancestral cult. When marriage is shirked or there is one but barren, then it means that there are no offsprings be protected by the ancestors and no descendants to feed their progenitors. So marriage, procreation and a male heir qualify one for ancestral status in this dimension. There are still other qualitative indices like good moral life.

Ancestor shall have lived his life according to the accepted moral norms of his society. In this light, we say with L.N. Mbefo (1989: 75) that:

*At its best, African traditional religion has formed its adherents to be friendly and hospitable to the stranger. It has taught them to seek peace rather than make war. It has built up a character that remained steadfast in upholding these values even under pressure. Moshweshive, the founder of the Sotho nation, is such a character. He is a true African Ancestor.*

In Igbo society, those who led bad lives are historic shame on their families. Their families in turn disregard them, avoid communion with them, forget them and so, deprive them ancestral cult. They are no ancestors.

Funeral ceremonies to be celebrated for the peaceful repose of the dead is yet another credential of an ancestor. This is a very important qualification since it is believed that with the funeral ceremony, the dead is ushered into the community of those who have gone before him to the spirit world. In short, through funeral rites the dead are elevated and installed ancestors. It is believed too that the deceased whose funeral ceremony has not yet been celebrated or was not adequately performed becomes restless ghosts who return to disturb, attack, harass their offsprings and relatives harshly. Therefore, the dead must have a male child in a legal wedlock who would “bury” him and “plant” him as an ancestor through appropriate funeral ceremony,. In this connection, Uzukwu, (E.E. 1983: 17) writes that, “The fullness of life is spiritualization, the ancestor is a spiritualized being, achieved through the process of his funeral, “planting” or burial by his offspring and people”.

When these ancestors become spiritualized, they stand in close relation with the Supreme Being.

### 2.2. ANCESTORS AND THE SUPREME BEING

In most African societies, the Supreme Being as one and the subordinate deities as another are the two different divinities recognized. The Supreme Being is one and only one exists while the deities are multiple. The Supreme Being is the Creator and sustainer of the entire created order. Therefore, even the deities are believed to be creatures of God.

Man who later becomes an ancestor, a deified being remains the Supreme Being’s creature. So, there exists some relation between the ancestors and the Supreme Being. On this relation, Emefie Ikenga-Metuh agrees with Meek, C.K. that:

*The power and authority of ancestors derive ultimately from Chukwu. This is not only because the first ancestor, semi-divine beings were sent down by Chukwu … But because ancestors co-operate with Chukwu in bringing each individual into existence. It is believed that conception takes place when Onyinyo (ancestral shade), with the permission of the founder ancestors goes before Chukwu and receive his “Chi”*

Metuh asserts in line with this that:

*At death, the nkpolobi (soul) goes back to Chukwu. What subsists is the Onyinyo (shades). This becomes Ndichie (Ancestor) when the burial ceremony has been completed. The living make sacrifices to Ndichie (ancestors at the Okpensi (ancestral shrine) because they are now believed to be very near Chineke, and act as intermediaries between him and the living. (Metuh, 1991: 43-44)*

The ancestors, therefore, derived their existence from the transcendent Supreme Being who alone creates (*Chineke*) both the visible and the invisible, and to whom all things move towards as their final destiny.

God is immanent too in African cosmology (*Chukwu no nso*) and so these ancestors mediate between the Supreme Being (*Chukwu*) and man (*mmadu*).
In sum, we can establish that dual relationship exists between the ancestors and the Supreme Being, namely: Creator – creature relationship and Supreme Being (Lord)/messenger (Intermediary) relationship.

2.3 ANCESTORS AND DEITIES/DIVINITIES

Onwubiko, O. (1988: 54) makes it clear in his Wisdom Lectures that Africans believe in the existence of spirits in general. These spirits can be grouped into two. The first types are those whose names are “known” and are localized, enshrined and therefore, regularly worshipped. The most prominent ones are often owned by a community or, at times by a kindred. The family gods also belong to this first group. The second group are those whose names are “not known”, and as such are called “bad spirits”. These are not located, that is, they are not associated with a particular community specifically and exclusively; nor are shrines erected for them anywhere. Sacrifices to them are often placed on the road sides, often on the forked roads, because they are believed to be wandering spirits; and through which road they come out they would eventually meet the sacrifice.

These localized spirits are deities. However, not all spirits are deities because we have non-localized wandering ones. Ancestors are generally spirits. Some ancestors are deified, localized and represented in images. These became deities reverenced and worshipped by their family, community or social group as such. These are usually the apotheosized heroes, warriors or founders of their social group. Some spirits of the dead who have not been buried according to proper funeral ceremonies would also turn into wandering, harmful spirits until they are ushered into the bosom of rest of the ancestors through funeral rites.

Evil spirits exist too. These are believed to cause sudden death, misfortune and illness. At the recommendation of the diviner, sacrifices are made to appease these malevolent spirits. Ancestors do their best to ward off these evil spirits from their offspring and people.

So, the spirits of the dead who have not found rest in the spirit world can be wandering spirits and they are known to disturb the living while localized spirits of the ancestors are deities. However, ancestors generally are divinities since they are “near God” and minister to God (The Divinity) as God’s messengers. And essentially, all ancestors are spirits who live in the spirit world having lost their physical body to death and mortality.

3.0 THE THEOLOGICAL VALIDITY

In theological studies scholars have made unprecedented progress in their explanation of the secular world and its events from theological interpretative approaches. The basic assumption is that the earth is the Lord’s and its fullness, (Psalm 24: 1, 1 Cor. 10: 26) so the entire universe of things belong to God, its creator and sustainer. In this light, Beuving, M. (2011:2) noted:

In fact, I want to argue that we are not explaining anything sufficiently until we also explain it theologically. The world we live in is the world God made. Every single person, thing, and activity in this universe ultimately relates to God. For this reason, it’s not enough to describe the physics that go into a beautiful sunset – it is appropriate (essential even) to describe the sunset by referencing the God who created it. Cultural productions are no different. God made Human beings in His image (Gen 1: 26 - 28), and every human being knows truth about God (Rom 1: 19, 20, 21, 23, 25, 28). Paul actually reframes all of human existence in a theological light. For the Christian, nothing is “purely secular”. So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God”  (1 Cor 10: 31).

Even though everything relates to God, it is not everything that pleases God or gives him Glory. We have, for examples, disobedience to God, deprivations and disease. Ancestor worship is Igbo land is a cultural production which has an immense theological value. It is a religions worship and festival that pertains to God. It is not only worthy to be discussed as a subject matter in theology, it has positive theological contents for viable researches and moral theological values that are soteriological when lived hence some scholars call the ancestors the equivalents of Christian Saints.
3.1 THE THEOLOGICAL CONTENTS OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN IGBO LAND

Hereunder, we shall highlight the theological contents of ancestral cult as found to exist in Igbo cultural context. They are:

1. The Existence of God

God exists in Igbo world view. Igbo culture is a theistic culture. Ndi Igbo believe in the Supreme Being whom they call Chukwu (Supreme God – Chi Ukwu), Chukwu Abiamu Ura (Deus Otiosus, Deus absconditus). The King-Creator (Ezechiteoke). He is immanent (Chinonso). This God is Mysterium Tremendum (Omama amasị amasi, Omịmị ị egwu, Omịmị ịbụ Omịmị). In Igbo traditional society, there are no atheists. Ancestor worship evidences this strong belief in the God who created the ancestors, and they relate with him as creatures, messengers and intermediaries.

2. The Recognition of Spirits

In Igbo cosmology spirits are recognized in their groups as either benevolent or malevolent. Igbo religion is already a predisposition to the theology of demons, evil spirits or devils (demonology) the angels and the good spirits (angelology), the Holy Spirits (Pneumatology) and the human spirits (Mụọ mmadụ). The ancestors attract the blessings of good spirits and ward off the afflictions of the evil ones.

3. The Presence of Shrines

Ancestors are localized with specific shrines and altars. They are fed, venerated and celebrated in their shrines. They are holy sites for the adherents of indigenous religion. Ozioko M.A. (2005:49) wrote about this thus;

*On this day every man and woman, boy or girl, married and unmarried would assemble at the shrine of the Ancestral fathers and other dead fathers to offer sacrifices to them. The offerings were in accordance to what they deemed fit to give their dead fathers. The offerings ranged from cocks to goats that were slaughtered for the ancestors. It was a real festival and nobody wished to miss it.*

The Priest (Attama) is usually the eldest male in the kindred (Onyishi) who offers the sacrifice in conjunction or co-celebration with Ndi Okpara, eldest males in the families that make up that village or kindred.

4. Prayer, Thanksgiving, Sacrifice and Communion

These theological elements exist as proper contents of ancestor worship. Prayers are made to God, Chukwu through the ancestors. Petitions and supplications for favours are essential parts of this prayer. People, usually the descendants who received favours from the ancestors offer thanksgiving sacrifice to them. The sacrifice is a necessity because through it, the ancestors are fed. There is communion following the sacrifice among the living and the dead. These theological ideas did not come with Christianity, they were there before the advent of both Islam and Christianity.

So, when Christian evangelizers and missionaries came to Igbo land, their teachings were not totally strange because they had their resemblances, in Igbo religion. In line with this thought, Bediako (1992: 226) cited by Afeke, B. and Verster P. (2004: 51) explains the significance of the ancestral theology this way:

*... the real essence of a theology of ancestors is not about the fate of the departed who were not Christians, or who were not sacramentally linked with the Church. A theology of ancestors is not necessitated because many African Christians have ancestors who were not Christian. Rather, a theology of ancestors is about the interpretation of the past in a way that shows that the present experience and knowledge of the grace of God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ have been truly anticipated and pre-figured in the quest for and the response to the transcendent in former times as these have been reflected in the lives of African people.*

The liturgy in Roman Catholism, for instance, is a structured practice, that is an advancement from improvisation, and could be followed with effortless ease by neophytes, Catechumens and old members. The prayer through and sacrifice to the ancestors follow some definite structures like the invocation of the first ancestor till the latest. This enables the successive Okpara in every generation to perform this priestly function for his family or kindred. The ancestral mediatory role is not in the sense
of Jesus Christ’s but in the far lesser gradation of the intercessory roles of the saints and the angelic hosts.

5. Eschatology

This dimension of ancestor worship stresses the ontological immortality of the dead in Igbo world view. The human person in Igbo understanding is made up body (aru), soul (nkpuluobi) and spirit (miọ). The body decays at death while the Nkpuluobi goes back to Chukwu, the Creator. In the physical realm, the human person is Mmadu, in the spiritual sphere, he/she is ndi miọ/ ndi maa (ghost or spiritual being). Eschatology constitutes a big magisterium of the Catholic Church and found too in every Christian denomination: Protestant and Pentecostal. Ancestor worship emphasizes that there is life after death; there is judgment and there are rewards and punishments for those who lived well and wickedly respectively. If ancestors could eat the food given them, it is not strange in Christian biblical form of reference. One of the post-resurrection experiences with Jesus Christ was that he ate with his apostles at Emmaus (Luke 24: 13 - 35) and at the river bank (John 21: 1ff). In ancestor veneration, all the past family members are indeed alive, and are in communion with the living and the yet unborn.

However, the idea of heaven as presented by the Christian theology is found in Igbo religion but has some imperfect variances. Igbo religion has re-incarnation, ilo ụwa, ogbanje and horizontal places of rest where someone dies in one town and is believed to be alive in another town, within the range of terrestrial existence. These are questions for the Christian Faith and theology. But most essentially, both religions believe in life after death. In one it is ancestor worship while in the other it is Omnium Sanctorum, Communion of the Saints. Again, both religions believe in prayer for the dead, funeral rites and ceremonies. Without adequate funeral rites, one cannot attain ancestorhood. We know too that prayers for the dead, suffrages and other pious devotions help the dead in purgatory reach heaven in Catholic theology and practice.

6. Moral Life And Social Ethics

Ancestors lived upright life and continues to foster same among their descendants from the spirit world. Due to ancestral veneration, children of the same great grand father or progenitor come to know themselves as related by consanguinity. This stamps out incest and other sexual immorality like adultery in the family life. In Nsukka cultural zone of Enugu state, for example, wives who commit adultery did not only offend their husbands but the ancestors of their matrimonial homes as well. Ancestors are appeased by sacrifices after confession of this sin according to the local custom. Adultery is not common in the cultural area due to the moral force which the ancestors foster. However, there is gender discrimination here as men who engage in adultery are not caught just like in Hebraic cosmology, the story of John 8: 1 – 11 where only the woman was caught in the very act. The Christian religion has a lot to do in this respect which is still missio ad gentes in the culture of male domination and absolute patriarchy.

7. Family Solidarity

Ancestral veneration unites the family and helps in social development. Among Ndi Igbo, brothers and sisters go beyond the nuclear family system to reach the large members of the extended family who are children of the same ancestor. The caveat here is that this may breed clannishness which means exclusive support and love for only the members of one’s own clan.

The 1983 code of the Canon law stipulates consanguinity as a diriment impediment to Christian marriage in its direct line or in the second degree of the collateral line. (Canon 1078 par. 3). This family togetherness identifies those close relations and impediments are not incurred. Ancestor worship prompts education, charity and other positive socio-cultural values in the family. It engenders justice and peace as erring members are corrected or sanctioned accordingly. All these values are related to Christian values and world view.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

In this work, we strove to discuss the theological validity of ancestor worship. We equally tried to identify the good theological contents of ancestor worship with the view to upholding the good aspects and expunging its negative traits. In order to give furtherance to the gains of this paper and close its possible gaps, the following recommendations are made:

i. Ancestor worship should be given diversified and multidisciplinary studies. These further researches by African theologians et al is to enable them understand this religious index more comprehensively according to respective cultural areas and its connection with other anthropological values. Even though ancestor worship is prevalent in Africa, the nuances
differ from place to place, each minutest detail should be studied for proper understanding and guidance in the process of adaptation, inculturation or Christianization.

ii. The Church hierarchy should take the fruits of studies in this area as stepping stones to deeper implantation of the Church (*plantatio ecclesiae*) among Africans. The idea sown by some earliest ethnographers, anthropologists and missionaries that all cultural productions by Africans were demonic, devilish and darkness should be taken with a pinch of salt since later studies prove otherwise. Ancestor worship, for instance, has some multiple Christian values in its content and practice.

iii. Greater emphasis should be given to the African world view while preaching to them. This is because Africans can only become better Christians by first of all becoming better Africans. In other words, authentic Igbo culture leads to authentic Igbo Christianity.

iv. The inculturation process of authentic African values should begin immediately in Igbo land and indeed across the African continent. We are religious people and proper sowing of the gospel values will bear rich harvests of the kingdom. Therefore, let Diocesan Synods, Synod of Bishops Episcopal conferences, and seminary curriculum, etc focus on what makes us more disciples of Christ from our African background. A lot of our cultural values do not contradict the will of Christ and the teachings of his Church.

v. Let the family solidarity which ancestor worship fosters spread beyond the family lines to reach, the greater love of neighbor everywhere and prompt collaboration towards social development, justice and peace at all times.

5. CONCLUSION
Ancestral veneration in Igbo land is a critical component of Igbo culture. Igbo people respect elders and parents with a holy devotion and this continues even at the formers’ death. This filial piety, honour, respects and communion is not strange at all in the doctrines and practices of Christian religion. The Church has deep respect for traditional religions and cultures across continents and wishes, as a missionary strategy and pastoral practice, to uphold and preserve everything that is noble, true and good in them. Evangelization of peoples and Igbo people in particular can be easy and smooth when the traditional religious backgrounds of the evangelized, Igbo race are consciously studied and properly understood. And unless Christianity becomes a people’s culture, it cannot have deep roots nor bear rich fruits. The theological validity which ancestor worship has in Igbo land and in those nations and customs that practice it calls for an in-depth theological investigations and reflections with the aim to realizing profound evangelization among the people. This would significantly provide the necessary platforms and frameworks to enable the riches and preparatory values of the traditional religions to attain their redeemed elevations in Christ. However, these investigations, reflections, subsequent pastoral actions as essential as they may be, should be a sublime project guided by the competent ecclesiastical authorities.

References


