

## Analysis of “The Living-Dead” Yoruba Traditional Religion and Christianity: A Comparative Discourse

Oluwaseun Funmi Abilawon  
Department of Religious Studies  
Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo  
[Oluwaseunabilawon@gmail.com](mailto:Oluwaseunabilawon@gmail.com)  
08062179425

### Abstract

Discourses on ancestral veneration have taken a significant place in the field of Yoruba Traditional Religion (YTR). Existing studies on the concept have investigated the potency and reality of the belief in ancestral veneration, but little or no attention has been paid to ascertain the point of convergence and divergence between ancestral worship in Yoruba Traditional Religion and the Church Triumphant of the Anglican Communion. It has been discovered that these two belief systems – African and Western – share some similarities that demand close investigation. This study, therefore, investigated the portrayal of the beliefs in ancestors, with a comparative analysis of YTR and Christianity, using Anglican Church practices as a template. The study adopted a qualitative research design. The primary data were purposively collected through interviews with Priests and adherents in the Anglican Church and ATR. The study adopted qualitative research designs. The primary data were purposively collected through interviews with priests and adherents in the Anglican Church and YTR. Secondary materials were collected from textbooks and journal articles. The data were subjected to content analysis showing the similarities and differences between YTR and the Anglican Church on the beliefs in Ancestral veneration and the veneration of the saints. The analysis revealed that YTR and the Anglican Church share significant similarities and differences in their beliefs in ancestral powers and veneration. African Traditional Religion and the Anglican Church share some similarities and differences in the relationship between the living and the dead (ancestors). In line with the beliefs of the Anglican Church on Church Triumphant. Stakeholders should, therefore, ensure policy formulations that will have them or of salvation constantly open to YTR by making use of the concept of African theology to explain the belief of the Anglican Church on the church triumphant.

**Key Words:** Living-Dead, Ancestor, Comparative, Yoruba Traditional Religion, Christianity

### Introduction

The relationship that exists between the living and ancestors is a profound and enduring aspect found in various cultures and belief systems across the globe. From the depths of African Traditional Religion to the rich mosaic of human spirituality, the connection between the living and their ancestors holds immense significance. It is a relationship characterized by reverence, mutual influence, and ongoing communication (Ajayi, 2023). In numerous traditions, ancestors are revered as powerful spiritual beings who maintain a profound connection with the living. They are regarded as guardians and guides, possessing wisdom, knowledge, and spiritual authority.(Ajayi, 2023) Ancestors are believed to have the ability to intercede on behalf of the living, offering protection, blessings, and assistance in various facets of life. In return, the living demonstrate respect and honor to their ancestors through rituals, prayers, offerings, and commemorative ceremonies.

This relationship with ancestors extends beyond the individual or family level, encompassing entire communities and societies. Ancestors are seen as collective beings, embodying the collective memory, values, and ancestral lineage of a particular group. They serve as a bridge between the past and the present, offering guidance, support, and a profound sense of belonging (Quacoopome, 1987)

Communication with ancestors takes diverse forms, including dreams, visions, and divination practices. The living seek guidance, advice, and intervention from their ancestors during times of need or significant decision-making processes. This relationship is not confined to one-way communication; it entails the living to uphold their ancestral lineage, honoring the memory of their

ancestors, and living in accordance with the values and teachings passed down by their forebears (Idowu, 1979)

In African Traditional Religion, the relationship with ancestors plays a vital role in fostering social cohesion, maintaining cultural identity, and cultivating a sense of continuity. It provides a deep connection to the past and a spiritual grounding for the present and future generations (Idowu, 1979)

This work delves into the intricate dynamics of this relationship, and investigates its cultural significance, the rituals and practices associated with the veneration of ancestors, and its intersections with the Anglican.

### **The Beliefs of Yoruba Traditional Religion about Living and the Dead**

According to Chief Adefioye in an interview, the ancestors are the deceased who were once of a particular social group or clan, and they are generally called *ara orun*. He said, there are two categories of the dead: those who are still within memory or the departed of up to five generations, called the living dead; and those who can hardly be remembered again by the living. He further explained, by making reference to the Yoruba people, who call their ancestors *Babanla* (great father). In addition, he said the communal ceremonies are done in honor of the ancestors and to remind the people of the great deeds of their ancestors. *Egungun* and *Oro* are some of the festivals organized annually for the ancestors. He said the ancestors are so important to the African traditionalist, and argued that the concept of ancestors is also found in other religions like Christianity and Islam.

The ultimate qualification to become an ancestor is death. Death is the dividing line between the world of the living and the world of the dead. It is, however, not the only criterion. Not all dead people are considered ancestors. Those who died at an old age are more qualified for the group of ancestors (Haar and Nondo, 1992)

The traditional people believe in life after death. Although the arrival of Christianity modernized the beliefs of the people, it did not essentially revolutionize their basic beliefs. For instance, people believe that they need to live a moral life on earth by observing both religious rules and norms to earn a good life after death. The people believe that social and death is a natural rhythm of life, yet every human death is thought to have some external causes. This is why at any death, the relatives would want to know the cause of the death of their member. They would go to any length to ascertain the ‘what’ (ness) and not the ‘how’ (ness) of the death. This includes going to a medicine man.

It is pertinent to know that among the people of the African traditional religion, there is a belief that those who lived a good life while on earth and died a natural death, and thereafter, accorded a befitting burial, normally partake in the offerings with their kiths and kin who are still living; those are regarded as ancestors. It is believed that the ancestors are much more active in relationship with the living, receiving individually or collectively their sacrifices and homage. It is also believed that the ancestors can influence the lives and activities of their relations on earth, hence they can bring fortune or misfortune to them and at the same time protect them against the evil machinations of wicked people, depending on how the living regard and remember them.

From the findings, it was discovered that in the religion of Africans, life does not end with death but continues in another realm. The concepts of “life” and “death” are not mutually exclusive, and there are no clear dividing lines between them. Human existence is a dynamic process involving the increase or decrease of “power” or “life force,” of “living” and “dying,” and there are different levels of life and death. Many African languages express the fact that things are not going well, such as when there is sickness. In their words, we are living a little, meaning that the level of life is very low. The African religions scholar, Placide Tempels, describes every misfortune that Africans encounter as “a diminution of vital force. Illness and death result from some outside agent, a person, thing, or circumstance that weakens people because the agent contains a greater life force. Death does not alter or end the life or the personality of an individual; it only causes a change in its

conditions. This is expressed in the concept of ancestors, that is, people who have died but who continue to “live” in the community and communicate with their families (Haa and Nondo)

Death, although a dreaded event, is perceived as the beginning of a person’s deeper relationship with all of creation, the complementing of life, and the beginning of the communication between the visible and the invisible worlds. The goal of life is to become an ancestor after death. This is why every person who dies must be given a “correct” funeral, supported by several religious ceremonies. If this is not done, the dead person may become a wandering ghost, unable to “live” properly after death, thereby posing danger to those who are alive. It might be argued that “proper” death rites are more a guarantee of protection for the living than of securing a safe passage for the dying. There is ambivalence about attitudes to the recently dead, which fluctuate between love and respect on the one hand and dread and despair on the other, particularly because it is believed that the dead have power over the living (Mbiti, 1969)

Many Africans have a custom of removing a dead body through a hole in the wall of a house, and not through the door. The reason for this seems to be that this will make it difficult (or even impossible) for the dead person to remember the way back to the living, as the hole in the wall is immediately closed. Sometimes, the corpse is removed feet first, symbolically pointing away from the former place of residence. A zigzag path may be taken to the burial site, or thorns strewn along the way, or a barrier erected at the grave itself, because the dead are also believed to strengthen the living. Many other people take special pains to ensure that the dead are easily able to return to their homes, and some people are even buried under or next to their homes (Mbiti, 1969).

Many people believe that death is the loss of a soul or souls. Although there is recognition of the difference between the physical person that is buried and the nonphysical person who lives on, this must not be confused with a Western dualism that separates “physical” from “spiritual”. When a person dies, there is some “part” of that person that lives on – it is the whole person who continues to live in the spirit world, receiving a new body identical to the earthly body, but with enhanced powers to move about as an ancestor (Akano, 2023). Another interview with *Baba Obatala* shows that people believe that the dead have supernatural powers and for this reason, they prepare for death. They do this by ensuring that they live exemplary lives so that when they die, they will be accorded a befitting burial, and so, join the ancestors, since these are among the qualities for ancestorship.

The people’s worldview about life after death is that when a person dies, the person is not dead but has gone to the land of bliss to join their ancestors, from where they will be interacting, interceding, and protecting their families on earth. Family is not made up of only those who are still living in the flesh. The unseen ancestors are part of the family and are very interested in it. This can be said of most African people, but in varying degrees.

The African traditional people believe in life after death, and that explains the reason they accord their dead ones burial rites so as not to be rejected in the spirit world. Traditionalists believe that the spirit of the deceased goes to live in another place called the spirit world. “The people of African traditions believe that after a successful career on earth, one happily gathers with their forefathers in the land of the living-dead and continues the interminable cycle of life. Failure to carry out all the burial rites for the deceased means that he would be ostracized by his community in the world of the living dead. Without funeral ceremonies, the traditionalists believe that the deceased wanders the earth restlessly and causes havoc on those responsible. Furthermore, he submitted that “many Africans believe that their beloved ones who are dead do not actually leave them but hover around and protect them” (Osunbumi, 2023).

The death of children is regarded as a particularly grievous evil event, and many people give special names to their children to try to ward off the recurrence of untimely death. However, the African traditional religion believes that communion and communication are possible between the living and the dead. With this fact about life after death being established.

In the African traditional religion belief system, the family is made up of both the living members and the dead in the same way; they believe that ancestors are still present, watching over the household and the property of the family (Akano, 2023). They also believe that the dead are still

interested in the welfare of their living descendants. They also believe that the dead can be reincarnated into the family. African Traditional Religion strongly believes that life exists after death for both the wicked and the good. When a wicked person dies, he is not received among the ancestors. In African Traditional Religion, behavior is determined by the various levels of human society, such as the family, the clan, and the tribe. Such a community in African thought consists of both the living and the dead, who maintain a close relationship, with the dead continuing to influence the affairs of the living.

Traditional laws that govern normal life among the living is enforced by the elders; both the living and the departed ancestors are factors of social cohesion. There is an ambivalent relationship between the living and the dead. Wherever you go, the spirit world is evident, pervading the whole of human life, pressing into folklore, social relations, and vocabulary. It forms an integral part of the whole existence of African communities. This relationship is a mutually dependent one -the ancestors need the living to remember and worship them, and the living need the ancestors as moral examples and powerful benefactors. Communion occurs between the departed and the living relatives; yet, it is not full communion. There is a sense of separation because death has come between them, though they are still alive and part of the community (seen specifically in the term (living-dead). This ambivalence emanates from the need for balance.

Conditional Ancestorship: Not all deceased become ancestors; only those who lived a morally upright life, died a good death (not by suicide, accident, or disgrace), and received proper burial rites are believed to become ancestors. The living must honor them through rituals to maintain their status in the afterlife. Having said that, annual festivals like *Egungun* (masked ancestor masquerades) celebrate and invoke ancestral spirits. There is this general belief in *atunwa* (reincarnation), where ancestors may return to the family through newborn children. A child's resemblance or behavior may be linked to a specific ancestor. Apart from this, in the Yoruba religion (*isese*), some ancestors are venerated alongside the *Orisa*. Prominent ancestors like past kings or heroes may be deified over time.

### **The View of the Anglican Church about the Living and the Dead**

Adeniji, in an interview, said that the Anglican Church believes in the dead and living, as we can see in the context of church militant and church triumphant. He further stated that the Church believed in the Communion of the saints, that the communion of saints involves all of us, both living and the dead. He further explained that the Church did not believe in the ancestral worship or the spirit of ancestors because the Church forbade offering prayers to the dead. He drew a line between the belief of the Anglican Church and African traditional religion by saying that the Church is Bible based and anything outside this is not of the Anglican Church's belief. The investigation shows that the Anglican Church believes in the communion of the saints, which is the spiritual union of the members of the Christian Church, living and the dead, those on earth, and those in heaven. They are all part of a single "mystical body", with Christ as the head, in which each member contributes to the good of all and shares in the welfare of all.

The earliest known use of this term to refer to the belief in a mystical bond uniting both the living and the dead in a confirmed hope and love is by Saint Nicetas of Remesiana. The term has since then played a central role in the formulations of our creeds. Belief in the communion of saints is affirmed in the Apostles and the Nicene Creed. The Church teaches us that we are all a part of the communion of saints – the community of all men and women of goodwill, both living and dead. But this is a difficult thing to imagine, this communion of saints. Fortunately, the Bible gives us a wonderful image.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, we find an important image of how the early church understood how believers related to each other. The author of the letter first lists the many important men and women of faith - the Jewish ancestors who had been models of response to God's invitation, such as Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Miriam, and David, as well as whole categories of people who had served God as prophets, kings, judges, and martyrs. Then, having detailed these worthy ancestors in faith, the authors continue:



Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1-2). The author of Hebrews paints a picture for us of a stadium set for a race. All of the living people of faith are gathered on the track at various stages in our running of the race. The stands of the stadium are filled with all those who have ever run the race before us. As we run the race, this crowd of fellow runners, past and present, surrounds us and urges us on. There are so many of them that they become a cloud – a huge mass of people – all of whom are cheering us on. They are the witnesses to the faith, those who came before Jesus and those who came after him. Jesus is the pioneer, the one who shows us how to run the race and who gives us the goal to run towards. And when we finish running our race, we do not leave the stadium; we too join in the encouragement of others as they run that race.

Very Rev. David Ifadugba (Personal Communication 2023), in an interview, explained the position of the Anglican Church on the belief in the living and ancestors. He said ancestral worship is for African traditionalists and not in the Anglican belief. He said that the Anglican church believed in the Orthodox theology, which comes from Reformation theology, and this belief pointed to the belief in the communion of the saints, and these saints include both church militant and the Church triumphant, bringing corpses of the departed to the Church established that believed that both the dead and the living share a relationship in the Christian. To a certain extent, there are traces of inculturation in the system of the Church, whereas the Anglican Church does not pray to the dead not worship them, but what the Anglicans believe is remembrance of their dead (faithful departed). He argued that African traditional religion worships the ancestors and does not venerate them because he believes that the two words are the same, i.e, worship and veneration. Similarly, he said the Anglican Church forbade reincarnation because it is not in line with Anglican belief it is only in African traditional religion that reincarnation is practiced (Gehman, 2023).

From findings, it shows that Anglican Church believes that the dead cannot separate the living and their departed souls and that there is still a bond that brings the two together this was proven in the act of bringing the corpses of their relatives to church for service before disposing of one of the Anglican Church hymn exhibit the relationship that exists between the living and the dead. “Oh blest communion, fellowship divine we feebly struggle, they in glory shine, yet all are one in there, for all are thine”.

Ven. Dr. Oladele Victor responded in an interview that the Anglican Church believes in the afterlife. The Anglican Church believes in a state of continued existence after death and acknowledges the living and the dead as part of the spiritual community. The Anglican Church holds that the Church Triumphant consists of those who have died in the faith and are now in heaven. Theological interpretation varies within the Anglican tradition. Bringing the corpse of the dead to the church for service is a practice rooted in Anglican tradition, symbolizing the Christian hope in the resurrection and honoring the deceased’s connection to the church community. The Anglican Church generally does not venerate the dead in the same way as some other religious traditions, but instead offers prayers for the departed and seeks to honor their memory. The Anglican Church does not practice ancestor worship, but there are similarities in the way both ancestral traditions and Anglican beliefs acknowledge a connection between the living and the departed. Both beliefs recognize a connection between the living and the departed, but African traditional religions often involve direct ancestor worship, whereas the Anglican Church emphasizes a Christian hope in the resurrection. The Anglican Church does not engage in ancestor worship, and the Bible cautions against seeking communication with spirits apart from God. It emphasizes devotion to God alone. The Anglican Articles of Faith do not extensively address beliefs about the living and the dead, focusing more on core theological principles. The belief in the Communion of Saints, as stated in the creed, refers to the spiritual connection between all believers, living and departed. It’s a concept of shared faith and interconnectedness in the body of Christ (Solaru, 2023).

The investigation shows that the Anglican Church believes in the afterlife and that there is life after death. The communion with the dead also exists in the belief of the Anglican Church, but indicates the spiritual connection between all the believers, living and the dead. The ancestral worship is forbidden in the Anglican concept of communion of the saints, but shows their hope in the resurrection (Preacher, 2023)

### **The Difference between Veneration in ATR and the Anglican Church Perspectives**

From the Findings, it is evident that both African Traditional Religions and the Anglican Church have distinct beliefs and views concerning the living and the dead, and that the views and beliefs may be similar or differ as the case may be. However, this work dwells more on the differences between the two faiths on the issue of the living and the dead.

1. The Anglican Church refers to its departed souls as Church triumphant, while the African Traditional Religion refers to their departed souls as ancestors.
2. African Traditional Religion believes in ancestral worship, while the Anglican Church believes in the commemoration of the saints.
3. African Traditional Religion believes strongly in the reincarnation of the ancestors, while the Anglican Church outrightly rejects this belief.
4. African Traditional Religion attaches more spiritual responsibilities to their ancestors, but the Anglican Church does not attach any spiritual responsibility to its departed souls.
5. African Traditional Religion regards its ancestors as a link between them and the divinities and deities, while the Anglican Church does not see their departed souls as a link between them and God.
6. African Traditional Religion believes that the ancestors unify their family, but in the Anglican Church, Christ unifies the church, and not their departed souls.
7. The Anglican Church disregards living people contacting the dead as taught in African Traditional Religion.
8. African Traditional Religions do offer sacrifices to their departed souls (ancestors), but the Anglican Church rightly jettisons this act.
9. African Traditional Religions never believe that their ancestors have lost their senses; rather, the people strongly believe that the ancestors can see, hear, feel, and have human emotions, but this is far from the position of the Anglican Church about their departed souls.
10. African traditional religion offers prayers to its departed souls, whereas the Anglican Church does not channel its prayers to its departed souls, but rather to Almighty God.

To understand the importance of ancestors, one must realize that in the African view, death is not taught to end human relationships. Rather, those who die enter the spirit world in which they are invisible. Though the spirit world is a radically different world, it is also a “carbon copy of the countries where [the ancestors] lived in this life.” Deceased ancestors remain close by, as part of the family, sharing meals and maintaining an interest in family affairs just as before death. Yet they are taught to have advanced mystical power, which enables them to communicate easily with both the family and God. Thus, they are considered indispensable intermediaries. The dichotomy between the African Traditional Religion and the Anglican Church perspective of living and the dead shows that, to a certain extent, both do not hold the same concept or belief as the relationship between the dead and living concerns (Fadugba, Personal Communication 2023).

### **Similarities between the ATR and the Anglican Church about the Veneration**

From the findings, just like in the Anglican Church, African Traditional Religion has a meeting point on the concept of veneration. This work examines various areas where the two are interwoven. They both believe in the fact that their ancestors and saints lived before passing to the grave beyond and were once human before their death. Furthermore, they both have rituals and ceremonies attached to venerate their ancestors and saints. The rituals and ceremonies may differ, but the fact is that they both believe in rituals and ceremonies for their departed souls. African Traditional Religions claimed that they are not worshipping ancestors, but what they are doing is

venerating the ancestor, like the people, thus, they have personal memories of their ancestors in African Traditional Religion, and also in the Anglican Church.

According to the interviewees, it shows that there are certain areas where African traditional religion and the Anglican Church agree on the context of the veneration, and at the same time, disagreement sets in as pertains to doctrine issues regarding the beliefs on veneration of the dead. In ATR, the living dead refers to ancestors who have died but remain spiritually active, influencing the living. In Christianity, some interpretations (especially Catholic and Orthodox traditions) hold that the souls of the faithful departed exist in an intermediate state (e.g., paradise or purgatory) before the final resurrection. In ATR, the living dead serve as moral enforcers, rewarding good behavior and punishing wrongdoing among their descendants. In Christianity, the departed, especially saints, serve as moral examples, and some believe they can intercede in human affairs, most especially when it comes to prayers to saints.

### **Analysis of the Two Beliefs about Veneration**

In essence, the respondents from the interview section categorically stated that the belief of the Anglican Church is totally different from that of ATR as regards the dogmatic belief of the reincarnation of the ancestors, which is grossly against the belief in Anglican Church doctrine and liturgy. Discovery from the interview shows that the Anglican Church venerates the church triumphant at the commemoration of the saints, so also the African Traditional Religion claims to venerate their ancestors and not worship them (Ifadare, Personal Communication 2023).

The interviews also revealed that the bringing of a corpse to the Anglican Church is to establish the fact that there is a bond between the dead and the living, though some denominations jettisoned this act for the reason best known to them. The ATR also has stools for their ancestors at their meeting place. It is obvious that the Anglican Church does not believe in the spirit of ancestors like the ATR, but in the church triumphant and the communion of the saints. There is no sacrifice attached to the commemoration of the saints or church triumphant, but ATR does offer items like food, drinks, and other gifts to their ancestors. It is established that the church militants will one day become the church triumphant if they live a well fulfilled life while on earth, but not every dead person becomes an ancestor according to the belief of ATR, but only those who die well.

The belief of the ATR presents the idea of living and the dead in the context of Africa, and this fact can be used to teach typical Africans the concept of the saints and church triumphant in the Anglican Church if properly and carefully managed (Fadugba, Personal Communication 2023).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Anglican Church believes and teaches that there is life after death and that there is resurrection of the dead. Moreover, only those who live a life that is pleasing to God shall enjoy the everlasting communion with the church triumphant. However, the context of veneration in ATR is equivalent to ancestral worship, which in the Anglican Church is the only way to immortalize and honor the faithful departed souls. In the same vein veneration in ATR involves sacrifices, ritual and ceremonies, but does not involving any sacrifices in the context of Anglican Church as far as veneration is concern. Anglican Church belief strongly that only the saints can be venerated. ATR also believes that only those who lived a good life before joining the spirit world are qualified to be venerated. Veneration in the context of the Anglican Church does not indicate that they are worshiping the saints or the souls departed, but in the case of ATR, it looks like worshiping the ancestors because it involves rituals, sacrifices, and ceremonies. Veneration in the Anglican Church is not idolatry but is a way of bringing back the memories of the faithful departed souls into memory. It shows that the Anglican Church recognized the activities of the faithful departed souls, also ATR venerates the ancestors to remind them of the activities of the ancestors when they were on earth.

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