Patterns of Ecodomy in Indigenous African Religions

Four Perspectives on Ancestry as Foundation for Building a Safe Environment for Native Africans throughout the African Continent

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Introduction

CONTEMPORARY STUDIES in indigenous African religions focus on providing various communities as well as the whole of society with concrete proofs that the actual reality of religion in general and specifically the manifestation of indigenous African religions in particular are capable of fostering peace, prosperity, and security not only to the communities which practice these religions but also to those which are connected with these indigenous African communities although of different religious convictions. This effort to show that indigenous African religions are involved in a constant process of building peace, prosperity, and security can be summed up by the notion of ecodomy, which although stemming from Greek philosophy and religion and literally referring to the process of building a house or, by extension, a community, can also point to "any constructive process" as Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz demonstrated in his famous book entitled *God's Spirit. Transforming a World in Crisis*, published in 1995. As a constructive process within the extremely complex phenomena of indigenous African religions, ecodomy is far from easy to shrink into a theoretical definition. Nonetheless, it can be evaluated based on a fundamental aspect which is common to all indigenous African religions; in this particular case, this common denominator was found in the idea of ancestry and more particularly in the role played by ancestors in specific African contexts. Despite the various approaches to indigenous African religions, four main perspectives can be singled out as providing distinct patterns of ecodomy based on the concept of ancestry. First, there is the approach of John S. Mbiti, an Anglican Protestant with an English cultural background, who believes that the idea of ancestry can be useful to contemporary African societies if one retained the idea of remembrance although he is much more interested in defending his Christian convictions rather than his native African culture. Second, Issiaka P. Lalèyê, writing from a Roman-Catholic angle with strong cultural connections with France, focuses on the reality of death as fundamental to the reality of ecodomy, and especially on the specific need that people go through a good death before they become ancestors. Third, Jacok K. Olupona, now at Harvard Divinity School teaching African religious traditions, provides a perspective which is much more religious in nature compared to Mbiti and Lalèyê because he not only writes from a non-Christian perspective, but he also decisively focuses solely on African religions; hence his conviction that the aspect which can contribute to the peace, prosperity, and

security of African societies in connection with the notion of ancestry as ecodomy is the practical reality of ritual as found in indigenous African religions. Fourth, Israel Kamudzandu, who teaches New Testament Studies and Biblical Interpretation at Saint Paul School of Theology, indicates that the idea of ancestry can go beyond indigenous African religions into establishing relevant liaisons with other religions, notably Christianity, by using the role of ancestors as mediators between God and humanity. Although radically different, these four perspectives share the common goal of using the notion of ancestry and the specific role of ancestors in various indigenous African religions as ecodomic or constructive attempts to provide the immensely different spectrum of African societies with concrete religious ideas that can instill peace, prosperity, and security in virtually all African communities.

1. Ecodomy as Good Remembrance in John S. Mbiti

FOR MBITI, ancestors are the former members of communities who died and somehow live beyond their own death. Nevertheless, the most important aspect of the idea of ancestry is not necessarily the fact that the departed can exist as "living dead" or exclusively as "spirits"—because in either capacity they are believed to coexist with the living and, in so doing, as Mbiti explains, "be men's contemporaries"—but that the departed can be remembered; moreover, they must be remembered in a good way. It is crucial to understand, however, that for Mbiti, remembering the ancestors is not an act of worship, but a feature of social interaction (Mbiti 1996: 289), a view which is refuted by Anthony Ephirim-Donkor who believes that in indigenous African religions ancestors are worshipped (2013: 189) in specific religious terms and hence the proper way to remember ancestors is through worship (2004: 905). In Mbiti though, for as long as the departed can be remembered they are considered "living dead"; when there is nobody left to remember them they become full spirits. Mbiti, however, is of the opinion that only the departed who are no longer remembered and are considered full spirits can be included in the category of ancestors, so in order to avoid the confusion between the "living dead" who are still remembered and the full spirits who are no longer remembered but are both wrongly considered ancestors in Western presentations of African spirituality, Mbiti calls for the cancellation or "abolition" of the notion of "ancestors" or "ancestral spirits" and use only terms like "spirits" or "the living dead" where applicable (Mbiti 1999: 83-84).

Provided that, according to Mbiti, the departed can be called "ancestors" only after they are no longer remembered or well into the relatively distant future of the four or fifth generation, one should take a closer look at the African understanding of time which establishes who and how a certain person can or cannot be considered an ancestor. For starters, one should understand that, in African spirituality, time is neither linear, nor numerical, but rather qualitative and quantitative, which means that, in Mbiti's words, time is "silent and indifferent," but it is time nonetheless that provides ancestors with remembrance. This is why, as Gwinyai H. Muzorewa indicates, African traditional societies prefer phenomenal calendars (Muzorewa 2014: 32), which means that they do not have numerical calendars basically because they are, in Mbiti's words, "impossible and meaningless" (Mbiti 1999: 21). For the African mind, what matters is not the exact number of days, but their significance, so it is not the day as time unit which counts but rather the day, or time in general as event (Asante and Nwadiora 2007: 56). If a certain year had more events which are considered important, then that specific year can be longer than another year. Consequently, Western ideas of time seen as past, present, and future are not very useful to describe African chronology, in which case Mbiti prefers to conflate present and future into what he calls

"Sasa" while the past—which can overlap with the present—is described as "Zamani" (Mbiti 1999: 21).

These two Swahili words encompass what Mbiti describes as the "African concept of time," which has nine main tenses that, using Western categories, can be described in the following sequence: "1. Far Future or Remote Future, 2. Immediate or Near Future, 3. Indefinite Future or Indefinite Near Future, 4. Present or Present Progressive, 5. Immediate Past or Immediate Perfect, 6. Today's Past, 7. Recent Past or Yesterday's Past, 8. Far past or Remote Past, and 9. Unspecified Tense." (Mbiti 1999: 18). The Sasa comprises the first seven tenses, while Zamani the last five, which shows that tenses five, six, and seven overlap. Thus, the Sasa and Zamani, present and past, share the ideas of immediate past, today's past, and recent past, which indicates that, for the Western mind, what is really important for African spirituality has to do with the present and the immediate time surrounding it or what is in the West the immediate future or the immediate past (Pöntinen 2013: 272 and Chandler 2001: 12).

Thus, for Mbiti, the Sasa is the time of "conscious living" (Mbiti 1999: 18) which feeds upon the past, not the future, a perspective confirmed by D. A. Masolo (1994: 108). Unlike Western thought which is based on the idea of history moving forward and expecting progress, in African spirituality history moves backward, so the Sasa moves back into the Zamani, the present into the past as H. Odera Oruka notices (Oruka 1997: 188), an aspect which is of crucial importance for the idea of ancestry and the way ancestors are perceived in African societies. Ancestors are important primarily because they exist in the past, the only part of time which has a real qualitative significance for African mentality and, as shown by Ana Maria Monteiro-Ferreira, can be recognized by the ordinary people of the community (Monteiro-Ferreira 2005: 356). When a person dies, Mbiti explains, he or she moves ontologically as well as existentially from the Sasa to the Zamani, from the present into the past, which—as pointed out by Leonard T. Chuwa—accounts for the reality of the deceased (Chuwa 2014: 19). For as long as a dead person is remembered by his immediate family, he is not really dead so, reading Yvonne Joubert and Anton Grobler, one understands that the deceased person continues "to be part of and related to the ongoing family" (Joubert and Grobler 2013: 2-3); he is a living dead and his existence continues beyond death into the Sasa. When nobody is left to remember a dead person, he moves backwards in time from the Sasa into the Zamani, so his is no longer considered a living dead but rather vanishes into the Zamani and thus becomes a full spirit when he or she can rightfully be called an "ancestor" (Mbiti 1999: 24).

In African spirituality, therefore, ancestors are the departed who are no longer remembered; those for whom, as Mbiti explains, "the process of dying is completed" (Mbiti 1999: 25). While still in the Sasa after death, a person can be remembered, as shown by Gerald K. Tanye (2010: 110, n. 84). This means that, once in the Sasa, he or she can reportedly appear, mostly in dreams (Anderson 2010: 48), to certain members of his or her family (especially the elderly and never to children), and this is why libations are poured on behalf of this person as "symbols of communion, fellowship, and remembrance" (Mbiti 1999: 25).

2. Ecodomy as Good Death in Issiaka P. Lalèyê

THE IMAGE of ancestors becomes clearer in indigenous African religions and can be considered to take a consistent form when the reality of death has affected a person, as evident in Lalèyê. Broadly speaking, Lalèyê argues, while bound together with the reality of death, the idea of ancestry is not automatically defined by death. Thus, as far as Lalèyê is concerned, in African spirituality death becomes connected with ancestry only if the deceased had led a good life and, as Charles O. Jegede shows, consequently enjoyed what can be called a "good death" (Jegede 2010: 352). For the rest of the deceased, namely, for those whose lives were anything but good and their deaths were considered "bad," the reality of ancestry cannot be said to have anything to do with the existence beyond death itself. In other words, only those who had a good death can become ancestors; for anybody else, death is far from being the blessing of ancestralization; on the contrary, it is seen as the curse of punishment (Lalèyê 1996: 658); hence the conviction, as Dominica Dipio shows, that there are instances when ancestors need to be appeased (Dipio 2014: 54). Either way, however, the purpose is to influence the lives of the living; regardless of whether it is by blessing or by punishment, the living are being taught, helped, and strengthened in their lives because even in the case of punishment, the living can still be taught valuable lessons for life. Thus, in Lalèyê, ancestors can help the living not only through the traditional pattern of ecodomy which is essentially positive, but also through the negative ecodomy of punishment resulting in positive pedagogical effects in the lives of the living.

Regardless of whether a certain person was good or bad, had a good death or a bad death, so irrespective of whether he or she is going to become an ancestor or not, death is a reality that cannot be ignored and must be dealt with. It is here, as Lalèyê shows, that the social and the religious aspects of the idea of ancestry become intertwined mostly because the deceased must be assisted in leaving the realm of the living in order for him to settle in the realm of the dead. While the idea of ancestry has nothing to do with this particular aspect, it becomes prominent as burial rituals begin as a public sign—so specific to African mentality inside or outside Africa according to Tonia D. Armstrong (2010: 89)—of the intention of the living to help the deceased take his rightful place in his life beyond death because, in African spirituality, rituals—Michael Baffoe and Lewis Asimeng-Boahene explain—are seen as means to contact, even to talk to ancestors (Baffoe and Asimeng-Boahene 2012: 493). According to Lalèyê, the living can infer whether the deceased is going to become an ancestor or not; the way he died is sufficient proof of the way he lived. In other words, the quality of one's death is always a sign of the quality of one's life, which has direct repercussions on the way the burial is going to take place. Thus, unlike those who led bad lives, those who lived good lives will be given proper burials with certain remembrances dates for what the Africans consider "the second burial." Once the second burial has been completed, the process of ancestralization begins and the deceased can be the subject of a genuine cult, which is essentially religious in nature (Lalèyê 1996: 658-659).

Regarding ancestry, Lalèyê points out that individuals pertaining to certain social categories such as kings, chieftains, and priests have a stronger likelihood to become ancestors than the rest of the population, and—as Wilhelm Dupré indicates—they can also serve as "representatives of the ancestors" (Dupré 1975: 71-72), which indicates that social status can be a guarantee of good death. In such cases, the historical and social importance of the lives of the deceased breeds a certain predisposition for ancestry. In their capacity of kings, chieftains, and priests, their lives are more likely to have been beyond reproach, so one can see even during their lifetimes that such persons, as pointed out by James R. Lewis, may become ancestors upon death (Lewis 1999: 4) as they have a bigger likelihood to be the beneficiaries of a good death. It is important

to notice, however, that all those who become ancestors are automatically included in two categories: the anonymous ancestors who are invoked collectively and the known ancestors who are invoked by name based on the fact that they are remembered by the living members of their families (Lalèyê 1996: 658-659).

For Lalèyê, this invocation of the dead, mostly by the members of their families as Theo Sundermeier notices (1998: 122), and particularly of those who are considered ancestors has obvious religious connotations. At this point, as Lalèyê underlines, the process of becoming an ancestor turns into an act of sanctification. Death itself, good or bad, defiles the human being, so all those who bury the dead or those who touched the dead are considered impure and must necessarily go through a process of purification (Weir 2004: 594). Likewise, the departed who suffered bad deaths are given to priests who perform certain purification rituals, all part of the burial process. Thus, while death defiles, burial rituals are meant to provide purification for the deceased and move him or her towards the good side of death; hence, the process of turning the dead into ancestors has similar cathartic functions which are, according to Lalèyê, profoundly religious and even magical (Lalèyê 1996: 659) with the evident purpose of securing a good death for the possible ancestor.

Lalèyê, however, underlines that purification rituals do not necessarily turn the deceased into a saint, so good death is not automatically available through religious rituals. Purification and sanctification are two distinct phases in the post-death existence of the deceased, but once the purification act of the burial ritual has been performed—and especially after the second burial (Armstrong 2010: 89 and Ray 1999: 144)—a certain deceased person can be said to have become a saint and thoroughly enjoy a good death. In this case, the departed will have accessed the sacred dimension of existence, always and exclusively available following the moment of death, in this case a good death, which transforms the deceased into a genuine ancestor. Once the deceased who had gone through a good death become ancestors as a result of purification and burial rituals, they also become the objects of a cult, in this case the cult of ancestors, one of the features of African spirituality which, as Gabriel J. Gomes contends, has managed to preserved indigenous African religions to this day (Gomes 2012: 49).

3. Ecodomy as Good Ritual in Jacob K. Olupona

IN OLUPONA, ancestors are often considered superior even to deities and gods which makes the distinction between gods and ancestors very hard to make in some African religions; it is easy though to understand, as Khonsura A. Wilson writes, that for the African mind ancestors "are more important in the affairs of humans than God" (Wilson 2012: 174). This also indicates that ancestors exist in a higher realm because, following Jawanza E. Clark's explanation, they are considered to "transcend human beings who have achieved their destiny and fulfilled the purpose of their being" (Clark 2012: 75) so they now live in an ontologically different meta-historical sphere, a totally different level of existence from that of ordinary life. Furthermore, Olupona shows that it is from this transcendent realm that ancestors are capable of bestowing all sorts of positive influences, or blessings, upon the living members of their families. This is why the mutual relationship between ancestors and the living is so crucial for the African mind: blessings and other daily benefits are totally dependent on this religious connection between the departed spirits of ancestors and those still enjoying life in the world, a connection which is possible only through rituals. Olupona underlines that failure to engage in this religious practice of entertaining an active connection with ancestors results in all sorts of curses, such as "misfortune, illness, and

even death" (Olupona 2014: 28), all these—Dama Mosweunyane points out—having been "cast upon ... society by its ancestors" (Mosweuyane: 2013: 52).

It is here that the ecodomic function of ancestors is revealed by Olupona. Ancestors are part of religion and it is in this capacity that they are trying to influence the world of the living by blessings and curses, hence performing proper or good rituals is crucial for maintaining not only the connection between deceased ancestors and their living relatives but also the prosperity of the latter category. Although his understanding of religion and ancestry comes very close to that of Lalèyê, Olupona's ecodomic approach to ancestry does not move from the social to the religious aspects of life; on the contrary, for Olupona, ancestors are a key component of religion from the onset, and it is within this specific religious context that they influence the lives of the living by blessings and curses, an aspect which is underlined also by Peter J. Paris when he writes that ancestors "have the power to bestow blessings and if they fail to do so, the fault lies with their devotees" (Paris 1995: 44). It is evident, therefore, that good religious rituals for dead ancestors are compulsory for the keeping of peace and prosperity within the community of the living.

In Olupona, the religious connections with ancestors is validated concretely by the performance of certain rites of passage, such as "naming, puberty, marriage, and death" (Olupona 2014: 28), all of which are religious rituals. These events are believed to be happening in a context which combines natural and supernatural realities. For instance, if the connection with ancestors is strong, evil supernatural forces can have a negative effect not only on these rites, but also on the lives of those involved in them. On the other hand, however, a strong relationship with ancestors is going to provide individuals and their families with a considerable degree of success in all respects, which cements the conviction that the veneration of ancestors is a must in African religions especially when the deceased have recently passed away, although nowadays the actual observance of ancestor veneration appears to have decreased according to David Westerlund (2012: 449). It is here that Olupona comes very close to Mbiti's distinction between ancestors and the living dead. As Olupona explains, the living dead are the "recently deceased," persons whose lives are still remembered by their families while, in more general terms, ancestors are those who are no longer remembered by anybody, and especially by the members of their families (Olupona 2014: 28-29).

Olupona also discloses that a salient feature of some African religions, especially in Sierra Leone, is the fact that ancestors are believed to depend on their living families even if, as Simeon T. Iber shows, the predominant view throughout the African continent is that the living are dependent on the ancestors who can influence the lives of the living (Iber 2011: 20). The aspect of the ancestors' dependence on the living, however, is not only a spiritual one, but it somehow has material connotations which become evident in the specific religious rituals performed on behalf of the dead. Thus, ancestors need their families, and particularly their children, to "sustain themselves in the afterlife," as Olupona puts it (2014: 29); this is why, Khondlo Mtshali writes, the dead are often "buried with personal belongings" (Mtshali 2009: 133). The transcendent world of the ancestors, therefore, retains some physical characteristics mostly in terms of "beauty and prosperity" (Olupona 2014: 29). This is why Olupona highlights that the world of the dead resembles that of the living. The way ancestors continue to enjoy their existences is very similar to the way of life in the world because, as Sybil M. Lassiter explains, death is only "a journey into the spirit kingdom" (Lassiter 1998: 14). Families, for instance, live together both here and in the afterlife, hence the necessity that the living be connected with their ancestors who, according to Sihawukele Ngubane, are considered "part of reality" (Ngubane 2012: 96). Moreover, the afterlife is believed to enhance and perfect the qualities of the dead, so a deceased person is now considered—in his capacity as ancestor—to be capable of providing wisdom and council to the living, as Monica A. Coleman points out (Coleman 2011: 224). In this respect, Olupona writes, ancestors—who can

be contacted and with whom a relationship is possible through proper religious rituals—are believed to be much more important than gods who are beyond the possibility of a personal connection (Olupona 2014: 29).

The beginning and the end of life are closely associated with the belief in ancestors and they are marked by religious rituals. According to Olupona, while older people are generally believed to enjoy a closer relationship with ancestors (Sundermeier 1998: 122), some populations from the Ivory Coast are convinced that newborn babies are incarnations of ancestors (Raboteau 2004: 12). Interestingly enough, as "reincarnated ancestors" (Olupona 2014: 30) babies retain their ancestral memories to the point that, when they grow up, they forget them including a wide range of languages. Thus, by the time they begin to speak, the will have forgotten all languages with the exception of the language of the tribe to which they belong. It is not clear from Olupona's presentation if, in their capacity as reincarnated ancestors, children remain ancestors for a while or they lose this status as they progress into adult life. What is clear, however, is the general understanding of death as the moment when people are believed to become ancestors in most indigenous African religions (Olupona 2014: 30-31) through the proper administration of good religious rituals.

4. Ecodomy as Good Mediation in Israel Kamudzandu

KAMUDZANDU'S APPROACH is a bit different from those of Mbiti, Lalèyê, and Olupona. Thus, he explains that ancestors play a vital role in "cross-cultural hermeneutics," in the sense that people such as the Shona have a facilitated access not only to their own religious convictions but also to other religions, and especially to Christianity, because it is impossible in today's world to avoid, as Samuel O. Imbo writes, "Western interactions with African religions" (Imbo 2002: 92). The starting point in this cross-cultural and cross-religious hermeneutic resides in the capacity of ancestors to serve as mediators between humanity and God, mostly as spiritual forces through which people pray. At this point, Kamudzandu makes a very move which brings him closer to Mbiti's perspective on ancestry. Thus, if for Mbiti ancestors serve a role which is more social than religious, for Kamudzandu ancestors are still to be kept within the sphere of religion but not as entities which are worshipped. Ancestors, Kamudzandu emphasizes, are not worshipped—an aspect which becomes "problematic," as Julius Bailey writes, given that ancestors are said to be connected with their families (Bailey 2008: 103); they are venerated and it is in this capacity that they are part of "the Shona worldview," first and foremost before they can be considered part of their religion as mediators (Kamudzandu 2010: 23-24).

Ancestors therefore are part of life and, more importantly, are part of the life of communities as mediators because, as Johannes Triebel indicates, "without the ancestors there is no life" (Triebel 2002: 189). Even if ancestors are, by definition, deceased people, they continue to exist in themselves and in the life of their communities since, as stressed by Maulana Karenga, one of their main features is immortality (Karenga 2000: 273), a characteristic that allows them to mediate a relationship with the living. Since the existence of ancestors is continuous irrespective of death, the are considered to be "the living dead" and it is in this capacity that they function as mediators simply because they are believed to be closer to God than the living in "an invisible, ever-present world of spirits," as Melva Wilson Costen describes it (2009: 210). What Kamudzandu wants to achieve by this presentation of ancestors is to provide his readers with a perspective which does not see the African attitude towards ancestors as "paganistic, heathenistic, and animistic." On the contrary, he writes, belief in ancestors and the actual relationship of African people with their ancestors is not only a mark of their "identity and belonging" but also a helpful worldview that is

capable of connecting African religions to the Christian religion (Kamudzandu 2010: 24) through an evident process of religious mediation.

In this respect, African perspectives on ancestors, Kamudzandu believes, do not collide with Christianity, so instead of viewing the two perspectives as opposing they should be accepted as complementary, even mutually embracing. For instance, as Kamudzandu writes, the idea of ancestry as well as the role of ancestors as mediators in African spirituality do not and should not prevent the Christian religion from cohabiting with indigenous African religions. To be even more precise, it appears to be Kamudzandu's conviction that ancestors should be seen in friendly terms, especially when compared to Jesus Christ—the mediator *par excellence*—the person who not only epitomizes the essence of the Christian religion but, as Elia Shabani Mligo shows, can also fulfill the role of an ancestor/mediator in African religions (Mligo 2011: 364). In Kamudzandu's words, "ancestors have to be recognized in the African context not as rivals of Jesus Christ, but rather as part of the community governed by Jesus Christ" (Kamudzandu 2010: 35), a gathering of the mediated. This very brief quotation is vital in deciphering not only the role of ancestors as mediators in indigenous African religions, but also the role of these religions in a mediating relationship with Christianity. Thus, as far as Kamudzandu is concerned, the African idea of ancestry not only presents the Christian religion in friendly terms, but also places indigenous African religions in a close mediatory relationship with Christian beliefs, especially since—as Rosemary Radford Ruether claims—"many African Christians quietly or openly practice a synthesis of African and Christian religions" (Radford Ruether 1999: 233).

One should be extremely careful, however, in concluding that Kamudzandu's explanation aims at establishing the inferiority of indigenous African religions, on the one hand, and the superiority of the Christian religion, on the other hand. His discussion about the relationship between the place and role of ancestors as mediators in African spirituality and the mediatory function of Jesus Christ in Christianity is more a juxtaposition than a hierarchical arrangement. The two worldviews, in Kamudzandu's opinion, should not work against each other, an idea shared, with some reluctance but also with hope for a better future, by Laurenti Magesa (2010: 87). On the contrary, they should find a way to coexist given that in reality this situation is already an established fact or, as Sybil M. Lassiter writes, "a variety of traditional indigenous religions coexist with the many Christian and Islamic faiths in Africa" (Lassiter 1998: 12). In light of their mediatory capacity, African ancestors and the Jesus of Christianity should be presented as perfecting each other and, in the worst of cases, Jesus and Christianity somehow religiously complete the various African beliefs in ancestors. As far as Kamudzandu is concerned, ancestors should always be perceived as "helpers of the Supreme Being," and if the Jesus of Christianity is seen in these terms, then the ancestors of African spirituality provide him with a much-needed help in putting together or mediating between two religions to work for the same ultimate goal: the blessing of the community of the living (Kamudzandu 2010: 178-179).

The most important feature of Kamudzandu's approach is its irenic spirit based on the idea of mediation. Instead of presenting indigenous African religions in conflictual terms with other religions and especially with Christianity, he uses the idea of ancestry and the mediatory role of ancestors as an instrument which creates peace and prosperity. In a way, ancestors stand between cultures and religions, precisely because they can provide the two realms with adequate mediation. Even if, in Kamudzandu's own experience, ancestors do belong to the African worldview, they simultaneously provide a bridge—an idea supported also by F. Ochieng'-Odhiambo (2010: 56)—between the specificity of the African culture and the novelty of other cultures, including those based on Christian beliefs. In this context, ancestors are seen not only as mediators, but also as builders of communities, clans, families, and cross-cultural, even cross-religious relationships (Kamudzandu 2010: 181).

Conclusion

FAR FROM being a monolithic academic enterprise, the contemporary effort to study the wide range of indigenous African religions results in a rather variegated spectrum of perspectives regarding the common aspect of the highly diverse reality of religions in Africa. The one feature which is common to indigenous African religions was suggested to focus on the notion of ancestrality and particularly the role of ancestors in providing African societies with peace, prosperity, and security. Thus, if ancestrality with is corresponding notion of ancestors is the very characteristic which unites indigenous African religions, the perception of ancestrality is again something which defies singularity. Quite the opposite, four distinct approaches to the idea of ancestry as ecodomy—broadly defined as "constructive process"—were identified in this study which correspond to four perspectives on ancestry as basis for generating a safe context for all native Africans. These four perspectives on the role of ancestors in indigenous African religions result in what has been called "patterns of ecodomy" or models for the actual building of a safe environment for native Africans in highly diverse social contexts. Concretely, the four patters of ecodomy as perspectives on ancestry in the study of indigenous African religions belong to John S. Mbiti, Issiaka P. Lalèyê, Jacok K. Olupona, and Israel Kamudzandu, scholars with personal and professional experience not only in Africa but also in Europe and the United States of America. While they all agree on the common aspect of ancestry as bringing indigenous African religions together in providing the African continent with peace, prosperity, and security, they differ in the actual content of ancestry as ecodomy. Thus, while for Mbiti and Lalèyê ancestors can function beyond the realm of indigenous African religions as cultural and social realities, Olupona and Kamudzandu keep ancestors exclusively within the boundaries of religious beliefs and practices. More importantly, however, they all disagree on what ancestry as ecodomy consists of; hence the sharp distinctions in the content of ancestry provided by the four African scholars: remembrance for Mbiti, death for Lalèyê, ritual for Olupona, and mediation for Kamudzandu. This range of different perspectives does not however cancel the one common feature of ancestry in contemporary studies of indigenous African religions, namely, its capacity to constitute itself into an ecodomic endeavor which constantly seeks to produce as well as promote constructive values such as peace, prosperity, and security throughout the cultural and social diversity of the whole of Africa.

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Abstract

Patterns of Ecodomy in Indigenous African Religions: Four Perspectives on Ancestry as Foundation for Building a Safe Environment for Native Africans throughout the African Continent

This paper identifies four perspectives on the idea of ecodomy as ancestry in contemporary studies on indigenous African religions. Building on the notion of ecodomy defined by Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz as constructive process in 1995, the paper investigates the works of John S. Mbiti, Issiaka P. Lalèyê, Jacok K. Olupona, and Israel Kamudzandu with specific reference to the role of ancestors in indigenous African religions as well as to their conviction that ancestors have a positive role in promoting peace, prosperity, and security throughout the African continent. Defined as ecodomy, ancestry has therefore a distinct content in each of the four perspectives: remembrance in Mbiti, death in Lalèyê, ritual in Olupona, and mediation in Kamudzandu. Regardless of whether it is part of African religions in particular or African cultures in general, the idea of ancestry is capable of providing African societies with a safe ecodomic environment for all indigenous Africans if ancestors are respected and remembered (Mbiti) for their good life and death (Lalèyê) through proper rituals (Olupona) which can function not only within or in correlation with indigenous African religions but also in mediation with other world religions such as Christianity (Kamudzandu).

Keywords

ancestors, remembrance, death, ritual, mediation