The Cult of Ancestors: A Focal Point for Prayers in African Traditional Communities
Ezenweke, Elizabeth Onyedinma
Religion & Human Relations
Faculty of Arts,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Introduction

The spiritual world of Africa peoples is very densely populated with spiritual beings; spirits and the living-dead (Mbiti, 1960). Africans believe in the Supreme Being who is believed to be the creator of the universe and all therein, in addition, Africans believe in other spiritual forces that are believed to have powers, often times, for specific purposes. Among these spiritual beings is the belief in ancestors. Some scholars of African Traditional religion classified the belief system of the Africans into four types: The supreme God, the sky god, the mother earth and other divinities (Parinder, 1967). Mbiti (1975:36) echoed that “every African people recognized God according to some cosmologies. However, there are beside Him, other divinities and spiritual beings, some of which are closely associated with Him” (p.36). Ezeanya (1972) in Ezenweke (2004) discovered that “It is generally observed that when Africans pray, they invoke the Supreme Being (God), spirits, and sky god and 'agbala' divinities. Each is believed to be powerful and capable of protecting man” (p.14).

It is often said that West Africa is the home of many divinities (Idowu, 1973). Basden (1966) had earlier avowed that “scattered here and there throughout the Igbo country, more particularly on the eastern side of the Niger are certain local deities alleged to possess supernatural powers” (p.66). Metuh (1981) reiterated that “the belief in many deities and the ancestral cults has been observed and has overshadowed the worship of God” (p.134).

It may sound surprising that till date, there seem to be no consensus opinion among scholars of African traditional religion on some theological issues relating to the nature of African Traditional
Religion (A.T.R). Some of these theological questions centered on whether the adherents of African traditional religion pray and if they do, who are the recipients of these prayers (Ekwunife, 2007). These and many other theological questions such as the place of the cult of the ancestors in African prayers seem not to have received a generally accepted answer among scholars in this and related areas. More so, there seem not to be sufficient studies in this prevailing orthodoxy, which has created serious knowledge gap in the literature. This gap yawns for study, especially within the Sub-Sahara Africa where the increasing mixture of faiths calls for the retrieval of African matrix.

Conversely, it is believed, that the result of this study, which was carried out in Anambra State of Nigeria, will emit some light to some of these theological problems facing the nature of African traditional religion. The problems, which the study addressed, were therefore:
(a) To ascertain the position of the cult of ancestors in African prayers.
(b) To identify the focal recipient/addressee in African traditional prayer.

The study was guided by two (2) research questions as follows:
(1). What is the position of the cult of ancestors in African prayers.
(2). Who is the focal recipient/addresssee in African traditional prayer.

The method used for the study was an evaluative survey, using primary and secondly sources and the instruments used for data collection were a set of interview guide. We shall discuss the subject of this paper under the following sub HEADINGS:

- Concept of prayer.
- Prayer in African communities.
- The cult of ancestors in African communities.
- The focal recipient in African traditional prayers.
- The cult of ancestors within other religions.
- Principal findings.
- Conclusion.