

## **Ancestors and Moral Sanctions among Indigenous Esan people of Edo State, Nigeria: An Exposition**

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**Abstract:** *God is the ultimate reality in Africa Cosmogony. The Africans believe that God in his greatness can destroy them at the slightest provocation. They therefore resolved to approach Him through intermediaries like the ancestors, who are created by God, but are independent of him. The ancestors are regarded as the living dead which imply that though they have died physically, but live in the supersensible world and still maintain link with relatives, that they left behind on earth. They are the guardians of morality in Africa and thus referred to as “Moral Paragons,” because they execute moral sanctions on their relatives that they left behind. But can the African ancestors truly enforced sanctions or the claim is a mere fallacy? This is a gap in scholarship that this paper is set fill. The paper is set to achieve this objective by appropriating historical analytic research methodology. Findings shows that some communities in Esan land have relegated ancestral-veneration to the dustbin of history, due to the influx of the two proselytizing religions i.e., Christianity and Islam, as well as the influences of the forces and pace of globalization, which shows that many Africans are*

*going through some predicament ignorantly. The scope of this work is Idumabi community in Irrua, Esan Central Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria. The paper recommends the practice of strict moral precept and self-discipline among Africans in general and Esan people in particular, in order to avert sanctions from the ancestors. The work adopts Ayantayo's Divine Command ethical theory for its theoretical frame work.*

**Keywords:** *Cosmogony, Ancestors, Veneration, Sanctions and Globalization.*

## **Introduction**

Social dislocation from immorality in our society today is generating tension, bad blood and rancor, particularly adultery, which has led to the up bringing of illegitimate off springs in many families in Nigeria. The discovery of the truth in such marriages has diminished the vibrancy and inherent joy in related families, consequently, most people have liquidated their marriages, some committed murder and suicide. Others confirmed the veracity of the development by conducting deoxyribonucleic acid test (DNA). However, the violation of marital vows is done in high level secrecy. The western judicial system cannot force people to remain in marriages against their individual will. As such, the law is quick to dissolve marriages that are found to develop some infraction, just to avoid ugly development. This is because the western law that we adopted as Nigeria legal system is blind, full of ambiguities and characterized with human limitations. It has not been helpful in the handling of cases that are related to adultery. When compared to the traditional

societies with reference to *Esan* people, it is a different scenario all together. So long as a woman and a man are properly contracted in marriage, which means lawful bride price would have being paid by the man on the woman. If the woman gets involved in adulterous act, no matter the level of secrecy, she will be sanctioned by the ancestors, the invisible police men of various *Esan* communities and many other communities in Africa. It therefore shows that nothing whatsoever can be hidden from the watchful eyes of the African ancestors. The responsibility of the ancestors as an active judge in *Esan* communities in particular and African societies in general requires the scrutiny of scholars.

### **Clarification of Terms**

**Cosmogony:** The word comes from the Greek Cosmos, meaning the world and root of, to be born or what is brought into being or reality. Cosmogony therefore probes into the question of origin of the universe (Jegede, 2011). Basically, it is the scientific study of the universe, its origin and development (Hornby, 2010) which implies that, cosmogony relates to perception, interpretation and the development of the world.

**Ancestors:** They are the forebears of the Africans that act as invisible police and the guardians of morality. They lived an exemplary life on earth and had trodden the moral paths laid by their first ancestors. The ancestors superintended over African communities. They give approval to any action that makes the community a better place for people to live. It is believed that they are constantly watching their living relatives. They sanction those that violate moral code and reward those that keep it. Their punishment could be misfortune, illness and

even death, while their reward could be in form of bountiful harvest, child birth and prosperity (Opoku, 1978). These ancestors are referred to as father and mother because though they have died, invisible and cannot be seen with the physical eyes, Africans believe that they exist in the supersensible world where they regulate activities of man on earth. Thus, they are regarded as the “living dead” (Awolalu & Dopemu, 1979). In Nigeria recourse is towards the man, basically because the entire country is tinted towards patrilineal lineage.

**Veneration:** It means the highest degree of respect and reverence of a person, as a result of his goodwill, wisdom and even the sacredness of his character, while quoting Idowu, Awolalu stated that it is wrong to use the word ancestral worship to describe the manifestation of an unbroken family ties between dead fathers, grandfathers, great grandfathers and the children that they left behind in the world (Awolalu, 1979). Since there is an ultimate reality (God) that is worshipped by human beings God created the ancestors. It will be erroneous to use the same word to describe man’s acknowledgement of the ancestors. The most appropriate word to be used should therefore be ancestral veneration instead of ancestral worship.

**Sanctions:** It is an official order that limits a person or make them do something. It could also be a course of action that can be used to make people obey a law or behave in a particular way (Hornby, 2010).

**Globalization:** It entails the free movement of goods and ideas between and across borders, trade liberalization, movement of capital for greater and speedier returns

and repatriation of profits from quick yielding investments from the developing to the developed nations. The consequences are that globalization exacerbates inequality between the developed and the developing nations (Nwanuobi & Ezeah, 2019). However, Nigerians maintains an ethical behaviour that enables them to avoid conflict with supernatural forces and also to live in harmony with their fellow human being, this is in line with the criteria for ascertaining universal values.

### **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework adopted for this paper is Ayantayo's divine command ethical theory, which is based on the emphasis that human behaviour is underscores by the will of God. This implies that, it is only God that determines what is right and wrong, which means it is only things that are forbidden or required by God that stands. Thus, no action is bad unless God condemns or forbids it. Hence, nothing is permitted unless God approves it. Man doesn't have sense of moral right or wrong independent of God (Ayantayo, 2009). However, the sanctions and activities of the ancestors shares affinity with God's divine command, yet they imposed sanctions independent of God, who delegated such power to them.

### **Qualifications of an Individual to become an Ancestor**

The ancestors are revered by the Africans in general and *Esan* people in particular. Thus, an individual can become an ancestor when he/she attains the following:

1. The individual must lived a life that is worthy of emulation.
2. The person must have attained ripe old age.
3. He must be married, have children that will continue his lineage after his death.
4. Among Esan people, if an individual died without biological children, his Godson- *Oruo* plays the role of his child and inherits his valuable properties.
5. As a requisite to become an ancestor, the person must have died a good death, which means he must not have died as a witch or wizard, commit suicide, not from any form of violence like accident or unclean diseases like lunacy, leprosy, dropsy and epilepsy (Opoku, 1979).
6. The individual must be given proper burial rites: *Esan* people believe that ancestors enter into the spiritual realm after death and physical departure from this gross material world. This transition enables them to know more than humans, have deep rooted feet in the supersensible and in the physical world. They enjoy dual existence and are bi-lingual i.e. they speak and understand the language of man and that of the spirit. Thus, they function actively as intermediary between man and God. Man can appeal to them through sacrifice. However, anybody that is not properly buried with full funeral rites will not be admitted into the cult of the ancestors. Such a person will become a wondering spirit. This is also the situation of those that died bad death. Bad death refers to those that died through act of wickedness, hanging, drowning, bad diseases or during childbirth or pregnancy, such people will not be admitted into the abode of the ancestors, their spirit haunts trees, rocks, rivers and water courses until they repent and

reborn into disable bodies, this gives credence to the Africa believe in reincarnation (Quarcoopome, 1987).

### **Reasons for the Veneration of the Ancestors among *Esan* people**

Ancestral veneration cuts across the entire *Esan* land. The people appeal to almighty God-*Osenubulua* through their departed ancestors. The African ancestors are venerated for the following reasons:

1. *Esan* people believe that all inhabitants of the supersensible world can see what is happening on earth.
2. They hold that their ancestors can direct their relatives and families that they left behind in this dangerous world from the spirit realm.
3. *Esan* people believe that all dead people could see and speak to God.
4. The process of venerating their ancestors enables the people to maintain a strong bond with their deceased father and the entire family.
5. The ancestors are venerated so that they avert any impediment against their children or relatives that they left here on earth.

### **Methods of Ancestral Veneration among *Esan* People**

Among *Esan* people, children venerate their late father through the first surviving son of the deceased. He is in charge of the family and takes custody of the symbol representing their late father known as *Ukhure*--A short stick with the image of a human face at the edge and cowries laced around it. The *Ukhure* can only be touched by the eldest son, who uses it to pray and bless

any of his siblings that wish to appease their father's spirit. This is accompanied either with goat, fowl or whatever the diviner instructed them to take along to employ their father's spirit towards their direction and to favor them. The sacrificial item is slaughtered by the first son of the family, on the family shrine in the presence of family members that are called upon to witness the rite. Such people that witness the event participate in the sharing of the food, meat and drinks, after which the person that offers the sacrifice is blessed and prayed for. The veneration of ancestors serves as a means of unifying family members.

At the death of the first son, his immediate younger brother takes over from him. It is believed as well, that fresh blood could easily attract and appease the spirit of the ancestors. Thus the blood of a goat is irresistible by the ancestors. Any actions a man want to cement in his family, once he split the neck of a goat on the ancestral shrine, it will be done by the ancestors, because they will definitely listen (Okojie, 1994) and grant the request. For instance a goat is slaughtered to effect the forgiveness of an adulterous woman, to conclude arrangements to inherit a late father's or a late senior brother's wife (Widow inheritance) to renounce a wife, to give a wife permission to get children outside marriage if her husband has erectile related issues or low sperm count, to disinherit a troublesome child and to accept a disowned child back. Without the splitting of blood of a goat on the family shrine, prayer to the ancestors among the *Esan* people is a mere intercession.

### **Functions of the Ancestors**

The role of the ancestors in the family and community cannot be underestimated. These include:



1. They guard the family that they left behind on earth, in this regards they function as invisible police in their family and community.
2. The ancestors are the invisible chairperson in family gatherings, thus, they are the spiritual superintendent of earthly families and communities.
3. They are the intermediaries between the divinities and God on one hand and God and man on the other hand, because they have access to direct communication with the divine being.
4. They have delegated authority from God, thus, operate independent of God, in such a way that they can impose sanction or reward individuals. Clan. Linage or family (Quarcoopome, 1987).
5. They accept sacrifices either for appeasement or as a gratitude for answered prayers and so on.
6. The ancestors are given a special place in the conduct of rituals and festivals among the Africans.
7. The ancestors unite family members.
8. They are the formidable forces behind the custom and tradition of *Esan* people.
9. The ancestors are the symbolic heads of family and communities in Africa.

Despite the importance of the functions of the ancestors among *Esan* people, they are not placed on the same pedestal with God and the divinities. However, the ancestors are closely related to the living members of communities in such a way, that is different from the relationship such communities have with God and the divinities.

### **Offences that are Sanctioned by the Ancestors**

Witchcraft/ Wizardry/ Sorcery: Some time ago in 1988 at *Idumabi* quarters in *Esan* Central Local Government

Area of Edo State, a woman and her children accused her husband of being a wizard that was responsible for the whereabouts of their son, a Lagos based police officer that got missing mysteriously, an unfounded accusation that the man refuted. A witch hunter from *Ewohimi* was invited by the *edion*-elders of the community. The man was expected to come and unravel the truth behind the mysterious circumstances and the accusation. Unfortunately, he discovered the truth but was bribed by the woman, so he lied and confirmed the allegation against the man, the father of the missing man. The accused man was eventually starved to death by his wicked wife. Twenty One days after the incident, the witch hunter was on a motor bike that somersaulted on the well tarred Irrua- *Eguare* express road, there were no vehicle behind and in front of him. His upper tooth pulled out of his mouth, he held them with his hands, ran to the *Onojie*-Kings parlance to confess to the crime, he committed against a man that he lied against at *Idumabi*- Irrua (Interview with Momoh, 2023). It was later confirmed through divination, that the accident was orchestrated by the ancestors. As usual sacrifices were offered to appease them.

Adultery: There was this case of a man that hail from *Ileh* in *Esan* west local Government Area, who resides with his Family in Lagos. Initially, he was doing very well in business and work life, but after a while he lost his job. Things became tough for him, at a stage he could barely provide for his Family. In an attempt to help out economically, his wife started having secret affairs with their neighbour. She gets money from him, cooks and fed her Family. Her husband suspected fowl plays between his wife and the neighbor but kept his suspicion to himself, which was a violation of *Esan* custom. After a

while, he became terribly sick, when it became critical, he was taken home. Immediately, the elders saw him, they knew he was contending with the ancestors. His wife was interrogated, at this stage the man could no longer walk or talk. She confessed and explains the circumstances surrounding the development. However, there is no tenable excuse to violate traditional rules. The elders slaughtered a goat on the man's ancestral shrine, used a white chalk-*erea* to rub his body and prayed for him, within some few hours he stood, walked to his Fathers Farm, harvested fresh corn, boiled them and eat, but was forbidden from touching or eating any food from his wife, till her cleansing process was completed. The man was fully healed within some few days. After the sad episode, he decided to maintain and continue with the marriage (Interview with Eromosele, 2023).

Incest: Cases of incest in *Esan* land are taboos because they attract the sanctions of the ancestors. A practical case that attracts the sanction of the ancestors, involved the case of a girl that had sexual relationship with her cousin at the youthful stage of her life. She later got married and had children that died after birth. It was later discovered through divination, that she committed incest by having affairs with her cousin many years back. The young man who was happily married was not affected, but he had to give her part of the money for the sacrificial items, thereafter a goat was slaughtered on their ancestral shrine, she was prayed for by the elders. Thereafter she was freed from the sanctions of her ancestors (Interview with Enaboifo, 2023). *Esan* people uphold high morality; the fear of the sanction of the ancestors serves as source of morality and a factor

responsible for the strong social cohesion among the people.

### **Critique of Ancestral Veneration**

1. It is the veneration of heroes and heroines in African that ought to have being left to die and rest in peace.
2. It is the veneration of the dead relatives, Fathers, grandfathers and grandmothers of the Africans. This appears to be meaningless and a mere waste of time.
3. Christian converts posited that ancestral veneration in Africa is demonic and satanic.
4. The recognition and acknowledgement of the ancestors in Africa evolved from the figment of the people's imagination. Some people hold that the ancestors don't exist, that they have died and gone. They should therefore be forgotten.
5. African traditional religion is shrouded in a lot of secret; this is responsible for the setbacks in the religion.
6. The use of the blood of goat or any other animal to appease the ancestors is not in consonance with modern civilization.
7. Unethical diviners often defraud innocent people and aid fraudster with their esoteric knowledge.
8. It appears that the ancestors can be bribed with the blood of goat, because they seem to be greed for it.

### **Effects of Modernization on Ancestral Veneration**

Africans are deeply rooted in indigenous tradition. It is extremely difficult to sever them from their traditional connection (Awolalu & Dopemu, 1979). However, Islam, Christianity and globalization has

affected African traditional religion and ancestral veneration in the following ways:

1. When African Traditional Practices are compared to modern civilization, all indices shows that traditional Practices are completely out dated and outmoded. Many educated people Think that it is primitive, barbaric, savage, tribal, primitive, heathen, idolatry, fetish and native (Idowu,1973). As such they don't want to have anything to do with indigenous religion.
2. Urbanization: Urban centers are laced with cultural changes that are as a result of the influence of acculturation that reflects in languages, belief system, practices, group and individual behaviour. People with split personalities are mostly and easily affected because they are victims of two integrating cultures (Onwubiko, 1991). A good example is linguistic cultural changes, that manifested in corrupt English language, which irrputed in pidgin English. Importantly, a new central trend brings about a new belief tha affect old ones.
3. One serious effect of modernization on indigenous religion is that, people no longer see the need to patronized diviners openly; they rather consult diviners behind the stage. This has depleted the religion and its importance, a great deal.
4. African traditional religion is not an evangelical religion, people are born into it; hence, it is the most diminished religion in Africa. It is losing members to other religion daily, yet practitioners seem not to be bothered. This is having an uncomplimentary effect on Africa culture, custom, religion and tradition .e.g. Africans no longer felt the need to pour libation or

even to offer sacrifices to appease the divinities or ancestors.

5. Christians and Muslims converts are often influenced by their new religion. This makes them to relegate Africa indigenous religion to the back ground and even decorate it with derogatory appellations such as devilish, evil and Satanist.

## **Conclusion**

African ancestors are real and acknowledged among Esan people, there are empirical evidences that justify their existence. Sadly, the veneration of the ancestors by *Esan* peoples is undergoing transformation in rural and urban cities in *Esan* land and elsewhere in Africa. In fact, it has being relegated to the background, this is under pinned to globalization and acculturation, the practice is increasingly undergoing fundamental changes in pattern, structured, role and activities. This observable development can be attributed to the penetrative effects of Christianity, Islam, and modernization which has tactically eroded Africa culture, to the extent that the west want to make an European from an African by remolding through social imperatives, particularly through cognitive influences.

This move has caused more problems for the African than mitigating an already decorated ugly situation, it has being discovered that the further the African move from their cultural heritage and background, the more they are entangled with the problems of existences, as such marriages has lost its oil, grease and sanctity, divorce is now one of those things, ladies are now half naked, all in attempt to emulate their western counterparts, sexual immorality that used to be a taboo has soar to the high heavens, technology that

was invented for the good and continuous development of the society has being cornered and is now been used by man to defraud his fellow man. Many Africans have consciously separated themselves from their ancestors and alienated themselves from their culture and ethics. It is obvious that Africans are already suffering from the enormous consequences. Africans, Nigerians, *Esan* people in particular must urgently returns to their root, maintain self-caution, self discipline and sustain societal norms, this will bring back the much needed social – economic harmony that is required for sustainable societal peace, progress and development.

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