

Vocabulary for the Study of Religion

Volume 1

A–E

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BRILL

LEIDEN | BOSTON

2015

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possible to disagree about which terms are to be counted as analogical when used of God. Is 'make' univocal because it has the general sense 'produce' or 'bring into existence,' or is it analogical because one central sense involves physical means and preexisting material, and the related senses represent a loosening of the normal rules governing that term? To return to an earlier example, Ross takes 'wise' said of God to be analogical (Ross 1981: 170–171) but Swinburne does not (Swinburne 1992: 155). Contemporary theories overcome the obstacles of medieval theories, but introduce problems of their own.

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EARLINE JENNIFER ASHWORTH

Ancestors and Ancestor Worship

"Ancestors are everywhere and everything is ancestral" stated a frustrated James Whitley (2002: 119) in response to the apparent uncritical use of the 'ancestors' among British prehistorians. The terms "ancestor" and "ancestor worship" may indeed be ethnocentric. One of the first scholars to raise this point was Igor Kopytoff (1971), who objected to the use of terms that are not found in the vocabularies of the communities being studied. He noted that African cultures make no distinction between living and dead elders: "The term 'ancestor' sets up a dichotomy where there is a continuum. By conceptually separating living elders from ancestors, we unconsciously introduce Western connotations to the phenomenon thus labelled and find ourselves having to deal with paradoxes of our own creation" (1971: 140). He claimed that "worship" conveys too reverential an association and that the deceased are treated with contentiousness rather than respect. He concluded (1971: 140) that "the selection by anthropologists of the phrases 'ancestor cult' and 'ancestor worship,' in dealing with African cultures, is semantically inappropriate, analytically misleading, and theoretically unproductive."

Others have disagreed. For example, John McCall (1996: 256–257; see also Fortes 1976: 2) pointed out that the kinds and mechanisms of power attributed to the ancestors are completely different from those attributed to living elders. He also noted significant differences in terminology and in the methods of interaction, such in as the presentation of offerings—for example, in sacrifices versus gift giving. Yet Kopytoff's work still usefully highlights the need for circumspection before labeling belief systems with inappropriate terminology.

One of Kopytoff's key observations was the absence of a specific word for "ancestor" (in the sense of deceased forebear) in African languages. He concluded that no distinction is made between living and dead elders (see also Brain 1973: 122; Steadman et al. 1996: 63). Nevertheless,

while elders may be conversed with as if they are alive, the means of contacting them post-mortem is clearly different—a point conceded by Kopytoff (1971: 133). There is no continuum but rather an adaptation by the living to accommodate their predecessors through a process of re-socialization (see Ooms 1967: 288). The changes can involve reintroducing the recently deceased into the home through the provision of household shrines, visiting graves to commune with them, and activating rituals to ensure that the dead are present when offerings are made—for example, bell-ringing (Ooms 1976: 298) or reciting invocations (Harrington 2013: 46) to call upon spirits to partake of the offerings provided for them. If one takes “worship” as “respect” rather than, more narrowly, as “adulation,” then “ancestor” and “ancestor cult” may in fact still be suitable terms for a range of cultures, and ancestor worship may be universal (Steadman, Palmer, and Tilley 1996: 64).

Ancestor Cult versus Cult of the Dead

Though often used interchangeably with each other, “ancestor cult” should be distinguished from the “cult of the dead” (see Brain 1973: 122). Ancestors are people within one or two generations of their living successors—parents, grandparents, and at most great-grandparents (see, for instance, Ooms 1967: 256; but see also Lehmann and Myers 1993: 284). They are addressed by name and are typically asked by their descendants for assistance in domestic matters. By contrast, the cult of the dead is directed toward the collective deceased or affinal (non-linear) ancestors (Kiernan 1982: 293), who are often considered to be responsible for otherwise inexplicable negative events such as sudden deaths and droughts and to whom propitiatory offerings are made or against whom execration rites are performed. The revered dead cause distress to their families not through capriciousness but rather in reaction to their descendants’ moral transgressions, and it is the withdrawal of ancestral protection that leaves

descendants vulnerable to adverse events (Kiernan 1982: 291). Once placated, the ancestral dead are expected to be benevolent and to re-engage with the living. Those who are not the recipients of regular cult are not bound by the same moral code and can behave unpredictably and threateningly (see Newell 1976: 28).

In short, non-linear ancestral spirits intervene actively with the intention of harming the living, whereas the blessed dead bring misfortune through inertia instigated by perceived neglect. Thus while the outcomes may be the same, such as the death of a child or the failure of a harvest, the motivations and justifications differ. In one form the dead are held responsible for disasters through their malevolence; in another, they are exonerated by the failure of their living descendants to fulfill their filial obligations.

The Sociological and Political Aspects of Interaction with the Dead

The parent-child relationship lies at the heart of ancestral cult (see Kiernan 1982: 289). The symbiotic relationship between the ancestors and their heirs is summarized by William Lakos (2010: 6): “In a world underpinned by the reverence towards ancestors the individual exists by virtue of his descendants, and his ancestors exist only through him.” Filial piety reinforces the position of an individual as a member of a larger family-kin-ancestor web and connects the biological with the social and political (Lakos 2010: 6). Emphasis is placed on the involvement of the transfigured deceased in the affairs of their relatives rather than on the characteristics that the person possessed during life (see Kopytoff 1971: 129; Newell 1976: 22–23; Fortes 1976: 14). This emphasis reflects the change of role from individual to ancestor.

Forbears are deemed figures of authority, with judicial capability over the living and the recently deceased. Parental discipline is invoked in the manner in which they wield their power to ensure the maintenance of social norms and customs

(Fortes 1976: 14). Since those who were commemorated after death retained (Kopytoff 1971: 138) or augmented the status they had possessed in life, one might expect the relationship between the living and the dead to be one of respectful child and attentive parent, but this is clearly not the case, and scholars often comment on the apparent ambivalence of the interaction. The parent-child relationship can be inverted to the point where the dead are scolded for their behavior toward the living and are cajoled into acting on behalf of those they have left behind (see Kopytoff 1971: 30; Gable 1996: 113, 117).

Ancestor worship and its accompanying ceremonies may be seen as a sociological tool with the potential for use in the manipulation of the past, identity, and power within or between communities. As Eric Gable points out, “ancestors embody in their persons society’s essential morality” and are the guardians of ethical behavior and social order, particularly over the ownership, division, and inheritance of property (1996: 104). Women, while not necessarily the sole practitioners of → rituals for the dead, may be more involved in the cult than men (see Fortes 1976: 8). As shamans, priestesses, and “wise women,” women are involved in regular communication with the deceased, elevating their status and giving them a greater voice in the community. Here ancestral rituals provide a forum for the articulation of views not readily expressed elsewhere and empower those who might otherwise be disenfranchised (Gable 1996: 119; Michel 2001: 67; Vijfhuizen 1997).

Ancestor worship contributes to the definition of family and → community (Vega 1999: 340). In cases of contested property, ancestral spirits and associated burials can be used to support claims to land (Schwartz 2000: 436). The memories of a shared past and the physical presence of ancestors can be manipulated to provide a sense of → belonging to a lineage with an exemplary, well-established past. That sense of belonging may in turn influence the decision of persons who travel beyond their homelands to return to their

birthplace for death and burial (see, for example, Schwartz 2000: 435).

Involvement in cultic activities often begins at an early age. In addition to learning through the observation of parents and siblings, children are educated about their predecessors by elders—a process that serves to strengthen intergenerational bonds (see Ooms 1967: 263). Children themselves can be counted among the ancestors, but the duration of commemorative practices is generally shorter for them than for adults (see Ooms 1967: 251; Fortes 1976: 8). The shorter practices are unsurprising, given the subordinate status of juveniles in society and their lack of accumulated wisdom. The importance of having children to provide for parents in their old age, to ensure their immortality, and to guarantee the continuity of the family is emphasized in many cultures (see Fortes 1976: 5, 7). Failure to procreate can lead to societal condemnation (Lakos 2010: 59), if not to outright banishment.

In certain traditions the production of a descendant is sufficient to ensure ancestorhood, and even when the parent’s conduct during life was reprehensible (Fortes 1976: 9, 10; Ahern 1973: 121). But in general, death itself is insufficient to transform a person into an ancestor (see Fortes 1976: 2). There must be funerary and subsequent mortuary rituals to initiate and sustain the status of the transfigured deceased, who, from a stable position in the afterlife, can mediate between the worlds of mortals and local or state gods.

While ancestor worship may originate as a religious activity, it can gradually develop into a merely habitual act, where the initial purpose is lost and is replaced by social expectation. Such an evolution was noted by Herman Ooms in his study of Japanese household religion (1967: 296). In cultures where the maintenance of cults is a standard part of communal action, to abstain from involvement is to reject the community and its values and is thereby to court ostracism. Thus peer pressure and tradition may be as important as devotion or necessity in the continuance of ancestor cults,

and the act of worship is not automatic evidence of underlying belief. Like all other traditional activities, ancestor worship is not immune to change over time (Lakos 2010: 4; Bay 2008: 13).

Death does not extinguish the relationship with kin but rather transforms it (Fortes 1976: 5) and reaffirms the (occasionally subverted) parent/child dynamic. Death creates the need for a new form of participation, with a corresponding alteration in the means of communication, primarily through objects imbued or used by the spirit—for example, the *asen* of Southern Benin, West Africa (Bay 2008: 1). Ancestors are a key part of sedentary civilizations, where concern for group identity and the continuity of a community firmly embedded in a selectively remembered idyllic past are important in creating a sense of stability. Greater emphasis may be bestowed on progenitors if the community is uprooted or threatened. Ancestor worship can also be used for political purposes, including the legitimization of status by association with illustrious forbears (see, for example, Bay 2008: 16). Thus ancestors have the potential to inform the past, to influence the present, and to affect the future. They are a dynamic guiding force through whom the fears, hopes, and customs of a society may be expressed.

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