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Why Premodern Humans Believed in the Divine Status of Their Parents and Ancestors?

Psychology Illuminates the Foundations of Ancestor Worship

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Introduction

The worship of the dead or ancestors could be indeed defined as a religious phenomenon. Their adherents or believers assume that the dead family members deeply govern the life of their descendants, often enough down to the smallest details. The believers communicate with their dead by prayer and sacrifice. Thus, they do not only believe in the immortality of the soul but also in the magical or divine power of the dead on the world generally and on lives of their still living descendants. The dead have therefore much more power than the living whose life depends largely on their decisions.

The ancestor worship has been therefore an important component of religious behaviour across cultures, continents, and history. Historians or ethnologists who describe the religion of a specific culture sometimes explain that this culture believes in their ancestors *or* in Olympic gods *or* in a single god of heaven. Following this, many people tend to assume that while one culture believes only or mainly in ancestors, the other culture believes in a pantheon

of high gods, and another one prefers only the highest celestial deity. Questions arise therefore: is it really true that societies chose different kinds of divinities? Are there religions without Olympic or high gods or without divine ancestors, or without a godfather in heaven? And if it is so, what factors may have caused such divergences? What theory could explain them?

According to the existing historical and ethnographic data, the parallel existence of three forms of divinities within one culture is indeed a frequent case across continents, regions, and societies: most cultures did know and adore a godfather, a pantheon of Olympic gods, and divine ancestors at the same time.¹ Differences that exist in this regard usually concern the cultic status of different divinities. However, European Christianity, recent Islam and recent developments in other world regions seem to change this picture. Especially Christianity belittled and fought against the ancestor worship during the Christianisation process over the last thousand years. Still certain forms of ancestors' cult of the dead did exist in popular Christianity in Europe at least to the era of Enlightenment, although it was weaker than the one existing in other cultures of the world.²

For scholars engaging in the field of religious studies, the existence of the ancestors' cult is so evident that any attempts to explain it theoretically seem to be redundant. They usually argue that this kind of cult is only a reflection of certain family or clan structures whose purpose is to support the existing social organization.³ However, approaches such as these neglect the principle of sufficient reason. Ancestor worship can fulfil social functions only then when people believe that dead family members have magical and divine powers. This is not the case in modern societies, however. The first step, therefore, should be to explain why premodern nations developed the belief in mystical status and magical powers of their (dead) family members. I argue that such answer can be provided only on the grounds of developmental psychology which attends to developmental differences between premodern and modern nations.⁴ Indeed, the ancestors' cult can be convincingly explained only in this

1 Jensen (1992: 365–441); Le Roy (1911: 145–213); Mbiti (1970: 36–124); Eliade and Culianu (1995); Frazer (2010); Oyibo (2004).

2 Ariès (1980: 123, 776); Oesterdiekhoff (2009: 265–270).

3 Fortes (1983); Durkheim (1981); Lienhardt (1987); Middleton (1999); Bergunder (1993).

4 Ludwig Feuerbach (1985) was probably the first one to outline a general theory of religion basing on developmental psychology.

broader and deeper context of cross-cultural psychological studies.⁵ Secondly, the fact of the cross-cultural universality of ancestor worship provides sufficient evidence that social functions of the ancestors' cult are only side effects or second row phenomena which did not have any impact on the origin of what I term here the "ancestral religion."

1 The Universality of Ancestor Worship across Premodern Societies

Ancestor worship did not exist only in ancient China or India but it is to be found above all among bands of hunters and gatherers, peasant societies, and agrarian civilizations. The Australian aborigines, for example, do not only know a godfather who lives with his family in heaven, having created the world and being omniscient and almighty.⁶ They also believe that their ancestors created the world *in illo tempore*, in the beginning of time, by metamorphosis of their bodies in all phenomena the cosmos consists of. They celebrate their annual ceremonies before the rain season starts in order to recapitulate that primordial event. The ancestors are believed to appear in the bodies of their descendants in this holy time so that they themselves create the world anew when the people, their children, perform the holy rites. The totemic rites do not remember and do not symbolise the creation of the cosmos but completely reproduce creation time and creation act in the fullest sense possible (dream time). The holiest rites of the aborigines do not only provide the full identification between the living and the dead but also the annual renewal of dominance and creation power of the ancestors. Both living and dead people care for the renewal and reproduction of the cosmos as it was *in illo tempore*. Moreover, Australian aborigines also believe that every newborn baby reincarnates one of their ancestors. In this way, ancestors do not only live in the world of spirits but also in the bodies of the living. The living generation therefore is nothing else than the reincarnation of the first generation of ancestors. The dead are not dead but they live in the persons of the current generation; the dead are those now living on earth. The Australian aborigines usually had no graveyards that contain the bodies of their ancestors. They assumed that only a few generations and little time had passed between the first generation of earth makers (the

dreamtime) and the present time. However, they collected the hair or the skull of their beloved and strongly believed in their magical power.⁷

The Australian aborigines lived as bands of hunters and gatherers on Stone Age level. Ethnographic reports showed that cultures on this level spread across the world worship their ancestors in a similar way. The ancestor worship cannot be attributed only to agrarian cultures as some authors had assumed. Rather it is very old – most likely as old as religion as such. People of Papua New Guinea, the Andaman islanders, a number of nations across the Pacific Ocean, the Eskimo, the indigenous tribes of Siberia, the Indians of both Americas practised the worship of ancestors and corresponding totemic rites.⁸ The ancestor worship is also a characteristic of Hinduism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Shinto. Indeed, it has existed across the Asian continent from prehistory to recent times. Especially the Confucianism strongly institutionalised the ancestor worship.⁹ "The ancestral cult is regulated in the state ritual by special rescripts for all classes of the Chinese people," De Groot says. "This ancestral worship, sanctioned and regulated by the state religion, is actually received to be the only religion the people may have" (1910: 78 f.). The Greek-Roman antiquity knew the worship of ancestors from prehistory up to its end. In his acclaimed book, Fustel de Coulanges (1981) described the decisive role ancestor worship had on shaping the religion, culture, society, and family life in the Mediterranean. Several ethnologists had also analyzed the far-reaching similarities between equatorial Africa and the ancient Mediterranean regarding ancestor worship.¹⁰ The ancestors' cult is indeed the prevailing feature of African indigenous religions, although today it is also strongly intertwined with Christianity and Islam in Africa.¹¹ As for Europe, the ancestor worship declined there, both very early and to the highest degree, under the pressure of medieval Christianity: the cult of deceased family members, e.g. among Germanic tribes, was considered idolatrous

5 Oesterdiekhoff (2009, 2011, 2013a, 2015).

6 Schmidt (1926–1955); Bergunder (1993); Eliade (1961: 192); Eliade and Culianu (1995: 75); Elkin (1986: 201); Frazer (2010, I: 29–124).

7 Spencer and Gillen (1904); Elkin (1986: 164–261); Durkheim (1981: 336–488); Frazer (1932: 330; 1994, III–VII; 2010, I: 29–124); Lévy-Bruhl (1931: 91–112).

8 Frazer (2010, I+II; 1994, XVI: 17); Radcliffe-Brown (1964); Tylor (1871); Feest (2003: 54 f., 71); Jensen (1992); Lévy-Bruhl (1938: 149–164; 1983: 90); Oesterdiekhoff (2013a: 215–230; 2009: 261–276).

9 Malek (2003); Meisig (2003); von Stietencron (1979); Sontheimer (1977); Tylor (1871); Debon (1979); De Groot (1910; 1892–1910); Oesterdiekhoff (2008; 2011: 147–161).

10 Fortes (1983: 214); Wlosok (1978); Lévy-Bruhl (1931: 146); Oesterdiekhoff (2009a: 261–276).

11 Oyibo (2004); Mbiti (1974); Middleton (1999); Lienhardt (1987); Schoormann (2005); Evans-Pritchard (1956: 2–6).

and punishable, as Christian monotheism implied a confrontation with all traditional beliefs in magic and human divinities (von Padberg 1998: 59).

Nonetheless, although Christianity in Europe did marginalize the worship of ancestors, it did not eradicate it completely as common people continued to practise their archaic religious traditions and their magic of the pre-Christian era. The medieval people believed in the magical power of the dead, offered sacrifices on their graveyards, spoke to them, and implored their help. Such forms of cult existed in Europe at least up to the era of Enlightenment. Indeed, the belief in ghosts and spectres (usual apparitions of the dead) was as strong in medieval Europe as it is in traditional societies around the world today, e.g. in Sub-Saharan Africa as well as in the classical civilizations of Asia.¹² Still, whoever in medieval Europe said that the dead were true gods, able to make rain, avert storm, help during birth, cause death, and sickness, risked accusations of blasphemy and frequently capital punishment. On the other hand, the same statement made in any non-European culture was an expression of piety, or even of common sense. “Do not believe that this worship is not idolatry; any intelligent Chinese will tell you that it does not differ from worship paid to gods,” wrote De Groot (1910: 66), describing Chinese opinions around 1910. It is important to add that the worship of the dead remained stronger in Eastern and South Eastern Europe than did in Western and Central Europe, where it has been fostered by the Orthodox Church. Moreover, it was also supported by the traditional family structure of East-European societies (Kaser 2000; Oesterdiekhoff 2008). All in all, the ancestor worship has been known to humanity since prehistoric times, and it was to be found across the world – in tribal societies as well as in agrarian civilizations. Over the last centuries, however, great monotheistic religions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity contributed to the decline of this form of religion.

2 Several Kinds of Divinities

Tribal societies and agrarian civilizations usually know one central god, a godfather, who created the world although they may not worship such highest divinity (*deus otiosus*). Moreover, they also regard natural objects such as rocks, rivers, woods, trees, mountains, stars, planets, and moon as spiritual beings, often pray to them and bring them sacrifices.

They frequently venerate storms, hurricanes, wind, rain, the four seasons, beauty, happiness, health, fertility, braveness, etc. as divinities, dedicate to them temples or sanctuaries. Besides, they adore excellent warriors, magicians, or kings as true gods. However, while living persons only seldom have the chance to be venerated as gods, the percentage of the dead to become this status is much higher. In other words, one needs to be dead in order to become a heroic ancestor. Indeed, every dead person may eventually receive the divine status (Schoormann 2005: 303; De Groot 1910: 66).

Obviously, only those with multiple offspring eventually receive this status because it is the children who continue to fear and to love their forefathers after their death (Lienhardt 1987: 42). Whenever people have any existential problems, they thought first about their family gods, prayed to them, and begged for their help. Communication with family gods was permanent and secure; indeed the ancestors constituted the first instance before turning to higher gods. It was because godfather was thought of as far distant and not much interested in human affairs, while the family gods are nearby and personally involved. They know that godfather is more powerful than the family gods. Still, family ancestors are believed to stay in a closer contact to the highest god. In other words, ancestors work on behalf of godfather or can address him whenever it is necessary or helpful. There existed therefore certain co-operation and relationship between the highest deity and the ancestral divinities, as the highest god is frequently the most important Ancestor.¹³ As one Lugbara informant put it: “To offer sacrifice is to give food to the dead. It is not to give food to God. We do not do that. But truly God is there. Does he not see the sacrifice? He sends the rain or holds it back. He is behind the ghosts; he stands behind the ancestors as well, and he is pleased when we give food to our fathers” (Middleton 1999: 102).

The relation between a distant godfather, not very present in every-day human activities, and omnipresent ancestors whom people address on day-to-day basis by prayers and sacrifices, was a common picture in Aboriginal Australia, Oceania, Sub-Saharan Africa, China, India, and Native America, as well as in nineteenth-century China or India.¹⁴ The

12 Ariès (1980: 35–40, 309); Delumeau (1985: 117); Röhrich (1980: 172–182); Oesterdiekhoff (2009: 265–270).

13 Schoormann (2005: 365); Wundt (1915: 44–48); Eliade (1961: 192, 222); Evans-Pritchard (1956: 49–55); Oyibo (2004: 39, 49).

14 Malek (2003: 110, 112, 118, 130, 138); De Groot (1910: 66–88; 1892–1910); Meisig (2003: 149–157); Evans-Pritchard (1956: 177); Eliade (1961: 192); Oyibo (2004: 39, 49, 116f., 119); Middleton (1999: 25).

“monotheistic” revolution brought about by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam largely consists of establishing a new relation between godfather and ancestors. Specifically, they moved the highest deity from the background position to the forefront of belief and cult, thus reversing the previous relationship between those two categories of spirits.

3 The Power of Ancestors

The worship of ancestors took place within homesteads or in adjacent gardens, where the dead family members were often buried.¹⁵ “There are, then, for every man and woman in China three altars for the exercise of ancestral worship: one at home, one at the grave, one in the temple of the clan” (De Groot 1910: 79). The last generation enjoys the biggest amount of attention and adoration, as the most important ancestors are the dead parents, followed by grandparents, uncles, and aunts. Very often, the generation of the grandparents plays only a small part in veneration or sometimes even not at all. Families whose kinship is based on female lineages often worship only parents, brothers and sisters of the mother; in other cases wife and husband venerate only their parents respectively but not those of their partner (Lévy-Bruhl 1931: 148 and 217; Lienhardt 1987: 110). The third or fourth ascending generation practically receives no worship (Bamler 1911: 515), except perhaps in certain agrarian civilizations, such as China, with established traditions of a complex ancestors worship practiced by noble families (Tylor 1871; De Groot 1892–1910). However, even in China people predominantly pray to their dead parents and not to more distant forefathers. In cultures based on patrilineages, wife has to participate in the worship of husband’s ancestors.¹⁶ De Groot writes in this regard:

Especially, however, men are worshipped after their death. Worship of the dead is a logical, natural continuation of the worship of the living, in the first place of fathers and mothers, the highest authorities in social and family life ... It places the child under the almost absolute authority of its father and mother, so that it has to pay to both the utmost amount of respect, obedience, subjection, which China has in all time expressed by the term *hiao*. It forbids children ever to withdraw from that authority, whatever their age may be (1910: 66).

The same can be stated about the ancestor cult in Sub-Saharan Africa, Aboriginal Australia, India, East Europe, in the ancient Mediterranean, and elsewhere.¹⁷ In other words, the worship of the dead is only a continuation of respect shown to living parents and the elderly. This implies that in archaic societies it was common to regard parents specifically, and the older generation generally, as people staying closer to the realm of the sacred: the older people are the higher is their magical and divine status. It is particularly evident in aboriginal cultures of Australia: the younger men fear the older ones who are believed to have strong magical powers. Ancestor worship implies therefore the belief in the magical power of the dead. But the persons attain magical powers not only after their death; they have it already when they still live on earth. Thus, the younger ones adore the older ones and feel dependent upon them through all their life.¹⁸

How strong is the power of the dead? They can make rain, drought, sunshine, harvest, hunting success, happiness, mishap, sickness, birth, death, victory, defeat, etc; in fact, they are believed to have full magical control over everything that is happening in the world. In this regard, they are like the highest deity but they exercise their power only for the benefit of their descendants: they are almighty, omniscient, omnipresent, revengeful, benevolent, all characteristics, which usually describe godfather, too.¹⁹ The informant Teezien from the Tallensi tribe in West Africa declared to Meyer Fortes: “If you work on your fields and the harvest spoils, then you recognize that it was your father who is responsible for this damage, isn’t it? If you raise cattle, and it dies, then you have to conclude that it was your father who caused this incident, isn’t it? If you don’t give him anything then he will refuse to give something to you, isn’t it?” (Fortes 1983: 225 f.).

Premodern people believed that obedience to moral codes and avoidance of transgressions against the moral order provided luck in life and maintained cosmic arrangements. Whenever people fulfilled their duties to ancestors they would be rewarded with protection against all mishaps. Whenever people failed in this regard, they would be punished with misfortune, sickness, or death.²⁰

15 Lévy-Bruhl (1938: 149, 217); Oyibo (2004: 119); Fustel de Coulanges (1981: 36–60); Fortes (1983).

16 DeGroot (1910: 66); Fustel de Coulanges (1981: 64–85); Oesterdiekhoff (2008); Malek (2003).

17 Fortes (1983); Lienhardt (1987: 42, 125); Elkin (1986: 81–163); Fustel de Coulanges (1981: 61–156); Oesterdiekhoff (2008; 2009: 261–271); Sontheimer (1977).

18 Elkin (1986: 81–139); Durkheim (1981: 180); Spencer and Gillen (1904).

19 Tylor (1871); Lévy-Bruhl (1931: 139–164; 1938: 156); Mbiti (1974: 104–114); Oyibo (2004: 135); Middleton (1999: 79).

20 Lienhardt (1987: 291 f.); Fustel de Coulanges (1981: 30, 39); De Groot (1910: 87).

The ghosts who are more frequently invoked and who are considered to bring sickness are the recently dead, who may be still remembered by the living. They are the fathers, grandfathers and their brothers; more distant ghosts are not so troublesome. It is said that just as a father disciplines his son and expects respect from him, so does a man expect his dead father to take a close interest in his activities, whereas other ghosts are not especially concerned (Middleton 1999: 47).

Thus, sending prayers and sacrifices to the ancestors is of the utmost importance regarding the maintenance of the cosmos, security of people, and luck of the family: “S’il leur offre la nourriture et la boisson dont ils ont besoin, il compte en recevoir l’équivalent sous une forme ou une autre. S’il leur présente périodiquement les offrandes et les sacrifices habituels, il s’attend en récompense à être protégé en toutes circonstances, et à sortir sain et sauf de tous les dangers” (Lévy-Bruhl 1931: 152). De Groot (1910: 87) put it this way: “We may call this sort of religion an animistic lottery, always very advantageous; some food, spirits, paper mock money, houses, and puppets of paper are the stakes; the prices are material blessings a thousand times more valuable, bestowed by the ancestors.” Nonetheless, sacrifices were not viewed as mere symbolic rites but rather as material provisions for hungry and thirsty ancestors (Fustel de Coulanges 1981: 33–38). This implies that sacrifices to ancestors may have originated in the care for the living elderly parents and relatives: “Are our ancestors not people of our lineage? They are our fathers and we are their children whom they have begotten. Those that have died stay near us in our homes and we feed and respect them. Does not a man help his father when he is old?” (Middleton 1999: 25).

Death does not separate therefore the living from the dead: they continue to live their common life and their communication. As children obey their parents, the grown-ups obey their dead ancestors; the dead ones are not really dead but they have only changed the way they act, and although they are not visible they are fully existent and present. A number of ethnographers reported that they frequently did not know whether natives spoke of living or dead persons: their informants maintained that the dead could see and listen to everything what happens and what is said; in fact, they even stated that they could frequently hear voices of their parents. They also experienced their ancestors in dreams which they regarded as real appearances and not as illusions.²¹

“For Lugbara, living and dead of the same lineage are in a permanent relationship with each other. The dead are aware of the actions and even the thoughts of the living, ‘their children,’ or at least they may be so” (Middleton 1999: 25).

In short, the dead are only a certain category within a society composed of several age groups. The older people are the higher status and power climb. “Toutefois, si les morts ne font pas l’objet d’un culte proprement dit, s’ils sont simplement des ‘ultra-vieillards’, de qui se composent les classes les plus âgées, il subsiste entre ces classes et celles qui forment la société des vivants une différence de grande portée” (Lévy-Bruhl 1938: 164).

4 An Attempt at an Explanation

As mentioned above, ancestor worship is rooted in relationships between generations which are essentially different from those that organize social life in modern societies: children are respectful and obedient towards their parents even when they are 40 or 60 years old, and believe in their superior magical and practical competence. In a sense, the ancestor worship extends this attitude onto the afterlife.²² Following questions arise therefore: in what social conditions people believe that: (1) the dead are omniscient and almighty regarding the fate of their children and of the world they live in; (2) the dead have magical control over all events concerning their descendants; (3) the dead require sacrifice; (4) the dead are spiritual beings that deserve worship?

These questions can be answered by reference to the findings of developmental psychology. Specifically, Bovet (1951), Piaget (1981), Thun (1959), Zeining (1929) as well as a number of other authors who researched children’s attitudes towards parents, elderly, and divinities, provided theoretical tools for explaining the ancestor worship. Bovet, for instance, demonstrated that children in modern societies up to the age of 6 frequently regard their parents as true gods who control world, village, neighbourhood, and household; they also believe in their magical powers regarding all kinds of events: “Pourtant, dès qu’on cherche à formuler l’idée que l’enfant se fait de son père et de sa mère, on retrouve les attributs divins de la théologie classique: la toute-puissance, l’omniscience, la perfection morale” (Bovet 1951: 27). On this stage of psychological development, fear and love are dominant

21 Oesterdiekhoff (2013a: 121–128; 2009: 181–187; 2011: 91–95); Lienhardt (1987: 149, 154); Tylor (1871); Lévy-Bruhl (1938: 134); Fustel de Coulanges (1981: 55).

22 Von Stietencron (1979: 57); Fustel de Coulanges (1981: 134); Fortes (1983: 209–222); Wlosok (1978: 58); Oesterdiekhoff (2009: 261–276).

feelings toward parents. Respect and love (*pietas*) characterizes also the appropriate attitude towards gods (“piety”):

Dans l'ordre des sentiments, il est certain que des enfants auxquels personne n'a jamais enseigné à adorer Dieu adorent spontanément leur mère. Or, nous l'avons vu, cette adoration se traduit très naturellement sur le plan de la pensée par une divinisation que nous pouvons donc considérer, elle aussi, comme toute spontanée et instinctive. Il fait ainsi, si nous ne nous trompons, renverser les termes, parler d'une paternisation de Dieu plutôt que d'une divinisation des parents et voir dans l'adoration filiale le prototype des sentiments religieux et l'origine des dogmes théologiques. En ébranlant la religion des parents, la crise intellectuelle de l'enfance fait éclore la religion du Père céleste (Bovet 1951: 38).

Modern children who reached the age of 6 usually undergo their first “sceptical crisis,” their first stage of “philosophical” thinking. At this stage, their mental abilities rise to the level where they are able to recognize first shortcomings of their parents and the elderly. As a result, they gradually lose their belief in the divine status of parents and transfer their religious feelings to official gods fostered by the society in which they grow up. By the age of 13, modern children usually demonstrate a strong religious devotion. After entering adolescence, young people undergo a second sceptical crisis – the stage at which they began to question established beliefs and doctrines; consequently, their religion frequently weakens or becomes devoid of personal engagement, which often leads to agnosticism or even atheism.²³

Developmental psychology has demonstrated that magic is an inevitable part of children's psychology. While in every premodern society adults preserve their magical ideas lifelong, children in modern societies lose their magical beliefs during the course of the first 10 years of life. From 1932 onwards, the Piagetian cross-cultural psychologists conducted more than 1000 empirical studies across hundreds of different social milieus and cultures. Those studies demonstrated that adults living in traditional, or “archaic” social milieus did not develop the adolescent stage of formal operations. This stage unfolds gradually among adolescents living in industrialized societies between their tenth and twentieth year of age.²⁴ School education and other components of modern cultures are necessary to foster human psychological development beyond

children's stage. One could conclude therefore that the “premodern mind” is still in “stuck” on the stage before the “first sceptical crisis,”²⁵ while adherents to monotheistic religions occupy stages between the first and the second sceptical crisis.²⁶

Conclusion

Children and premodern people share the same forms of animism and magic. Both groups believe stones, rocks, rivers, lakes, and objects to be animated and alive; both groups believe that plants and animals are persons who think and act like humans; they also have similar ideas regarding shadows, movements, space, and time. Moreover, children and people in premodern societies believe in ghosts and spectres they fear at night and in dark forests; they also have the same categories regarding causality, chance, probability, and necessity. They understand neither empirical causality nor chance and explain baffling events using mystical concepts. Both groups have similar ideas regarding morals and law and do not differentiate between physical and moral laws. They also share the belief in immanent justice and in ordeals which decide what to do next or what happened in past, etc.²⁷ Developmental psychology delivers therefore decisive tools that make possible a convincing explanation of ancestor worship. It also sheds light on the inveterate enmity between ancestor worship and monotheistic religions as well as the evolution of religion in general (cf. Feuerbach 1985). Ethnology in particular can use findings of developmental psychology in order to explain various religious phenomena, as the works of Bastian, Vierkandt, Schulze, and Hallpike demonstrate. Developmental psychology could even provide impulses for a theoretical discussion on the established ethnological axiom of cultural relativism.

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