

A Comparative Study of Ancestor Worship in Africa and Pre-Qin China

Jun Liu

Fuzhou University of International studies and Trade, Fuzhou 350000, Fujian, China

Abstract: This paper conducts a comparative study of ancestor worship systems in Africa and pre-Qin China. Through in-depth analysis of the belief systems, ritual practices, social functions, and historical evolution of ancestor worship in these two cultural contexts, it is found that despite significant regional and cultural differences, ancestor worship in both Africa and pre-Qin China played similar core roles in maintaining social order and strengthening cultural identity. The study reveals that African ancestor worship exhibited a stronger pragmatic tendency and practical interactivity, while pre-Qin Chinese ancestor worship was institutionalized and formalized into rituals earlier, becoming an important source of legitimacy for political power. This comparison not only helps to understand the commonalities of early human religious thought but also provides a new perspective for cross-cultural studies.

Keywords: Ancestor Worship, African Religion; Pre-Qin China, Comparative Study.

1. Introduction

Ancestor worship, as one of the most widespread and enduring religious phenomena in human society, has manifested in rich and diverse forms across different cultures and historical periods. In both traditional African societies and ancient China, ancestor worship constituted a core element of social culture and religious life, profoundly influencing the development trajectories of these two civilizations. This study selects Africa and pre-Qin China as comparative subjects, aiming to explore the similarities and differences in ancestor worship between these two ancient civilizations, thereby deepening our understanding of early religious concepts and practices in human society.

Although research on ancestor worship has accumulated considerable academic foundation, systematic cross-cultural comparative studies remain insufficient. Existing literature largely focuses on analyses within single cultural regions. For example, Zhang Hongjie, in **A Brief History of China**, points out that ancestor worship is a "unique characteristic" of China, rather than a universal characteristic of human civilization. [1] However, ethnographic data from Africa show that the ancestor worship of Black Africans maintains a "remarkable consistency" with that of ancient China in both "theoretical basis" and "practical manifestation." This coexistence of similarities and differences provides possibilities and value for comparative research.

In terms of research methodology, this paper employs historical comparative and documentary analysis, relying on primary sources such as oracle bone inscriptions, archaeological discoveries, and ethnographic records, combined with existing academic research findings, to systematically compare the two traditions from multiple dimensions, including belief systems, ritual practices, and social functions. Through this research, we can not only better understand the cultural logic of Africa and pre-Qin China, but also provide valuable case studies for cross-cultural research in anthropology and religious studies.

2. Comparison of Core Concepts and Belief Systems

2.1. Concepts of the Soul and the Afterlife

In ancestor worship in Africa and pre-Qin China, there are both significant differences and striking similarities in the understanding of the soul and the afterlife. African traditional beliefs generally hold that the soul continues to exist after death and intervenes in the world of the living in some way. For example, the Bamileke people of western Cameroon believe that "the dead do not die," but rather begin a "journey of ancestorification." Death is not the end of life, but a process of transformation into an ancestral state. In Africa, various Black ethnic groups generally believe that their ancestors roamed the villages and huts of the living, existing in daily life, constantly accompanying the living, and intervening in worldly affairs.

The concept of the soul in pre-Qin China is fully reflected in the oracle bone inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty. The Shang people believed that the souls of their ancestors possessed the ability to intervene in human affairs, "influencing wind and rain, agricultural production, and the outcome of wars, directly harming the Shang king, queen, princes, and other nobles related to the royal family." The power of the former kings was almost "comparable to the Heavenly God." [2] The Zhou Dynasty further developed the concept of "remembering the ancestors and honoring the deceased," emphasizing reverence and remembrance for ancestors.

A key difference between the two concepts of the soul lies in their imagination of the afterlife. The African belief in the soul world is closer to the real world, with ancestors directly existing around the living. In contrast, during the pre-Qin period in China, especially in the Zhou Dynasty, a more complex concept of the underworld emerged. [3] For example, the *Classic of Poetry* mentions "the Yellow Springs," indicating that people at that time believed their ancestors resided in a specific realm separate from the real world.

2.2. The Role and Status of Ancestors

Both traditions attribute to ancestors a dual function of protection and punishment, but their specific manifestations differ.

In Africa, ancestors are primarily seen as guardians of the family and maintainers of community order. They "watch over the homeland, protect family and tribal members, directly concern themselves with and intervene in all matters concerning family and property, ensuring abundant harvests, thriving livestock, a large and prosperous population, and long life for their descendants." [4] Simultaneously, ancestors can also be angry and destructive, "sending natural disasters and man-made calamities to punish their descendants." [5] This punishment usually stems from the neglect or misconduct of descendants towards their ancestors, such as failing to provide sufficient offerings or neglecting sacrificial rituals.

In pre-Qin China, the role of ancestors became more politicized and institutionalized. Ancestor worship during the Shang and Zhou dynasties was closely intertwined with the state power structure. Ancestors were not only guardians of the family but also sources of legitimacy for the king. Oracle bone inscriptions show that Shang kings frequently consulted their ancestors through divination on matters of state such as war, agriculture, and weather. Former kings were considered worthy to "serve the Emperor," meaning to go to the imperial court and assist God in carrying out commands. This concept provided sacred legitimacy for the Shang kings' rule.

2.3. The Nature of the Ancestor-Human Relationship

Interesting differences exist between the nature of the ancestor-human relationship in Africa and pre-Qin China. In Africa, the ancestor-human relationship is more direct and interactive. A reciprocal exchange exists between the living and their ancestors: the living provide offerings and respect, while the ancestors provide protection and blessings. If ancestors do not receive proper worship and offerings, they may become resentful and harm the living. This relationship has a clear pragmatic character and practical purpose.

In pre-Qin China, the ancestor-human relationship was more institutionalized and hierarchical. Ancestor worship was not a simple reciprocal exchange but a political and moral obligation. Especially for rulers, ancestor worship was a confirmation and demonstration of the legitimacy of their power succession. The **Book of Rites** explicitly states: "Of the ways to govern people, none is more urgent than rites; of the five classics of rites, none is more important than sacrifice." [6] Sacrifice was considered an important means of maintaining social order and political stability.

Furthermore, the two also differ in the "moral attributes" of their ancestors. While African ancestors might punish the moral transgressions of their descendants, they were more concerned with whether the sacrificial rituals themselves were performed appropriately. In contrast, ancestor worship in pre-Qin China was more closely linked to the moral system, with ancestors focusing more on the moral conduct and political achievements of their descendants. The *Book of Songs* (specifically the *Daya* section, "King Wen") contains the line, "Never forget your ancestors, cultivate their virtues," emphasizing that commemorating ancestors should be combined with cultivating virtue [7].

3. Comparison of Ritual Practices and Social Functions

3.1. Ritual Forms and Media

Ancestor worship in Africa and pre-Qin China shares similarities in ritual practices, but also exhibits significant differences. In the tradition of the Bamilik people of Africa, the head plays a central role in ancestor worship rituals. In funeral rites, "the head of the deceased is removed from the skeleton and placed in a water jar (a type of earthenware jar)." This ritual, known as the "skull ceremony," signifies the deceased's transformation into an ancestor and a "symbolic resurrection." [8] The head, preserved in a "skull box" or "ancestor box," becomes a symbol of the ancestor's existence and a medium for communication with descendants. Ancestor worship rituals in pre-Qin China were more systematic and complex. By the Shang and Zhou dynasties, a strict sacrificial system had been established, with detailed regulations governing the number of sacrificial animals, types of offerings, and the specifications of music and dance. Oracle bone inscriptions frequently mention "offering three small sacrificial animals and two oxen at the altar" and "offering ten oxen at the river," reflecting the standardization of sacrificial rituals. The Zhou dynasty further developed the "auspicious rites" system, dividing sacrifices into three major systems: heavenly gods, earthly deities, and human spirits, and establishing sacrificial systems such as "five sacrifices" and "seven sacrifices" [9].

Regarding ritual mediums, Africa often uses physical objects such as masks, statues, and skulls to represent ancestors. For example, in the Egungun ceremony in Benin, participants wear special costumes, considered "the embodiment of the souls of their deceased ancestors." In contrast, pre-Qin China used more symbolic objects such as bronze ritual vessels and jade artifacts as ritual mediums. These objects were not only tools for communicating with ancestors but also symbols of power and status.

3.2. Ritual Venues and Social Participation

The choice of ritual venues and the degree of social participation also reflect the characteristics of ancestor worship in both regions. African ancestor worship ceremonies are mostly conducted at the family or community level, exhibiting strong openness and participatory nature. The Bamilik skull ceremony includes dances and collective celebrations, involving the entire community. Ancestor boxes are typically placed in the family home for daily communication and consultation with ancestors.

Ancestor worship in pre-Qin China was more prevalent in ancestral temples and cemeteries, exhibiting clear institutionalization and hierarchical characteristics. During the Shang and Zhou dynasties, sacrificial activities were an important part of national political life, with only individuals of specific ranks able to participate in and lead sacrificial ceremonies. The **Book of Rites** explicitly stipulates: "The Son of Heaven has seven ancestral temples, feudal lords five, high officials three, lower officials one, and commoners sacrifice in their sleeping quarters." Strict distinctions were made between different social classes in terms of sacrificial locations and scale.

3.3. Social Functions and Political Significance

Ancestor worship in Africa and pre-Qin China shares similarities in social functions and political significance, but

also has significant differences. Both traditions serve to strengthen social cohesion, transmit cultural values, and maintain social order. However, in terms of the depth and breadth of its political significance, ancestor worship in pre-Qin China was clearly more developed and systematic.

In traditional African societies, ancestor worship primarily served as a tool for maintaining family and tribal identity. Through shared ancestor worship, family and tribal members strengthened their bonds and sense of belonging. Ancestors were also guardians of moral norms and traditional knowledge, guiding the behavior of future generations through ancestral precepts and taboos. The traditions of the Bamilik tribe were considered "a sacred, immortal law," the "summation of the tribe's wisdom [10]."

In pre-Qin China, ancestor worship, besides its function of family identity, more importantly served a political integration function. The Shang and Zhou dynasties constructed a complete discourse system of legitimacy through ancestor worship. Shang kings, by offering sacrifices to their ancestors and claiming to be "guests of the Emperor," linked their rule to the Mandate of Heaven. The Zhou dynasty further developed the concept of "matching ancestors with Heaven," closely integrating ancestor worship with the concept of the Mandate of Heaven, providing a legitimacy explanation for the Zhou dynasty's association with the Shang.

Furthermore, ancestor worship in pre-Qin China was also closely integrated with the patriarchal clan system, forming a complete social organizational structure. Through the distinction between major and minor lineages and the establishment of the Zhaomu system, the Zhou Dynasty transformed blood relations into a political hierarchy, with ancestor worship becoming a crucial tool for maintaining this system. [11] While ancestor worship in traditional African societies also emphasized age authority and traditional values, it did not develop such a complex and politicized patriarchal system.

4. Historical Evolution and Modern Adaptation Comparison

4.1. Evolutionary Paths of Traditional Societies

Ancestor worship in Africa and pre-Qin China exhibited different evolutionary paths in their respective historical developments. In Africa, ancestor worship maintained strong continuity and stability. Despite the influence of the introduction of Islam and Christianity, traditional ancestor worship was preserved in many regions, even merging with foreign religions to form new forms. For example, "King Assa of Ethiopia established Eastern Orthodoxy in the 4th century and made it the state religion," but traditional beliefs persisted.

Ancestor worship in pre-Qin China underwent a more pronounced process of institutionalization and rationalization. From the ancestor worship with strong shamanistic elements in the Shang Dynasty to its gradual formalization and moralization in the Western Zhou Dynasty, the form and function of ancestor worship underwent significant changes. The Zhou Dynasty emphasized "matching virtue with Heaven," using the moral achievements of ancestors as a crucial basis for ancestral worship, thus weakening the mystical elements of ancestor worship in the Shang Dynasty.

Another important difference lies in the degree of written records and institutionalization. In pre-Qin China, the existence of writing systems such as oracle bone inscriptions and bronze inscriptions allowed for the systematic recording

and transmission of ancestral worship rituals, rules, and concepts. Zhou Dynasty documents such as the **Zhou Li** and **Yi Li** further detailed the ritual system for ancestor worship. In contrast, ancestor worship in traditional African societies relied primarily on oral traditions and ritual practices for transmission, lacking systematic written records, thus exhibiting greater fluidity and variability.

4.2. Challenges and Adaptations in Modern Society

In the modern era, both African and Chinese traditional ancestor worship face the challenges of modernization and globalization, but their adaptation methods and outcomes differ. In Africa, ancestor worship demonstrates strong adaptability and resilience. Many African communities still maintain traditional ancestor worship practices; for example, the skull ritual of the Bamilik people in Cameroon continues. [12] Simultaneously, ancestor worship has also merged with foreign religions such as Christianity, forming new forms. For example, "in order to become more grounded in Africa, Catholicism has adopted an Africanization approach, associating its rituals and clergy with traditional African culture." In China, traditional ancestor worship has undergone a more tortuous modern transformation. Due to revolutionary movements and modernization since modern times, traditional ancestor worship has been severely impacted. However, as a deep-seated cultural structure, ancestor worship continues to exist in various forms, such as the customs of tomb sweeping during Qingming Festival and ancestor worship during the Spring Festival, which are still widely practiced among the people. In recent years, there has even been a certain degree of ancestor worship revival, especially in rural areas.

5. Conclusion

This study, through a systematic comparison of ancestor worship in Africa and pre-Qin China, reveals the similarities and differences between the two in terms of core concepts, ritual practices, social functions, and historical evolution. The study finds that despite significant regional and cultural differences, ancestor worship in Africa and pre-Qin China played similar core roles in maintaining social order and strengthening cultural identity.

From a theoretical perspective, this study provides a new perspective for understanding early human religious thought. The similarities between ancestor worship in Africa and pre-Qin China suggest that, under certain conditions, human societies may independently develop similar religious concepts and practices. This reflects both the commonalities of human thought and reveals similar cultural solutions that may arise from specific social needs (such as maintaining social order and dealing with death anxiety).

At the same time, the differences between the two regions are equally thought-provoking. Ancestor worship in pre-Qin China was institutionalized and formalized into rituals earlier, and was more closely integrated with the political power structure, while African ancestor worship maintained a stronger practicality and real-world interaction. This difference may be related to factors such as the social organizational structure, historical development path, and ecological environment of the two regions.

This study also has certain limitations. Due to the lack of early written records in traditional African societies,

comparative research has to rely on the comparison of modern ethnographic data with ancient Chinese written records, which may result in an asymmetry in the time span. Future research could focus on in-depth comparisons of specific regions, such as comparing ancestor worship in West Africa and the Shang Dynasty in China, or explore the relationship between ancestor worship and other social variables such as economic patterns and kinship systems.

In conclusion, through the comparison of ancestor worship in Africa and pre-Qin China, we can not only better understand the cultural logic of these two ancient civilizations, but also provide valuable case studies for cross-cultural research in anthropology and religious studies. Ancestor worship, as an important way for humankind to face life and death and perpetuate culture, can be studied comparatively to help us think about the relationship between cultural diversity and human commonality in the context of globalization.

References

- [1] Zhang Hongjie: A Brief History of China, Yuelu Publishing House, 2022.
- [2] Lü Simian, Pre-Qin History, Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 2005, p.67.
- [3] Zhang Hongjie, A Brief History of China, Yuelu Publishing House, 2022.
- [4] Kuipou, R. (2015), "Le culte des crânes chez les Bamiléké de l'ouest du Cameroun", *Communications*, 97(2), 93-105. <https://doi.org/10.3917/commu.097.0093>.
- [5] He Feiyan, The Evolution of Ancestor Worship in the Pre-Qin, Qin, and Han Dynasties as Seen in Unearthed Textual Materials, Science Press, 2013, p146.
- [6] Li Xueqin (ed.), Mao Shi Zheng Yi, Beijing: Peking University Press, 1999, p78.
- [7] Gao Heng, Modern Commentary on the Book of Poetry. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 1980, p.180.
- [8] Kuipou, R. (2015), "Le culte des crânes chez les Bamiléké de l'ouest du Cameroun", *Communications*, 97(2), 93-105. <https://doi.org/10.3917/commu.097.0093>.
- [9] Zhao Li, "Western Zhou Ancestor Worship Ritual and Its Contemporary Significance" [D]. Harbin: Harbin Normal University, 2012, p.75.
- [10] Wang Wenjin (translator and interpreter), The Book of Rites: Translation and Interpretation, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2017, p. 58.
- [11] Addison, "Ancestor Worship in Africa", *Harvard Theological Review*. 1924, 17(2), pp.155-171.
- [12] Karani S., "Worship or Cult: An Analysis of Whether Ancestor Worship in Africa is Equivalent to the Biblical Understanding of Worship", *Shahidi International Journal of Theology and Religion*, 2023, 3(2), pp.21-36.