

The Ancestors

The importance of Ancestor Worship lies in the knowledge it provides us that our current existence is not "all there is."

Ifa's worldview can be thought of as the spiritual representation of Einstein's theory of relativity. Our belief in, and practices of, ancestor worship bridges the time gap that Einstein believed must exist between the past, present, and future. In Ifa, we understand that the invisible world of our deceased ancestors combines with the visible world of nature and human culture to form a single organic truth. Through ritual we bridge the relationship between the past and the present and in the process improve the future. The ritual process of ancestor worship can provide us with profound, quantifiable changes in our everyday lives. But the concept often meets with resistance.

For example, several years ago I saw a client who was in her early forties and had received her Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Chicago. She was both academically and personally interested in nontraditional forms of divination. Her personal "project" was a book on astrology from an academician's viewpoint. She was immediately attracted to the beauty and power of Ifa and within just a few short months had received her warriors (Esu, Osofi, Ogun, and Osun) and had undergone several other small initiation rites. Time and again she marveled at the connection she felt that she told me she wished to become a priestess of Yemonja/Olukun, her guardian Orisa.

During this period she came for divination frequently. With a single exception she followed all the prescribed sacrifices and offerings. The one exception was that she would not offer prayers and food to the spirit of her dead father. The first time she was called upon to do it she made no mention of her inner conflicts. But Ifa simply won't let you slide, so the necessity of ancestor worship - and of dealing with her departed father in particular - began to appear in every reading.

Finally, she exploded: "Phil, he was a no-good so-and-so; he berated me my whole life. Most of my problems have been a direct result of his unfeeling and uncaring behavior. I'll be damned if I'll offer him my love now!" I wasn't particularly shocked. Many of us have had trouble with relatives now deceased, but I did want her to understand the imperative of following the readings.

"First," I replied, "there is no point in fighting with the dead. Second, no matter what kind of an SOB your father was when he was alive, there are two facts

you have to understand: first, you wouldn't be here without him, and second, whatever he **was** he **isn't** anymore! That trip is over, those experiences simply a small addition to the experiences of previous lifetimes. now, instead of carrying all the negative energy, which impedes your growth and progress, instead of continuing to deny the love you were never allowed to express, you can make up and go forward with your live. And the way to do that is to finally tell him how much love you had for him and how much love you needed. I know it will be difficult, probably cathartic, but Ifa is saying that unless you disperse the negative energy you'll remain blocked and unfulfilled. The only way to get through that pain is by expressing the love that caused it. If you hadn't cared, hadn't loved your father, hadn't needed to be loved in return, you wouldn't feel all this rage and pain. When he died, you probably thought it was *over*. It isn't! You probably felt it was too late for anything to be done. It isn't! It's time to do it and get on with your life. It's time to be loved by him in return."

Three days later, on a Sunday morning, she called to tell me that she was **opting out**. I explained that you couldn't **opt out** of life, you could only choose to live it fully or not. But the choice was hers. Regardless of her decision, she had our love and compassion. Her experience, while extreme, is not atypical of the difficulty many of us have in coming to grips with our ancestors.

My good friend and teacher **Afolabi Epega**, like the woman above, also has his Ph.D. His is in chemistry. Afolabi is also a fifth-generation babalawo whose grandfather was perhaps the most famous babalawo in written history. The first time we discussed ancestor worship, Afolabi simply told me the following story.

I was in the midst of preparing a paper on some of the histories that comprise the sacred Odu, when I suddenly could not remember one particular story. The paper was due in just three days. In your country you might pick up the phone and call someone to find the information, but in truth, these facts were known only by my father, who lived in Lagos, and my deceased grandfather. At the time Nigeria still did not have phones in many individual homes, so contacting my father prior to presentation of my paper would be impossible. Unless I restructured my entire lecture I would have to find the missing history. So, I "called" my grandfather in our way. I used our ritual of ancestor worship to convey to him that I needed his help. The next night I awakened from a sound sleep to see my grandfather sitting on the edge of my bed. "What is the problem Faló?" he asked. I explained my situation, and he instructed me

to get a pencil and paper that I keep near my nightstand. he proceeded to give the information I had forgotten. When he was finished I expressed my love and gratitude to him, and he expressed his to me. I fell back into a deep sleep. The next morning I awoke with vague memories of the night before, but they seemed more dreamlike than real until I glanced at my nightstand and saw the writing there. Then I remembered my grandfather's visit. I was able to quickly complete my paper and give a thorough presentation to the class.

For almost 96 percent of the world's population, ritual offerings and prayers to deceased blood relatives are an integral part of everyday life. People of Eastern cultures such as the Chinese, Koreans, Indians, Japanese, and Tibetans, along with great segments of the populations of South America, Mexico, Cuba, Bali, Indonesia, Polynesia, Mongolia, the Eastern Baltics, Iceland, and New Guinea offer respect to and seek guidance from their ancestors. yet because most of us in the Western world were raised in the Jewish and Christian traditions, which proscribe ancestor worship, Western newcomers to Ifa tend to be skeptical of it. Ancestor worship fits perfectly into the Ifa devotee's integrated view of the physical and spiritual worlds.

You would imagine that everyone would be thrilled to have "proof," or a way to authenticate knowledge, of an afterlife. If you were to ask one hundred "average" Americans if they believe in life after death, one of two might say yes. Five or ten will say absolutely not. But about ninety percent will tell you, "well, I'd like to, but I really don't know." Yet when Ifa offers them a way to "know," they still resist.

Let me explain what I mean by knowledge. Knowledge is what you really know in your heart or in your gut. It's not always logical, but it is totally real and true. A mother, for example, "knows" that she loves her child. if someone or something start to hurt that child, she will instantly, automatically, and without "thinking" do anything in her power to protect it. Even if the child misbehaves, or grows up and ignores her, that love will not waver. Knowledge come from feeling and experience. It is not quantifiable. you know when you love another person; you know when you are moved by a book, music, or a sunset; you know when you feel peaceful - not because someone has listed all the good characteristics of the person you love or explained the sentence structure in the book, the mathematical precision of the music, or the light waves of the sunset, but because you experience it, you feel it. Logic has nothing to do with it. In fact, the truth of knowing something is much more powerful, accurate, and trustworthy than linear processes of "learning" or "understanding."

Ancestor worship will provide you with the knowledge that life is a continuum by enabling you to actually communicate with the energy of your departed family members and feel the profound feelings that that engenders. This may not happen in a familiar form - you may not find your grandfather sitting on the edge of your bed - but it will nonetheless be real and true. Not a product of wish fulfillment or hysteria, it will come through as irrefutable knowledge of the nonlinear side of reality.

Why are we so afraid of this knowledge? The answer, I believe, is that when we actually experience this access to other worlds, we are forced to question the very foundations and premises upon which we have built our lives - questions that invite change. And humans are naturally resistant to change.

Try to imagine the kinds of decisions you would make if you knew you would have future lives. Think about the number of short-term choices you make now. After all, if you believe that this is your only time around, then it makes sense to cram it with gratification and sensation. Growth and development would seem less important than acquisition and indulgence. The national debt, environmental destruction, pollution, the elimination of plant and animal species, fast cars and fast food - all are products of our culture's fixation on the now. But if you knew this wasn't your only time around, you would be far less likely to cut down the rain forest, use nonrenewable resources, or poison the rivers and oceans with lethal waste. Laws won't stop you from tossing a junk food bag out of your car window, but understanding that you need a healthy Earth for your own long-term survival not only might stop you from tossing the bag but would probably stop you from abusing your body with fast food in the first place.

Through ancestor worship, Ifa allows you to experience life as a continuum. And once you have, nothing will ever be the same again. The same kind of attitude changes and life changes that have affected nearly every individual who has gone through what we call a neardeath experience, who has experienced the other dimension and then been brought back, testifies to the effect of this knowledge. One does not have to die and be brought back to experience it; ancestor worship is our connection to the past and our road map to a better future.

How It Is Done

The actual ritual of ancestor worship is extremely simple. For the basic ritual all you need is a clear glass, natural water, a white candle, and the discipline to set aside thirteen minutes a day for seven consecutive days. For seven consecutive days, at the exact same time each day, you will light the candle

and offer prayers to your blood ancestors. you will call each name three times, and, after offering your love and your thanks, after offering the water for coolness and refreshment and the candle for light and energy, you may bring your problems to them. This doesn't mean asking them for a new pair of shoes or for your lover to call that night. We only ask our ancestors to intervene in serious life situation. The lost of a job, illness, the breakup of a relationship - these are the kinds of issues for which it is proper to ask their help. if no serious problems exists, then simply ask them for guidance in your life, health for you and those you love, and prosperity for your home. For example, my prayers go something like this:

Ajuba (Blessings) to all my departed ancestors. Particular blessings and thankfulness to my father, Mortimer Neimark, my father, Mortimer Neimark, my father, Mortimer Neimark. Also to my mother, Hortense Neimark, Hortense Neimark, Hortense Neimark; to my son Adam Neimark, Adam Neimark, Adam Neimark, and to all my children who did not reach term; to my grandparents John and Lillian Peters, John and Lillian Peters, John and Lillian Peters; Charles and Etta Neimark, Charles and Etta Neimark, Charles and Etta Neimark; to my great uncles Stanley Neimark, Stanley Neimark, Stanley Neimark; Arthur Peters, Arthur Peters, Arthur Peters; Norman Peters, Norman Peters, Norman Peters; to my great aunts Genevieve Neimark, Genevieve Neimark, Genevieve Neimark; and Lucy Ribback Peters, Lucy Ribback Peters, Lucy Ribback Peters; to my great-grandmother Nancy Peters, Nancy Peters, Nancy Peters, as well as all those whose names I do not know but whose blood runs through my veins. Please accept the coolness of this water so that you may be cool and comfortable. Please accept the light and energy so that you may have brightness and strength. I love and miss you presence here on Earth but gather strength and wisdom from your continued energy and guidance. May that guidance continue to open my paths and roads and the paths and roads of those I love. May you wisdom bring love and prosperity into my home.

This is simply an outline, and I think you'll find that if a lot is going on in your life, your prayers will be more complex. Also, the setting can be much more elaborate. Most priest I now put a table in one corner of a room and place as many photographs of their ancestors on it as possible. **A quick word of caution: the pictures should contain ONLY deceased relatives**; it is acceptable for you to appear in the pictures but not any other living being lest he or she join the deceased. You might place some of your ancestors' favorite items on the table, too. For example, cards for all those who played bridge

and other games, coffee for them all, along with an occasional cigar, fruit, candy, honey, or anything else I feel they might appreciate.

Be aware that when you take a specific problem to your ancestors, the solution may come in many forms. It is possible one of your ancestors will appear in your dreams and offer a suggestion or solution. Perhaps the problem will simply cease to exist for no apparent reason. So when you are asking your ancestors for help, it is important to be open and aware and to keep a pencil and paper by your bed so that when you awaken from dream, you can jot it down before it fades into the morning.

A few answers to the questions I know you will have:

- **Do I let the candle burn?**

You can, but it is not necessary. You can put the candle out after the thirteen minutes and relight it the next day.

- **Do I keep giving new water?**

No. The fresh natural water (bottled spring water, for example) should be placed on the shrine and allowed to slowly evaporate over the seven days. This symbolizes your ancestors' drinking.

- **Do I have to do it at night?**

No. You may do it any time of the day or night. But, if you start at 6:00AM, you must do it exactly 6:00AM each of the seven days. if you "blow it, " you start over.

- **Can I do it for a lesser or greater number of days?**

Within our belief system there are occasions for performing worship for three days, fourteen days, seventeen days, and twenty-one days. These are specific and highly esoteric reasons. Ninety-nine percent of the time, seven days is the correct number.

- **Do I have to have Pictures?**

No. You don't even have to have a formal shrine. All you need is the water, candle, and your prayers.

- **What happens if I'm traveling?**

If you leave during the course of the seven days, simply continue the sequence wherever you are staying. Be sure to adjust the time to when you were doing it at home. For example, if you were praying each night at 11:14PM in Chicago, you pray at 12:14AM in New York, or 9:14PM in Los Angeles. Remember, you can do it anywhere - at your friend's home, at Howard Johnson's, or at your summer cottage.

- **Can I keep a candle going all the time?**

yes. you may work with your shrine in any way you like. You can replenish the fruits and drinks and presents daily or weekly, as do most people around the

world. The formal worship, however, takes place on seven consecutive days within each month. The only exception to that would be if you had a reading from a Babalawo indicating that some other approach was necessary in order to solve a specific problem.

- **I had a friend who was as close or closer to me than my relatives. I called her "aunt". Can she be included in my worship?**

No! Only blood relatives can be worshipped this way.

Ancestor worship is one-third of the power of Ifa. It requires no initiation, no conversion, no expense. It is something that everyone can do. It is a powerful tool for making positive and discernible changes in our lives. It is equally effective in providing us with the awareness that life is not a single, accidental event but a continuing process that offers endless possibilities and pleasures.

Blessings,

Oluwo Philip Neimark

IFA FOUNDATION