

Ancestor worship by various cultures around the world.

Ancestor worship is a practice based on the belief that deceased family members have a continued existence, take an interest in the affairs of the world, and/or possess the ability to influence the fortune of the living. Many cultures attach ritual significance to the passing of loved ones, but this is not equivalent to ancestor veneration. The goal of ancestor veneration is to ensure the ancestors' continued well-being and positive disposition towards the living and sometimes to ask for special favours or assistance. The social or non-religious function of ancestor veneration is to cultivate kinship values like filial piety, family loyalty, and continuity of the family lineage. While far from universal, ancestor veneration occurs in societies with every degree of social, political, and technological complexity, and it remains an important component of various religious practices in modern times.

Description...

For most of the cultures, ancestor practices are not the same as the worship of the devas. When a person worships a Deity at a local temple, it is to ask for some favour that can be granted by the powerful Deity. Generally speaking, however, the purpose of ancestor veneration is not to ask for favors but to do one's filial duty. Some people believe that their ancestors actually need to be provided for by their descendants. Others do not believe that the ancestors are even aware of what their descendants do for them, but that the expression of filial piety is what is important. Whether or not the ancestor receives what is offered is not the issue.

Therefore, for people unfamiliar with how "ancestor worship" is actually practiced and thought of, the use of the translation "worship" can be a cause of misunderstanding and is a misnomer in many ways. In English, the word "worship" usually refers to the reverent love and devotion accorded a deity or divine being. However, in other cultures, this act of "worship" does not confer any belief that the departed ancestors have become some kind of deity. Rather the act is a way to respect, honour and look after ancestors in their afterlives as well as possibly seek their guidance for their living descendants. In this regard, many cultures and religions have similar practices. Some may visit the grave of his/her parents or other ancestors, leave flowers and pray to them in order to honour and remember them while also asking their deceased ancestors to continue to look after them. However one would not consider oneself as "worshipping" them.

It is in that sense that the translation "ancestor veneration" may convey a more accurate sense of what practitioners, such as the Chinese and other Buddhist-influenced and Confucian-influenced societies, see themselves as doing.

China



This picture was taken at a Malaysian Chinese home. On the left of the altar is a glass filled with rice. Joss sticks are stuck into it after the ancestors are invited to partake in the offering of food specially prepared for them on the Hungry Ghost festival.



Food is offered to the ancestors during the annual Hungry Ghost festival prayers. Ancestral veneration in some cultures such as Chinese, also ancestor worship, seeks to honor the deeds and memories of the deceased. This is an extension of filial piety for the ancestors, the ultimate homage to the deceased as if they are alive. Instead of prayers, joss-sticks are offered with communications and greetings to the deceased. There are eight qualities of De for a Chinese to complete his earthly duties, and filial piety is the top and foremost of those qualities. The importance of paying filial duties to parents (and elders) lies with the fact that all physical bodily aspects of one's being were created by one's parents, who continued to tend to our well being until one is on firm footings. The respect and the homage to parents, i.e. filial piety is to return this gracious deed, to them in life and after, the ultimate homage. In this regard ancestral veneration in China is a fusion of the teachings of Confucius and Laozi rather than a religious ritual.

Sacrifices are sometimes made to altars as food for the deceased. This falls under the modes of communication with the Chinese spiritual world

concepts. Some of the veneration includes visiting the deceased at their graves, making offerings to the deceased in the Qingming, Chongyang and Ghost Festivals. All three are related to paying homage to the spirits. Due to the hardships of the late 19th and 20th century China, when meat and poultry were difficult to come by, sumptuous feasts are still offered in some Asian countries as a practice to the spirits or ancestors. However in the orthodox Taoist and Buddhist rituals, only vegetarian food or fruit would suffice.

For those with deceased in the netherworld or hell elaborate or even creative offerings such as toothbrush, comb, towel, slippers, and water are provided so that the deceased will be able to have these items after they have died. Often paper versions of these objects are burned for the same purpose, even paper cars and plasma TVs. Spirit money (also called Hell Notes) is sometimes burned as an offering to ancestors as well for the afterlife. The living may regard the ancestors as "guardian angels" to them, perhaps in protecting them from serious accidents, or guiding their path in life.

Korea

In Korea, ancestor worship is referred to by the generic term jerye or jesa. Notable examples of jerye include Munmyo jerye and Jongmyo jerye, which are performed periodically each year for venerated Confucian scholars and kings of ancient times, respectively. The ceremony held on the anniversary of a family member's death is called charye.

Vietnam

Ancestor worship is one of the most unifying aspects of Vietnamese culture, as practically all Vietnamese regardless of religious denomination (Buddhist or Christian) have an ancestor altar in their home or business.

In Vietnam, traditionally people did not celebrate birthdays (before western influence) but the death anniversary of a loved one was always an important occasion. Besides an essential gathering of family members for a banquet in memory of the deceased, incense sticks are burned along with hell notes, and great platters of fruit and food are made as offerings on the ancestor altar, which usually has pictures of the deceased.

These offerings and practices are done frequently during important traditional festivals, the starting of a new business, or even when a family member needs guidance or counsel, and is a hallmark of the emphasis Vietnamese culture places on filial duty.

Europe

In most Catholic countries in Europe, November 1 (All Saints day, also known as Day of the Dead) is the day when families go to the cemeteries and light candles for their dead relatives. This is a very ancient practice, already present during the time of the Roman Empire, which was adopted by the Catholic Church early on. The official day, according to Roman Catholic church to commemorate the dead who have not attained beatific vision is November 2 (All Souls' Day).

Ireland

During Samhain in Ireland the dead were supposed to return, and food and light were left for them. Lights were left burning all night, as on Christmas Eve, and food was left outdoors for them. It was believed that food fallen on the floor should also be left, as someone needed it.

Canada and The United States



In the United States and Canada, flowers, wreaths, and grave decorations and sometimes candles, are put on graves year-round, as a way to honour the dead. Times like Easter, Christmas, Candlemas, and All Souls' Day are special days in which the relatives and friends of the deceased gather to honor them with flowers and candles. Hispanics, in particular, celebrate Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) on or around All Saints Day (Nov. 1), this being a mix of a native Mesoamerican celebration and an imported European holiday. Ofrendas (altars) are set up, with calaveras (sugar skulls), photographs of departed loved ones, marigold flowers, candles, and more. Some Americans may even have a shrine in their home dedicated to loved ones who have died, with pictures of them; and also, many roadside shrines may be seen for deceased relatives who died in car accidents or were killed on that spot.

Africa

Ancestor worship is very prevalent throughout Sub-Saharan Africa and serves as the basis of many religions. Ancestor veneration is often augmented by a belief in a supreme being, but prayers and or sacrifices are usually offered to the ancestors who may ascend to becoming minor deities

themselves. Ancestor veneration remains among many indigenous Africans despite the adoption of Christianity (as in Nigeria among the Igala) and Islam (among the different Mandé peoples and the Bamum) in much of the continent.

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