

**Finge Ancestral Practices and the Christian Faith: A Historical Study of the
*Wanabe Cult***

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Abstract

This paper examines the *Wanabe* ancestral practice in the Finge polity of Cameroon's northwest, showing how its encounter with Christian faith resulted in mutations that necessitated its revival. Underpinned by worship, veneration, and respect of the ancestors, the *Wanabe* practice enjoyed its heydays up to the time when the intrusion of Christian theology threatened its existence and relevance. Informed by existing scholarship and based on field work conducted in February 2017, it is argued that the plight of the *Wanabe* practice following its encounter with missionary Christianity hinged primarily on missionaries' negative perception of the practice, presenting it as an impediment to conversion to Christianity. Ensuing missionary efforts to repudiate this ancestral cult practice have met with indigenous repugnance that has ensured the revival and continuing importance of the culturally-entrenched belief system. The paper explores how the deeply religious beliefs and observances associated with the *Wanabe* ancestral practice posed as obstacles to the overly exclusive doctrinal conditions arrogantly and ignorantly proposed by Christian evangelizers. If the latter's ongoing efforts at adapting Christian theology to the non-Christian Finge religio-cultural background should uphold the labeling of indigenous cosmology as worthless for Christianity, then the value of religious traditions meeting each other would be missed.

Keywords: African Traditional Religion, Ancestors, *Wanabe*, Christianity, Conflict, Revival, Inculturation.

1. Introduction

The ancestral cult is a hallmark of religions across the world, and finds expression in religious beliefs, practices, and ensuing experiences (Lim 2015: 109; Townsend 1969). It is entrenched in African Traditional Religion and culture of people across Africa. The religio-cultural components of practices associated with ancestral beliefs and practices made the rituals defining features of local identity, pride, and consciousness. This firm attachment to beliefs and practices concerning ancestors and spirits of the dead is understood from the lens of African religiosity. Africans, notes Mbiti (1975), are notoriously religious.

Racial arrogance and cultural ignorance manifested by white missionaries who brought Christianity to Africa amounted to mistrust, misunderstanding, and failure to evangelize fully the societies they came in contact with. It was a problematic encounter between two faith traditions, with the African understanding of the concepts of God, ancestor veneration, divinities, and accompanying ritual practices either missed completely or arrogantly overlooked by European missionaries. This crusading and predatory mentality, fed in part by the baseless civilizing colonial agenda, yielded the perception that Christianity was superior to African religions. Opportunities for negotiation, dialogue, and engagement between the two faith traditions vanished, and African religious beliefs were named, condemned, and labeled as satanic, devilish, and demonic by Christian missionaries. Plagued by these complexities, African religious beliefs began losing their communal and absolute status, as some indigenous Christian converts were lured into distancing themselves from such beliefs. Missionaries, probably because they missed the concept of contextualization or simply due to racial arrogance, saw ancestor veneration as worship and advocated its abandonment. While some of the African Christian converts endorsed the blanket condemnation of ancestor veneration, others including non-Christians resisted such scriptural judgment of ancestral rites. This clash of Christians and ancestor veneration threatened the relevance and continuity of

beliefs and ritual practices associated with the respect of ancestors, occasioning religious conflicts in communities and disrupting lineal families.

In Cameroon's Bamenda Grassfields, a region known for its religious notoriety, the people involved in traditional religious practices to win the favour of God and ancestral spirits. Ancestral beliefs and observances are common among the Chamba, Tikar, Wedikum, and Tiv ethnic communities spread across the area (Nkwi & Warnier 1982). The Finge of the Tikar polity of Bambui conceive of their ancestors as intervening in their everyday life. Such intervention that can either enhance wellbeing or bring misfortune depends on how the Finge treat their ancestors. At the lineage level, attention to the ancestors is expressed through a practice called *Wanabe*. It is a cultural practice having a bearing on Finge religion, inheritance, remembrance, marriage, and bride wealth. Aimed at venerating and remembering the mother of the family head, the *Wanabe* practice had to do with the first born female of the man heading the family. From birth, even when the paternal grandmother is still alive, the first born female is declared *Wanabe* and remains single all her life. This first born female is named after the paternal grandmother. Through the *Wanabe*, the entire family, it is believed, maintains a bond with the ancestral spirit of the departed grandmother. Hence, the *Wanabe* receives the respect and honour reserved for paternal grandmothers. She takes the place of her father's mother in the family and cannot get marry. This ensures that these ancestors are continually pacified in order to keep them in good humour.

The *Wanabe* ancestral practice was subjected to negative Eurocentric perceptions and was brought under missionary condemnation. The repudiation, like elsewhere, reduced the influence of the practice, causing it to lose its communal status of the pre-Christian era. The encounter with Christianity also triggered mutations resulting from the labeling of beliefs and observances associated with the *Wanabe* practice as incompatible with Christian theology on idolatry and primitive grounds. The termination of the Western missionary era together with churches' recourse to inculturation in view

of Africanizing Christianity has occasioned the revival of the *Wanabe* practice in an unintended manner. Today, despite continuing tagging of *Wanabe* as worthless or antithetical to Christian faith, the practice is still alive and remains a defining feature of Finge religiosity. This paper focuses on the *Wanabe* ancestral practice, examining its pre-Christian heydays, challenges posed to it by Christian theology, and its revival and continuing relevance.

2. Analytical Framework

For many years now, academics have raised debates about the religious basis and intentions of ritual practices associated with ancestors. Observers of these rituals are sharply divided as to whether ancestors are worshiped, venerated or simply respected. The literature supporting the worship paradigm is huge, produced mostly by scholars of Western extraction. Subscribers to this school argue that beliefs and practices associated with ancestral cults constitute true worship (Addison 1924; Paterson 1928: 362; James 1956: 6; Sawyerr 1966: 33-39; Townsend 1969; Parrinder 1974: 31). These scholars are unanimous that worship is the hallmark of the ancestral cult, stressing that ancestors who are deified after their death are raised to a divine status and worshiped through ritual practices by the living. This view is a Western construct, fed probably by the ancestral deification practices of ancient Greek and Roman religiosity. Christian intrusion during the colonial era was marked by an effort to interpret, understand, and engage with the African ancestral cult from this Western academic lens. Africans were projected as worshipers of ancestors. The latter, in the thinking of these scholars, were divinely superior to God Almighty in the ritual practices Africans observe.

From the 1970s some religion scholars dismissed the worship paradigm, arguing that the African ancestral cult has as hallmark veneration (Mbiti 1975; Idowu 1973; Awolalu & Dopamu 1979; Conteh 2008; Ekeke & Chike 2010; Lubowa 2015; Lim 2015; Gratz 2016). According to Lim (2015: 110), "Ancestor veneration may convey a more accurate sense of what practitioners are actually doing than when ancestor worship is

assigned to these rituals." For him, veneration is a way to "respect, honour, and look after ancestors in their after lives, as well as to ensure their continuous good relations with living descendants." (Lim 2015: 110). In rejecting the worship school, Idowu (1973: 184) establishes a distinction between Deity, the divinities, and ancestors, noting that ancestors are not worshiped because they are "related to the living community in a way that cannot be claimed for Deity or the divinities who are definitely of a different order." Awolalu & Dopamu (1979: 275), while approving Idowu's distinction, add that "ancestors act as intermediaries between Deity or the divinities and their own children." Recent works by Lubowa (2015) and Gratz (2016) support this distinction between ancestors and the Supreme Being. In all, critics of the worship concept label it as misleading, false, and unfortunate.

The veneration concept, appropriate as it seems, intervened only when the worship paradigm had served for a long time as a defining feature of missionary Christianity in Africa. Missionaries to the continent interpreted traditional religion in terms of what Ukpabi (2011) describes as "worshipping the ancestors." Fed by such misleading interpretation, missionary evangelization frowned upon beliefs and practices associated with the ancestral cult. The cult's rescue from its false description as worship intervened late; coming only when some Christian Africans had been persuaded by this missiological thought. Christian converts who opted for dual belonging rather than complete abandonment of the ancestral cult were in the majority. Those who refused to submit fully to the repudiation of the ancestral cult as worthless tend to participate more readily in the ancestral rituals than the persuaded Christians. In the era of missionary evangelization, therefore, the *Wanabe* ancestral cult faced rejection from missionaries and some Christians. This acceptance and rejection of the overly exclusive doctrinal conditions proposed by Christian evangelizers provoked an academic debate about whether the cult of ancestors has worth for the Christian faith.

Paterson (1928: 363) acknowledges the relevance of ancestor worship to Christianity, noting the possibility of bringing it into harmony with the teaching of the Christian church. This view is corroborated by Kirwen (1987: 130) who sees the ancestral cult and traditional religion as a whole as a “legitimate interlocutor of Christianity.” He calls for the “Africanization of Christianity” with special focus on the ancestral cult given its potential to enrich Christian concepts such as reincarnation, life after death, and communion of the saints. Omorogbe (1999: 72) observes that ancestors occupy the place of saints in Christianity. In the thinking of Nyamiti (1989: 10), Christian evangelization in Africa should be sensible to the cult of ancestors, stressing that Jesus Christ is the ancestor *par excellence*. Consistent in the views of these scholars is the call for a compromise between the ancestral cult and Christianity. No wonder Mbiti (1971: 3) argues for more attention to the relationship between the gospel and traditional religion. He advocates that the church should come to a renewed understanding of the phenomenon of ancestor cult.

Other scholars consider the cult of ancestors as completely worthless to Christian faith and belief (Bediako 2000; Bae & Merwe 2008; Musekwa 2010). Though Bediako formulated what he termed “grassroots theology” intended for the bridging of evangelical gaps created by Western theologies, he postulates that the cult of ancestors is a myth, noting that ancestors are human spirits with no basis. For him, “Jesus Christ is the only real and true ancestor and Source of life for mankind, fulfilling and transcending the benefits believed to be bestowed by lineage ancestors.” (Bediako 2000: 31). Seemingly, Bediako’s postulation is a criticism on Africans for giving honour to ancestors that should only be accorded to God. Bae & Merwe (2008: 1299) straight forwardly conclude in their study that “ancestor worship is incompatible with Christian faith.” This mismatch is equally stressed by Musekwa (2010: 18) in his observation that “Any worship of a human father or grand father is idolatry, because it replaces the one True God with a human father, who is a counterfeit of our origins.” To these scholars, the ancestor cult is an

impediment to African conversion to Christianity. Their position is that the cult cannot be brought into harmony with the teachings of the Christian church, summarizing it as abominable idolatry with no resemblance with Jesus Christ and the canonized saints of the church. This view is consistent with attitudes relating to missionary Christianity in Africa. Their attitude consisted of labeling the ancestral cult as negative on the basis of which its repudiation was urged. This attack on the ancestral cult was predicated on ignorance, arrogance, unworthiness of the clergy, the colonial ideology with which missionaries identified, the exclusiveness associated with the crusading missionary mentality, and the European prejudice, which the missionary was part of (Hassan 2015: 199).

The foregoing literature is indicative that the ancestor cult is a richly debated field, with varying postulations at play. Scholars are sharply divided as to whether ancestral beliefs and practices should be termed worship or veneration. They also hold divergent views on whether the ancestor cult is a mismatch with Christian theology. These debates form a theoretical background against which an appreciation of Finge ancestral practices, particularly the *Wanabe*, can be done. This paper, using the *Wanabe* ancestral practice of the Finge as case study, attempts to add fledge to the debate by arguing that the African ancestral cult is underpinned by worship, veneration, and respect of the ancestors. This new perspective which equally recognizes the worth of ancestral practices to the Christian course in Africa is based on findings from the Finge community in Cameroon's northwest. The paper takes the cue from these studies to present the ancestral cult as a deeply religious expression hinged on entwined worship, veneration, and honour observances. The heydays, travails, and tortuous continuity and relevance of Finge ancestral practices laid bare in this study are predicated on the problematic encounter between African Traditional Religion and Christianity.

3. Origins and Pre-Christian Nature of the *Wanabe* Practice

It is impossible to explain the origins and nature of the *Wanabe* practice without some knowledge of the beliefs of the Finge people. This section is therefore a description of the origin of the Finge alongside their cosmology as a way of interpreting the logic of the genesis of the *Wanabe* practice. Finge is a vassal of the Bambui Chiefdom. The polity is seated in the Tubah Sub-Division in Cameroon's northwest. It forms part of the area referred to in ethnographic literature as the Bamenda Grassfields (Nkwi and Warnier 1982). The Finge are said to have migrated from Cameroon's north and settled among the Kom in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Prior to their arrival at Kifem in Komland, the Kom ancestor cult was a hallmark of their belief system. Nkwi & Warnier (1982) point out that Kom ancestral beliefs from whom the Finge borrowed are dependent on the premise that the dead influence the everyday activities of the living. This possibility of intertwining between the living and the dead is ensured through ancestral beliefs and ritual practices. The Kom ancestral cult is closely linked to the cosmology of the people and has a longstanding social function.

By the first quarter of the twentieth century when the nationalist tendencies of the Finge occasioned their migration from Kom to their present site, the ancestor cult had filtered through to the Finge from the Kom. This made ancestral beliefs and practices to become an intrinsic part of their cosmology. As elsewhere in the Bamenda Grassfields and Africa, Finge traditional religion centred on the belief in a Supreme Being called *Funyim* or God. Besides *Funyim*, the Finge people worshiped, venerated, and respected ancestral spirits to whom they offered prayers and sacrifices. The people believed that the Supreme Being manifested in all life and nature and provided solutions to a myriad of problems. It was supposedly the need to appropriately perform observances to *Funyim* and divinized ancestors that resulted in an aura of ancestral ritual practices performed by ritual experts. Generally, the Finge indigenous religion has many ritual practices which followers are required to perform. Beliefs and practices associated with the ancestor cult were aimed at ensuring a good relationship with Finge ancestors. The Finge

looked to the dead as protectors of the family with concern for the fortunes of their descendants. But they distinguished the ancestors from the dead, considering that there are conditions to be fulfilled by a deceased spirit to become an ancestor.

The origin and practice of *Wanabe* among the Finge in Bambui hinge on the philosophy of their existence and of life beyond the grave. Oral testimonies concerning the genesis of *Wanabe* point to the fact that the Finge migrated with it from the Tikar Fondom of Kom in about 1925. When interviewed, Fon Lobti II of Finge observed that before migrating from Kom, the Finge attached a lot of importance to ancestor veneration. He stressed that, then and even now, the Finge believed that the ancestors play an important role in the lives of the living. Another informant, Achondi Solomon, Chairman of the Finge Traditional Council, corroborated this information, claiming that the remembrance of the living dead by the living is the context from which the *Wanabe* practice emerged. Seemingly, such understanding of the origin of *Wanabe* from the context of ancestor veneration is a pointer to the fact that the succession and remembrance of the name of the ancestral spirit assures the state of existence in the afterlife. The *Wanabe* practice, as further narrated by the informants is meant for the veneration and remembrance of female ancestors, particularly the mother of the family head.

Wanabe is thus a cultural practice having a bearing on Finge religion, inheritance, remembrance, marriage, and bride wealth. Aimed at venerating and remembering the mother of the family head, the practice had to do with the first born female of the family head (*Njindau*). From birth, even when the paternal grandmother is still alive, the first born female is declared *Wanabe* and remains single all her life. This first born female is named after the paternal grandmother. Through the *Wanabe*, the entire family, it is believed, maintains a bond with the ancestral spirit of the departed grandmother. Hence, the *Wanabe* receives the respect and honour reserved for paternal grandmothers. She takes the place of her father's mother in the family and cannot get marry. Another

informant, Tofibam John, noted that there is a general belief among the Finge that by virtue of motherhood, a living mother can bless or curse an offspring. In his thinking, the *Wanabe* practice which is central to Finge religion is intended to properly venerate a departed mother in view of attracting blessings to the entire family. Failure to venerate a departed mother, according to Tofibam, can embitter the ancestral spirit and result in an aura of misfortunes. This discards the view held by some scholars that ancestor status is a male preserve (Olupona 2000: 52; Lawuyi 1988: 372).

As stressed by Joseph Nkoh, a Finge Notable, *Wanabe* is the mother-grandmother of the family who is attributed ancestor status upon her demise. The death of such females is followed by ritual ceremonies aimed at venerating and respecting these ancestors. Their death is not understood as complete separation from the family. In Nkoh's thinking, departed mothers of family heads, as ancestors, continue to participate in social relationships. It is the duty of the head of the family to properly bury his deceased mother for her to become an ancestor. This makes procreation, death and proper burial preconditions to becoming an ancestor. Rituals and rites organized around female ancestors involve the offering of sacrifices to them for the protection given to their families. In the course of the sacrifices the elderly man in the family who serves as the officiating priest names one of his female children after the departed mother. Such a female child becomes a *Wanabe* and through her the departed mother is felt to be still present, watching over the household, and directly concerned with the wellbeing of the family. "It is the *Wanabe*, says Linus Toh, "who ensures the interaction between the living and the death." For this interaction not to be ruptured, the *Wanabe* remains single throughout her life. In this way, female ancestors are remembered almost forever in families all over Finge. Female ancestors play an intercessory role between their living children and the Supreme Being. The foundation of the *Wanabe* ancestor cult is the belief that departed females have a spiritual status that empowers them to promote fruitful interaction between the physical and metaphysical worlds. When interviewed on the

relevance of rites associated with the ancestral cult, John Tofibam, a Family Head (*Njindau*), said that “I know that the spirit of my dead mother can do harm and good to the living, and I always sacrifice fowls to her spirit, so that I may not fall sick, and ask her for good fortune.” This was done by each family among the Finge as it was supposed to be under the direct protection of its ancestors.

Without doubt, the worship, veneration, and respect of female ancestors through propitiation stood in the heart of Finge cosmology. The *Wanabe* ancestral practice hinged on features of Finge Traditional Religion, namely, belief in the Supreme Being (*Funyim*) and the intercessory role of ancestors, ritual acts aimed at winning the favour of *Funyim* and ancestors, and a social group bound broadly together by these cosmological elements. *Wanabe* helped in keeping members of the various lineages (families) in Finge in harmony with their ancestral spirits. During the pre-Christian era when traditional religion was the only faith tradition in the area, belief in *Wanabe* was communal and absolute, with everybody adhering to observances associated with the ritual. Without exception, the Finges feared, catered for, and worshiped their female ancestors with courteousness. In every family, there was always a female member with *Wanabe* status and who was not allowed to marry. The intrusion of Christianity from the 1940s resulted in a problematic encounter between Finge Indigenous Religion and Christian theology. This encounter was harmful to the *Wanabe* ancestral practice as detailed in the next section.

4. Christianity Encounters the *Wanabe* Ancestral Practice

Christianity reached the Finge country in the 1940s at a time when missionaries strongly adhered to the mentality that compromise with heathen rituals was unthinkable. Missionary evangelization among the Finge led to the heavy presence of mainstream Christian denominations such as Catholic, Baptist, and Presbyterian. The conversion of many Finge people to Christianity by clerics caused the polity's Christian landscape to be dauntingly diverse. This was how the Christian gospel encountered Finge traditional religion, particularly ancestral beliefs and practices. It was not a good encounter given

that it occurred on the heels of missionary evangelization's blanket frowning upon all expressions of traditional African religiosity and spirituality.

The era of missionary Christianity in Finge was characterized by efforts at repudiating ancestral beliefs and practices as incompatible with Christian faith and belief. All the beliefs and observances associated with the *Wanabe* ancestral cult were condemned by missionaries deployed by the Basel Mission, Cameroon Baptist Mission, and Mill Hill Missionary Society. As noted by Joseph Nkoh, the notoriety of the missionaries in wanting to eradicate the *Wanabe* practice which they did not even bother to grasp was known to all. As the Finge were converting to Christianity under the influence of such proselytism, their ancestral beliefs began to suffer. The communal and absolute status of the pre-Christian era enjoyed by *Wanabe* began to fade. Some Finge converts to Christianity approved the missionary labeling of the practice as idolatry and even tried to distance themselves from all expressions of the ancestral cult. Church attendance, Bible reading, and prayer became frequent among Christian Finges who were in the majority. The popularity, communality, and absoluteness of the *Wanabe* cult were in crisis. Some Christian Finges stopped observing the ritual, allowing the *Wanabe* in their families to marry.

It follows from the foregoing that there are three distinguishable groups among the Finges depending on how they relate to their female ancestors. There are Christians who were completely persuaded by missionary proposition. Such faithful turned their backs to the ritual, refusing to yield to pressure from their family members. For such Christians, the ancestral cult is idolatry, with no possibility of elements of it to be integrated into Christian cosmology. The *Wanabe* cult came to be seen by such Christians as diabolic, with the potential to destroy a good relationship with God. This category of Christians was alienated from their families, community, and religiosity. Their behavior represented an ethnocentric form of Christianity which accrued from the cultural ignorance and insensitivity of Christian missionaries. But other Christians, best described

as dualists, did not see their conversion as renunciation of ancestral worship. They participated in church activities while at the same time observing ancestral practices. This category of Christians thus comprised of converts who preferred to observe both Christian and Finge religiosity and spirituality. Christian theological and doctrinal strictures failed to deter such faithful from upholding their faith in female ancestors whom they considered as intercessors between them and *Funyim*. The third category comprised non-Christian Finges who resisted Christian proselytism altogether, seeing more relevance in their ancestral practices than in the Christian theology.

The presence of these three groups undoubtedly served as seed for intra and interreligious conflicts in Finge, at the heart of which was/is the *Wanabe* ancestral practice. Within Christianity, as pointed out by Reverend Daniel Achochi, Christians who totally rejected the practice reported faithful who practiced it to the missionaries. This provoked conflicts among Christians of the same family in the example of Linus Toh's family whose unity was seriously threatened in the 1980s. Although there were no physical attacks, families were disintegrated by opposing cosmologies. The tension was more evident between Christians who wanted to discard their ancestral beliefs and non-Christian Finges. Within families, the latter consistently observed rituals associated with the *Wanabe* to the dissatisfaction of Christian family members. This was a dichotomy that quite often amounted to conflicts. Non-Christian Finges called on Christians to attribute same religious value to traditional ancestral beliefs as they did with Christian faith. John Tofibam, a non-Christian Finge, puts the cohabitation problem in these words:

There is a hidden cold war between Christianity and Traditional Religion because from the beginning ancestral practices of the Finges were negatively perceived by missionaries and their ardent followers. They qualified the ancestral cult as idol worship and called for its abandonment. We had to defend these practices given that relevance of the ancestors to us.

The relation between us and such Christians are not very good (Interview with John Tofibam 2017).

The troubled cohabitation the informant points to roiled many families in Finge. This was exacerbated by the total absence of dialogue between Christians and practitioners of traditional religion. Solomon Achondi, Chairman of the Finge Traditional Council, noted how some *Wanabes* who had been named after their paternal grandmothers renounced the names of their ancestors and adopted Christian ones upon Baptism. Angeline Nouwin sees this attitude as fallout of the zealous campaign unleashed by missionaries against the *Wanabe* practice on baseless theological grounds. Clearly, the exclusive missionary mentality impacted Finge ancestral beliefs and practices. The *Wanabe* practice changed in directions that would be perplexing to Finges of the pre-Christian era. Its communal and absolute status vanished, with the practice continuing in the hands of those who objected missionary persuasion.

5. Revival and Future of *Wanabe* Ancestral Cult

The intrusion of the Christian gospel and negative attitudes notwithstanding, the *Wanabe* practice is regaining its significance in the peoples religious, ancestral, and marriage culture. This corroborates views in religious scholarship that African cosmology continues to play vital roles in communities across the continent in spite conversion to Christianity (Olupona 1990, Adebajo 1989, Abioje 2000, Mbaku 2005, Kah 2008, Betoto 2012, Banadzem 1996). The truism is that many Finges have not yet abandoned ancestor veneration. They have not left behind beliefs and practices associated with ancestors, though a few are totally opposed to it. Though the official view of mainstream churches is still to reject and attack ancestral practices, Christians still practice ancestor veneration in secret to the dissatisfaction of church leaders. Theological and doctrinal strictures of the foreign missionary era are giving way, thus permitting Christians to revert to a practice they had once rejected. The inculturation and contextualization adopted as evangelical blueprints by Catholic and Protestant churches respectively are working in

favour of ancestral practices in an unintended manner. As the churches strive to build the Christian gospel into indigenous cultures, Finges are developing positive attitudes towards their culture and cosmology, despite the churches' continuous frowning upon all expressions of the ancestral cult.

These reforms have collectively led to the revival of the *Wanabe* practice as the number of Christians who oppose it dwindles. The Chief of Finge, Fon Lobti II, ranked the *Wanabe* practice among the Finge traditional practices that have survived Western influences. He observed that the practice is still widely observed today; stressing that his first born daughter who is currently pursuing studies at the University of Bamenda is a *Wanabe* and must remain unmarried all her life. In a boosting tone, John Tofibam described the ancestral cult as an "important inheritance from his forebears." He happily narrated how his first born female, Mekese Isabelle, gained *Wanabe* status by being named after her paternal grandmother, Mekese Susan. Following the latter's demise a few years back, Mekese Isabelle in her capacity as *Wanabe* succeeded the paternal grandmother. She has accepted the reincarnation of Mekese Susan through her and Tofibam treats her as his mother. According to Tofibam, allowing Mekese Isabelle to marry will be looked at as selling his own mother.

Suffice it to mention that the royal and Tofibam families where the *Wanabe* practice is still openly observed are not isolated cases. They represent a tip of the iceberg of the evidence relating to the persistence and continuing significance of the *Wanabe* practice. The practice is so entrenched that external forces have been unable to totally dismantle. Without doubt, and as the informants concur, there are many Finge people who still hold the *Wanabe* practice with great regard. The disappearance and secret observance of this practice are not even predicted by the Finge we interviewed. It is intertwined with the worldview and culture of the people which stand as foundations for its persistence. As this ancestral practice continues to trouble the mainstream churches, Christian Finges are increasingly seeking ancestors' mediation whenever they are faced with problems. This

is reviving the practice, with predictions that it might regain its communal status of the pre-Christian era. Presently, dualism and syncretism are common among Christian Finges, with some completely reverting to traditional ancestral practices.

Regaining the pre-Christian status seems unfeasible given the surge in Pentecostal churches. Pentecostalism came to Finge in the 1970s, but only expanded substantially from the nineties on, following the liberalization policy adopted by the Cameroon Government. While the mainstream churches have failed to replace ancestral practices with Christian theologically accepted functional substitutes, Pentecostal churches, namely, Full Gospel Mission, Apostolic Church, Winners Chapel, among others are labeling the ancestral cult as idolatry. They have called for its complete eradication, claiming that there are biblically approved functional substitutes. Pentecostal clerical leaders are aggressive in finding Christian replacements for ancestral beliefs and observances. They claim to depend upon scripture and the Holy Spirit for guidance.

This is challenging the ongoing revival of the *Wanabe* practice as Pentecostal Finges who are in the minority are repudiating the practice as a mismatch with Christian faith. As Achondi Solomon narrated, there is complicity between some Pentecostal family heads and the *Wanabe* in their families to undermine the practice. He gave an account of a family head (whose name he conceals) who recently terminated the *Wanabe* status of his first female born by allowing her to get marry to a wealthy man. This family head, claims Achondi, was pushed into disregarding the practice by the influence of Pentecostal preachers. The informant attributed the *Wanabe's* attitude to upbringing in the South West Region of the country where her Pentecostalization resulted in the acquisition of a Christian cosmology that is in complete variance with that of the Finge worldview. Simon Awonti, a Pentecostal Finge strongly holds the view that "a true born again Christian should discard ancestral beliefs." Other Pentecostal informants subscribe to this view, unanimously claiming that the *Wanabe* ancestral practice is unacceptable by biblical

standards. The spiritual and cultural needs met by this practice are either missed or simply overlooked by these Pentecostals.

Clearly, Pentecostals and mainstream Christians alike continue to have a negative perception about ancestral beliefs. They have failed to adapt to the local Finge context, persisting in the attitude of importing and propagating a gospel embedded in Western culture. From a predictive perspective, the future of *Wanabe* is bright, but its relationship with the Christian faith will worsen if churches do not engage in proper contextualization. There is a possibility of making Finge cosmology in general and ancestral practices in particular the reference of Christianity. Religion scholars such as Bediako (1992), Mbiti (1971), Idowu (1973), Kirwen (1987), attest that the African ancestral cult can be integrated into Christianity. For them the Christian gospel has an ancestral dimension to which the African beliefs and practices associated with ancestors can be made to slot. Frida Fonkwin, a Christian Finge, suggests that clergymen should be invited to bless sacrifices and offerings made in honour of and as a symbol of worship and veneration of ancestors. This may serve as contact point between the traditional and Christian religions considering that both faiths acknowledge the existence of humans after death. But Afeke and Verster (2004: 59) have called for the implementation of a theology to “inform Africans that the practice of venerating ancestors as if they have influence on people on earth and are acting as mediators is against God’s commandment.”

As the Christian faith grapples with the issue of ancestral veneration in Finge, it is time to develop a theology that pays attention to the “Fingization” of Christianity. This, to borrow from Kirwen (1987: 131), has the potential to produce a “new synthesis combining the best and most authentic elements of both African and Christian theologies.” This can roll away negative perceptions and the labeling of the *Wanabe* practice as idolatry and heathen. Christian clerical leaders and their faithful need to be conscious of the stark reality that the religious configuration of Finge is pluralist. Christian clergy, whether or not they have a good grasp of the nature and intent of ancestral veneration, need to be

accommodating and friendly towards those who do not share the same beliefs with them. I have suggested elsewhere that it is time for Christians to “belief and practice their faith in a manner capable of enhancing a culture of pluralism...” (Lang 2014: 276). This requires Christian awareness of traditional religion which can trigger inclusive and plural behavioural patterns among Christians.

6. Conclusion

The *Wanabe* ancestral practice among the Finge in Cameroon’s northwest was/is predicated in the deep-rooted belief that female ancestors play vital roles in the lives of the living. Informed by Finge worldview, the practice whose expression was characterized by prayer, sacrifice, and other ritual observances was an essential part of communal Finge religiosity before the contact with Christianity. The heydays of the practice were during the pre-Christian era when rituals and offerings served as modes of worship, veneration, and respect of female ancestors. The intrusion of Christianity pluralized Finge religious landscape, with successive missionaries condemning the *Wanabe* practice and requiring its complete abandonment. While a few Christian Finges who were persuaded by missionary mentality abandoned the practice, the great majority chose to be dualists, practicing both Christianity and traditional religion. Non-Christians resisted Christian proselytism altogether as they saw Christianity as a disruptive force. Missionaries and their ardent converts on their part saw the *Wanabe* practice as an impediment to the Christian course in Finge. As the condemnation of Finge ancestral practices by Christians and their clergy persists to this day, the revival of ancestral ritual practices is gaining intensity. This is evidence that the ancestral practice that is central to Finge religiosity carries with it more than one hundred years of a people in search of God.

The basic equality of the various existing religions stressed by religion scholars is denied Fing Traditional Religion. This is hinged on persistent ignorance, prejudice, and passion expressed by the Christian clergy in Finge, a situation that can be likened to the rest of Africa. These constraints are harmful to the *Wanabe* ancestral practice, to

Christianity, and to the dialogue and engagement expected from both faiths. It is time for the Christian clergy in Finge, Pentecostals specifically, to recognize and respect the right to freedom of religious expression enshrined in the constitution of Cameroon and international charters. Such recognition should pave the way for dialogue and engagement between Christianity and traditional religion which is so far overlooked in ongoing interreligious circles. It is disturbing that such a practice through which thousands of Finges connect with their ancestors and the Supreme Being should still be a subject of what Mbuy (2012: 183) describes as “strange and sweeping denunciations...from some African clerics and academics.” In such a plural religious landscape and given existing religious freedom and equality constitutional provisions, the ongoing legitimate resurgence of the ancestral cult requires the Christian clergy to treat traditional religion in all its ramifications with great respect and esteem. This might be relevant to the ongoing contextualization of the gospel message within the African context.

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