

When Ancestors Are a Problem

Paulin Batairwa Kubuya

Answers Questions about His Book

Meaning and Controversy within Chinese Ancestor Religion

Preliminary note: Fr. Prof. Dr. Paulin Batairwa Kubuya SX was professor at the Department for Religious Studies at Fu Jen Catholic University in Taipei and executive secretary of the Episcopal Commission for Interreligious and Ecumenical Dialogue of the Regional Episcopal Conference of Taiwan. On November 11, 2019 the Congolese Xaverian Father was nominated undersecretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Below, he answers questions about his book *Meaning and Controversy Within Chinese Ancestor Religion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2018, 232 pages). *Religions & Christianity in Today's China* has already published Fr. Paulin's article "Inculturation of the Church in China: The Case of Taiwan" (see *RCTC X* [2020] 1, pp. 34-43).

Fr. Paulin, from which perspective do you approach the Chinese "ancestor issue"?

The interpretation of phenomena pertaining to contacts between cultures requires a specific awareness and proper methodology. This observation is held by Nicolas Standaert, a sinologist specialized in Sino-Christian exchanges during the 16th–17th centuries. Starting from the early 1990ies, his research has been striving to unveil meanings which remain unnoticed and/or unaccounted for when a culture or a phenomenon is interpreted from one single perspective. Changing the interpretive perspective can enrich and deepen considerations held regarding a phenomenon.

In my book I focus on Chinese ancestor related praxes, specifically on the riddles they pose in the context of a hermeneutic of contacts between cultures and religions. Chinese ancestor related praxes have prompted numerous interpretations by foreign interpreters. In China, they triggered a controversy whose consequences are believed to still affect the reception and grounding of Christianity. Elsewhere, they were part of the package of the "anchored pagan practices" fought by missionaries, who nevertheless failed to eradicate them. These practices resisted in subtle ways until they were looked at in conjunction with so-called "animism" and/or "traditional religion." The aim of my book is not only to list available interpretations of Chinese ancestor practices but to ponder on them in a way that directs to the necessity of other explanations and hence broadens the hermeneutic field of the considered phenomena. This broadening is made possible thanks to a critical method, an "intrusive reading" aware of structural strings of power which condition any effort of

understanding. An “intrusive reader” is not merely content with “what is said, what is apparent,” but also by what “the apparent” is attempting to hide.

In answering the question “what did they – explorers, missionaries, scholars – say,” I try to offer a comprehensive assessment of the perceptions and interpretations foreign interpreters made of Chinese ancestor related praxes. Moreover, the act of reading intrusively enables us to situate each explanation in its original context. In this way, it sheds light on the dynamics that determined the importance of a question and conditioned the solution offered. The process shows the extent to which the act of interpreting is tributary to the context wherein it is carried out. There are no pure and completely disinterested explanations. Moreover, explanations are answers in the measure that they solve the questions of an inquirer. This being the case, the fundamental question regarding the existing hermeneutic of ancestor related praxes is “whose questions do they answer?”

Ancestor related praxes can be investigated for two different motives and with two attitudes. The first is motivated by an effort for a rational and systemic explanation of the behaviors of indigenous vis-à-vis their dead relatives. The second seeks to understand the concern of the practices. Ancestor related practices answer a concern to remain connected and in harmony with the nucleus that nurtures one’s existence. This concern is what makes of ancestor related praxes a religion indeed. The central part and role given to the ancestors in liturgy and other gestures that attracted the curiosity of the interpreters justify the title. One who looks deeply at this second form of hermeneutics will understand the reasons to let go of generic terminologies such as “ancestor worship,” “ancestor veneration,” “ancestor rites,” or even “traditional religions.”

What triggered your interest towards this subject?

As a Catholic priest engaged in interreligious dialogue in a Chinese environment I have often been asked basic and curious questions regarding my Christian faith by believers of other religions. However, the interest to research this topic emerged from a generalized perception I observed among the Taiwanese people, the context I was involved in when I initiated this research. There, it is assumed that Christians have cut ties with their ancestors. Usual questions addressed to those confessing to be Christians show curiosity toward their practice. “Do you ‘*baibai*’ 拜拜?” “Do you hold incense sticks? *Na bu na xiang* 拿不拿香?” “What about your ancestral shrine?” “Where do you keep your ancestral tablets?” These questions are not as simple as they look at first glance. I have seen the complications in which they drew the respondents. If the Protestants were to cut it short by saying no, the follow-up question would be about how could they pretend to be filial, how could they demand respect from their children and progeny, they who had dismissed and forgotten the ancestry that transmitted life to them? As for Catholics, they could hurriedly claim to have a space for their ancestors at home, or a sign in honor of the ancestors in their church, or again on “holding sticks” or “bowing,” etc. But they had immediately to clarify that they were not doing *baibai*. Those kinds of confusions and the nuances implied in the answers intrigued and allured me towards this topic. In fact, in the book, I explain how complex are those terminologies, the implied meanings and confusions surrounding words

such as *baibai* 拜拜 (worship), *shenzupai* 神祖牌 or *zuxianpaiwei* 祖先牌位 (ancestor tablet), *na xiang* 拿香 (holding incense, offering incense). I intend to shed more light on the dynamics of interpretations of those practices surrounding and related to ancestors in the Chinese context. A Catholic acknowledging holding incense sticks, and bowing and insistently explaining that she is not doing *baibai* – she is just expressing that difference which exists between *worshipping* and *respecting/venerating*.

What do you do in the book concretely?

To put it briefly, I investigate the dynamics of interpretation behind ancestor related practices across cultural boundaries. Given the Chinese context from where the inquiry started, the investigation is fundamentally on the meanings given to Chinese ways of relating to their deceased relatives. I also dwell on the contrasts of interpretations and assessments of those practices by foreign interpreters. I reconstruct the historical, sociological and ideological backgrounds wherein they emerged, and which affected the formulation of the perceptions and inquiries related to those practices. As the research assumes that any interpretation is conditioned by ideological factors of power and worldviews, I analyze in details the discrepancies between indigenous and foreign interpretations, hinting at the string of power and ideologies that might have interfered in the process of giving meaning. Lastly, I provide an additional hermeneutical framework which I expect can closely account for the motivations of practitioners of ancestor religion. What I intend by bringing this aspect is actually a conversation between two different types of hermeneutics, one that is essentially motivated by rationality, the other which is a quest for existential meaning, survival. In a nutshell, in *Meaning and Controversy within Chinese Ancestor Religion*, I ponder on a range of interpretations made of practices related to ancestors in the Chinese context. I look closely at the writings of people who attempted explanations for the ritual behaviors they were confronted with. The outcome is a conversation on the process of giving meaning in which protagonists are Western Christians and academics on the one hand and native Chinese or Taiwanese Christians and academics on the other. Moreover, given the circumstances in which the rituals occurred, I figured that there was a need for another hermeneutical framework, one capable of highlighting the consequences of the central and irreplaceable role of ancestors in those practices. In fact, from this new perspective, it appears that “religious” practices respond to the existential needs of the practitioners. In ancestor religion, well-being, wholeness, communion ... all those vital aspirations need the inclusion of ancestors, an inclusion that can be achieved through simple gestures such as lighting an incense stick, bowing, or complex and enigmatic rituals that have become objects of phenomenological inquiries. For as far as they are centered on “ancestors,” all those simple or complex rituals are the backbone of “ancestor religion” for they would be absurd without their proper reference to ancestors.

Why call it “Chinese ancestor religion” – a religion unknown thus far?

I was led to this qualification of ancestor related practices as religion as I remained unhappy and unconvinced by the long range of theoretical explanations of these practices in the Chinese context. In fact, chapters three and four expand on this question as they deal with interpretations and theories made by foreigners and corresponding answers and clarifications by locals. From the intrusive reading – which is the critical investigative methodology used in this study – I have realized and shown how the interpreters are conditioned, if not trapped within their own framework. The best they have tried to do is to ensure that the object of their observation could fit in a trending and politically “accepted” category of religion. Hence, ancestor related practices were said to be “cults,” a confirmation of “animism,” a major component of “traditional religion,” or essential to “folk religion” or “popular religion,” and other valuable arguments, which yet left me unsatisfied for several reasons. It seems to me that those theories were entangled with ideologies which prevented them from appreciating the central and essential role of ancestors in the rituals they were studying. Inquiring why interpreters were never willing to apply the concept of “religion” to those practices, I realized how restricted was their conception of religion. When religion is equated with the worship of a deity, it is hard to identify the relation between the living and the dead, which is evidenced in ancestor practices as a kind of religion. Moreover, the combination of “religion” and “ancestor” is seen as dangerous, inclined to idolatry as it tends toward making of one’s deceased relative a beneficiary of worship. No wonder one of the preoccupations of the Chinese Rites Controversy was that Chinese Christians divinized and worshipped their ancestors. “Chinese ancestor religion” wants to move away from the constrained definition of religion, by reiterating the central and essential role of the ancestors in the studied ritual practices. “Ancestor religion” is a classification found in a short essay written by religious anthropologist Pierre Diarra, in reference to religion practiced by the ancestors. I expand the idea from that sense of belonging to the part of tradition handed over, to “ancestors as central, essential elements” of that religion – a religion whose practices, rituals and worldviews become absurd if the “ancestral” element is taken away. And because of this reason, ancestor related practices will be belittled if reduced to a mere “traditional” or “popular” categorization. Popular or folk religions have many rituals that will flatten the specificity of ancestor related practices if they are put in the same sack. As for “traditional religion” – is there one religion that does not claim to be traditional? It suffices to read through the claims of New Religious Movements, as they strive to legitimize themselves by appealing to ancient sages, scriptures or memory.

Now, why Chinese? Ancestor worship is ubiquitous and appears in diversified forms throughout the cultural and religious history of China. Those practices transmit and secure values that are foundational elements of Chinese society; they open an eye to the vision of Chinese society as one founded on family encompassing the living and the dead, and whose sense of order and harmony is secured by means of the interaction between the two modalities of existing. Ancestor related practices are specific channels interconnecting

the two realms of existence, helping them overcome the separation caused by death and maintaining among them a healthy balance of mutual dependence. The practices achieve a deep religious meaning as they enable practitioners to connect and interact with a reality beyond their physical confines. Though they are living in this world, the rites connect them to the universe of the ancestors, which is a world in the present and beyond this time. They are rooted in the lived experience of practitioners, and therefore need be considered as embodied expressions of the quest for existential meaning. For practitioners, the achievement of existential meaning requires the inclusion, implication and mediation of the ancestors. When gestures in ancestor rites are analyzed from this perspective it is possible to appreciate their essence as constitutive of “ancestor religion.” This appellation renders better the fact that ancestors are indispensable players in the life of a person, of a family, of a community.

In the introduction you portray yourself as an African observer, an intrusive reader intrigued by the Chinese religious world. Was this introduction necessary or do you believe it has implications for the book?

Revealing one’s identity in the context of the hermeneutic exercise at hand in the book saves the readers from many unnecessary speculations. First of all, I cannot imagine any reason for the interest and attraction to ponder on the riddles of meaning-making surrounding ancestor related practices leaving aside my African background and my immersion in the Chinese context. What I was observing rang a bell and echoed something that needed to be re-visited. In the process, I found myself part of two universes which were about to encounter each other and possibly be of mutual enrichment. The spark leading to this research were some gestures observed during a family meal on a Chinese New Year Eve. On that occasion, I was the guest of the eldest couple of our small Christian community. Prior to the invitation, I had heard and read how Chinese valued that moment, for which all family members would gather around that specific meal. So I was very keen to partake and observe. The moment – especially the beginning of the meal – was solemn and intense. In the prayer, a specific mention was made of the ancestors – they were included not only as people remembered but also as partakers. The simple gestures of incense and toast drove me back home thousands of kilometers to Africa. I am sure my hosts did not realize the impact of their simple gestures. They had unwittingly deported me back to Africa while keeping my body present among them in Taiwan. The intuition of the existence of analogical parameters between the Chinese and African religiosity goes back to that evening. During the investigation that followed, I found many similarities in the basics of these two religious worlds: strong sense of family and kin relationships; family ties with corresponding obligations in this life and beyond, strong affirmation of life after death, the continuity of life with death creating two modalities or realms of existence, and the mutual obligation to nurture and sustain existence across the two realms of existence. The need for communication and interaction between the two modalities of living gives space to a range of diverse ritual gestures ... There is hence a common ground

of understanding and needs, which serves as a basis for the diverse manifestations (rituals, gestures) expressing piety, remembrance, veneration, etc. In my comprehension of the topic, I was persuaded of affinities – similarities and differences – discernible between these two religious worldviews. I explored other ways that would pay due attention to the specificities of the religiosity therein expressed and came to the category of “ancestor religion.” I am now convinced of this as the “most fitting” interpretative framework for Chinese ancestor related practices. Is not this indiscriminately putting an African mantle on Chinese tradition? Perhaps yes, but not exactly. Yes, in that the African background has something to say about this extrapolation – if it has to be considered so. Many explanatory examples of ancestor religion in the last chapter of the book are from Africa. They are however meant to illustrate analogical dynamics occurring in the Chinese context. No, because ancestor religion is something beyond Africa and China. Besides the Chinese part, I also investigated foreign interpretations of African ancestor related practices and their corresponding indigenous responses. The results are analogical to those of the Chinese part. There are similar judgments, appreciations, misunderstandings. The hermeneutic problem was not tied to a particular region – Africa, or China, India ... but to the core of the religiosity itself. Ancestor religion is not a particularity of Africa, or of China – it is an ancient worldwide religious phenomenon, which unfortunately is still yet to be fully and objectively studied.

Thus, once “ancestor religion” is established as a category, it can address the shortcomings in existing interpretive models, such as parameters and questions that are not raised when these practices are not considered part of a religion. For example, with “ancestor religion” one must ask questions about the relationship between ancestors and the Absolute.

What are the findings and the potential contribution of this study?

I have gathered many insights in the process of writing this book. The materials gathered cover 14 centuries and, to be well studied, a linguistic capability in Latin, French, English, Italian and Chinese was required. The greatest contribution of this research is the identification of the two types of hermeneutics surrounding ancestor related practices, the mechanisms through which they operate and how they affect the interpreter/meaning seeker. In one sense, attentiveness to the ritual gestures quenches the thirst for a rational and coherent explanation of what is being done; in the other sense, the ritual gestures reassure practical survival, sustain confidence about what happens after death, and affirm a continuation of life and community after death. And in all these, ancestors are central and essential, therefore, the category of “ancestor religion” fits.

What has remained unsaid and needs to be completed?

Meaning and Controversy is an unfinished project for it focusses on texts, records, accounts, interpretations of facts that are past. While writing the conclusion I was very much

aware that the book might kindle questions regarding the category of “ancestor religion” and an interest in hermeneutics of its presence and manifestation today. I hence projected a research on the modern phenomenon of ancestor religion in Taiwan: an exploration of the socio-cultural transitions that have impacted Taiwanese society in the last 50 years. In the preliminary fieldwork I planned to concentrate on new religious movements and intended to investigate activities through which the deceased are commemorated and kept as living members of the community. If time would allow, adopting the additional anthropological method of fieldwork could bring a comprehensive appraisal of the phenomenon and foster a better understanding of ancestor religion.