

1995

## Rethinking Ancestors in Africa

John C. McCall

*Southern Illinois University Carbondale*, [jmccall@siu.edu](mailto:jmccall@siu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/anthro\\_pubs](http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/anthro_pubs)

---

### Recommended Citation

McCall, John C. "Rethinking Ancestors in Africa." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 65, No. 2 (Jan 1995): 256-270.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Anthropology at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact [opensiuc@lib.siu.edu](mailto:opensiuc@lib.siu.edu).

## RETHINKING ANCESTORS IN AFRICA

*John C. McCall*

This article is the product of a research project assessing the importance of ancestors in the daily life of people living in Ohafia, a group of twenty-five villages in the Igbo-speaking region of Nigeria. Like many residents of rural areas of Africa, Ohafia people continue to maintain shrines to their ancestors, and ritual practices pertaining to ancestors remain an important aspect of daily life and of agricultural activities. The fact that ancestors remain a vigorous element in the lives of Ohafia people, and indeed of people in many rural communities in Africa, stands in stark contrast to the recent decline of interest in ancestors and ancestor-related practices among scholars of African culture and society. This divergence between cultural practice and scholarly interest is largely due to developments in Western scholarship quite unrelated to the importance of ancestors in the experience of African people. I will briefly outline these developments before turning to a discussion of my own findings.

Ancestors have long held an important place in anthropology. Spencer, Tylor, and Frazer all considered 'ancestor worship' to constitute the definitive mark of 'primitive religion'. Regarded as such, much attention was given to these practices, and their interpretation was central to Victorian models of the evolution of religion and the evolution of society in general. In African ethnology evolutionary concerns eventually gave way to functionalist models of African societies but ancestors remained a key component in discussions of the maintenance of jural authority, land tenure systems and segmentary social organisation. The structural-functional theory of ancestors reached its logical culmination some two decades ago with Igor Kopytoff's article 'Ancestors as elders in Africa' (1971). In it he argued that Africans did not draw significant distinctions between ancestors and living elders. According to Kopytoff, the questions of whether a person in a position of political and jural authority was dead or alive was merely a preoccupation of Western academics and that it held little relevance for the African. He attempted to support this rather startling proposition with linguistic evidence that Bantu terms used to refer to ancestors were identical to those used to denote living elders. By subsuming ritual sacrifice under the rubric of gift exchange, Kopytoff claimed, the 'supernatural' element of ancestor rites was revealed to be a spurious residue of Western analytical bias.

Kopytoff's article appeared to challenge the entire history of theory regarding ancestors at an epistemological level. After its publication his article was widely criticised. Brain (1975) and Mendonsa (1976) challenged both the relevance of his linguistic criteria and the validity of his interpretation of ritual practices. In spite of these criticisms (some of which I think were well founded), the article and the controversy surrounding it raised important issues. In particular, I think that Kopytoff's contention that Western scholars have exaggerated the 'supernatural' nature of ancestors merits serious consideration. I would suggest, however, that while his argument appears to challenge the *status quo* at a fundamental level, it is actually an extreme statement of the

structural-functional position. Among Kopytoff's critics only Uchendu (1976: 285) identified this dimension of Kopytoff's stance. 'In my view, this theory replaces "structural symbolism" with "structural realism" and, by equating the world of the descent group with the world of the ancestors, it asserts a "structural fusion" that represents the highest form of reductionism.'

Uchendu (1976: 295) observed that analyses which reduced the character of relations with ancestors to a structural role were particularly inadequate to deal with ritual practices among the Igbo people, where ancestors were 'both objects of honor and tools or agents which can be manipulated to achieve competitive goals'. Unfortunately, while Uchendu's critique advocated a practice-based approach he failed to follow through and instead moved on to discuss Igbo cosmology.<sup>1</sup> While it was clearly Kopytoff's intention to revitalise the discourse on ancestors in Africa, his argument, entrenched as it was in a functionalist view of society, could not mark a turning point. Rather, it signalled that the anthropological tradition of explaining ancestor-related practices in terms of a jural model of social organisation had reached a theoretical cul-de-sac.

A second, closely related, development contributing to the stagnation of scholarly interest in ancestors was the fact that lineage theory, with which the discourse on ancestors had been inextricably linked, was coming under increased scrutiny (Karp, 1978; Van Leynseele, 1979; Kuper, 1982a). The debate surrounding lineage analysis was summarised in Adam Kuper's article 'Lineage theory: a critical retrospect' (1982b). Kuper's argument was cogent if heavy-handed. Tracing lineage theory through its origins in Victorian kinship theory (Maine, 1861; Morgan, 1877) Kuper identified the crystallisation of lineage theory in the works of Evans-Pritchard (1940a, b, 1945, 1951) and Fortes (1945, 1949a,b, 1953). After briefly discussing the impact of Lévi-Strauss's alliance theory and Leach's transactional analysis, Kuper argued that lineage theory ultimately succumbed on the ethnographic battlefields of New Guinea. Kuper (1982b: 90) cites Strathern, who 'pursued the ideological meanings of claims that neighbors are "brothers," and revealed a complex interpretation of ideas, "a partial fusion of descent and locality ideology"' (Strathern, 1973: 95). This consideration of 'actors' models and systems' (Kuper, 1982b: 88) as dynamic ideological constructs rather than fixed structures was taken back to Africa by researchers such as Karp (1978) and Van Leynseele (1979) and proved to be as relevant in an African context as in New Guinea. For Kuper the verdict was clear. He concluded that 'the lineage model, its predecessors and its analogs, have no value for anthropological analysis' (1982b: 92). With this curt epitaph Kuper dismissed the entire species of anthropology which had framed analyses of ancestor veneration in Africa up to that time. Clearly, his representation of the structural-functional position was somewhat caricatured, particularly with regard to the works of Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (see Karp and Maynard, 1983). Nevertheless the publication of Kuper's article marked a general waning of interest in kinship studies in Africa and decline in research regarding ancestors.

My field research convinces me ancestors continue to play an important role in the daily life of many people in West Africa. It is my intention to address the problem of ancestors from a new and, I think, more productive perspective. While acknowledging the importance of ancestors in jural and

political affairs, a theory of ancestors must encompass a much broader range of experience. I contend that to understand the meaning of ancestors we must discard the boundaries of 'cult' and 'religion', which have traditionally defined the field of enquiry. Instead I will examine the experimental dimensions of living in a social milieu which includes ancestors and the relationship of that experience to the construction and reproduction of historical consciousness and identity. By doing so I hope to demonstrate the extent to which ancestor-related practices are techniques for experientially engaging with the socially constituted past, thus providing cultural mechanisms with which people can make and remake their social world. In this I am in agreement with Giddens (1976, 1979) that the social world is not a given fact—external and coercive, as in Durkheim's (1938) formulation—but is continually constituted and reconstituted through the interrelations of individuals engaged in the work of social praxis.

In Ohafia notions of ethnicity, community, paternal and maternal descent groups—the components of every individual's sense of himself or herself in relation to a multiplicity of social identities—are products of knowledge of the past. This knowledge is grounded in the lived experience of daily life in Ohafia villages and the fundamental conceptions of personhood which emerge from that experience. The categories of 'who I am' and 'who we are' are always known in relation to 'those who brought us into the world'.

My exploration of ancestors necessarily began at the locus of my own research in Ohafia. However, my findings had much broader implications pertaining to the general question of the role of ancestors in the cultures of sub-Saharan Africa. As I became established in the rural farming communities of Ohafia and involved in the daily flux of existence I came to appreciate the pervasiveness of the ancestral presence in the lives of the people. The first problem which became apparent was the complexity of the notion of an ancestor. I found that ancestors do not occupy a single 'position' in a structural sense but are embodied in a number of different ways in a wide range of activities and material culture. These multiple manifestations suggested a variety of possible identities for ancestors rather than a unified model. It was this multivalent pervasiveness, and the particular way that Ohafia people engaged with the socially constructed experience of it, that constituted an *ancestral presence* in Ohafia life,<sup>2</sup> a presence that, immanent in the landscape itself, was attested to by the shrines found at every turn and the offerings of kola and palm wine that punctuated the daily flow of life.

#### THE LANDSCAPE OF NAMES

Children begin to acquire knowledge of the ancestral presence when they accompany and assist their parents in work and social interaction. They travel to the farm, to market and to the compounds of friends and relatives. They are sent running on errands to deliver yams, to fetch water, to bid a neighbour visit, to perform countless tasks assisting in the progress of daily life and sociality. Through this participation in quotidian existence they gain an emerging sense of the cultural environment. They discover the *names of places* and in doing so learn that residential compounds are known by reference to the men

who originally cleared the bush and established the site as cultural space. They learn that access to the constantly shifting mosaic of agricultural plots which demand their labour and yield their food is reckoned by reference to the names of ancestral mothers who farmed those plots ages ago.

This sense of inhabited and embodied history which informs the ancestral presence is not a formal abstraction transmitted by didactic procedures. It is a lived reality which develops over time through everyday experience. As the child navigates this terrain, tending to the small responsibilities assigned to him or her, this landscape of names begins to take shape—the names of the dead, of those people who cleared the land, built the compounds, farmed the land and conceived the people. It is impossible to identify a particular place in the village without making reference to these names. They are simultaneously its history and its topography.

Residence in Ohafia is patrilineal and compounds are composed of large houses, occupied by senior males, surrounded by lines of smaller huts housing other family members. Typically, men's huts line one side of a path while women's huts line the other. The overall pattern is one of compact rows of contiguous structures traversed by a maze of paths. Amidst this labyrinth of domestic space are numerous shrines, some hidden, some out in the open. One type, marked by a thin *oko* tree<sup>3</sup> surrounded by stones, is found in a small clearing near the patriarch's house. The tree marks the shrine as *ezi ra alì*, the place where mothers of that compound bring their newborn children to be blessed. The rite is a simple one, performed by the eldest daughter of the paternal group. Rubbing the baby with chalk, she recites a brief blessing and places the child upon the ground. Until this rite has been performed mothers carefully avoid letting their infants touch the earth. The umbilical cord of each baby born to the compound is buried beneath the stones of the shrine.

Simple as it is, this rite embodies a fundamental relationship between individual, family and land which is the crux of personhood in Ohafia. To question whether someone was ever placed on *eti ra alì* is among the gravest of insults. Such a remark suggests that the person has no home, no family—that they are, in effect, not a person at all. *Ezi ra alì* means 'compound and land'. In this context 'compound' refers to much more than a cluster of buildings. It is the physical manifestation of the paternal group in space and time, a history of occupation in which a place comes to represent the people, past and present, who have occupied it. The rite of *ezi ra alì* is an enactment of this identification between person, paternal descent and place. It is a rite of *placement*, positioning each new child within a terrain, social, spatial and temporal. As children grow older and come to know this terrain they find that it is etched with its own history, which is their history as well. In the paternal compound in Ohafia, where generations have resided in the same place for centuries, the successive lives of those inhabitants, whose collective existence anthropologists attempt to capture in the notion of 'patrilineage', are not only inscribed upon, but are constitutive of, the habitat itself. Naming practices also reflect the sense in which each person is understood, at a fundamental level, to be a living manifestation of the cumulative force of his paternal descent. Men's and women's names consist of their given names followed by their father's name and then their grandfather's name. This is usually the extent to which

a name is given for social or legal purposes. But a person's *full* name is understood to go on and on, from father to father *ad infinitum*.<sup>4</sup>

The residential compounds are called *umudi*, 'children of the same husband'.<sup>5</sup> And these are known by the name of their common paternal ancestor. For instance, the people of the Ndi Kalu compound—literally, 'people of Kalu'—share a common ancestor named Kalu.<sup>6</sup> Among the buildings of that compound you will find the houses of Kalu's descendants. Beneath the floors of those houses the men who built them are buried. The sons of the compound use the room over the grave as a meeting place where matters of family interest are discussed. When libations are poured the ancestors invoked are the founder of the compound in which the gathering is taking place and his descendants. Before any living man may drink, a portion is poured into a small hole in the floor which is said to lead to the mouth of the founder himself.

Women are buried under the floor of their kitchen hut, which is located in the compound of their husband's family. Unlike men, who build on to their father's compound, move into abandoned quarters or found a new 'extension' near by, women are dislocated from their natal family after marriage. Women's existence in the domestic space of the compound is transitory and when a woman is buried beneath her kitchen it is often necessary to push aside the anonymous bones of other mothers who have passed before.

The system of double unilineal descent practised in Ohafia is spatialised in a binary system of land tenure. It is the patrilineage which dominates control of domestic property and activities and the matrilineage which controls access to farmland.<sup>7</sup> Hence, just as the names of male ancestors mark the social contours of the village terrain, so the names of female ancestors constitute points of reference for the distribution of the means of agricultural production.

Ancestresses are memorialised with pots called *ududu* which are kept embedded in the kitchen hearth of the eldest woman in the maternal descent group. This woman is priestess of the *ududu* and feeds them with yam and palm wine at the various points of the year, such as planting and harvest. When she performs these sacrifices—placing small amounts of food in the pots and sprinkling them with wine—she entertains the ancestral mothers to assure the well-being of their descendants. The priestess of the *ududu* knows the pots and calls each by name when she offers a sacrifice. She is the official genealogist of the maternal descent group and she is always consulted if disagreement arises over descent as it bears upon rights to productive land. Thus both the spiritual and the mundane functions of this shrine relate directly to agriculture—assuring the bountiful production and the proper distribution of agricultural land respectively. The *ududu* reside at the core of female space: the hearth of the priestess of the maternal descent group. Each time a priestess dies and is succeeded the shrine must shift its location to the hearth of the new priestess, usually in some other compound and often in another village.

Male ancestors are also memorialised with pots which are called *ifu mōn*, meaning 'spirit face'.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the *ududu*, the *ifu mōn* have a jural role. Oaths taken on the *ifu mōn* are used to settle disputes and it is said that any false statement sworn at the face of one's ancestors will bring death to the

speaker. The *ifu moñ* also serve as a reminder of Ohafia's martial past. These are the shrines of great warriors of the pre-colonial era, and trophy skulls are displayed near the pots as a vivid reminder of the prowess of the ancestral fathers. The *ifu moñ* are located in small structures set aside for the purpose. The pots of the senior patrilineage are kept in or near the main meeting house (*obu*) used by the male elders. The groupings of paternal compounds around a common meeting house are known as *ọnu ọgo*, and they carry the names of ancestors even more remote in history. The term *ọgo* refers to the public commons in front of the meeting house. The term *ọnu* means 'mouth' or 'doorway'. Hence *ọnu ọgo* refers to the fact that this mid-ranking structure of village organisation stands on the threshold between the domestic space of the *umudi* and the public space of the *ọgo*.

*Ọnu ọgo* are grouped into larger divisions called *isi ọgo* or 'head ọgo'.

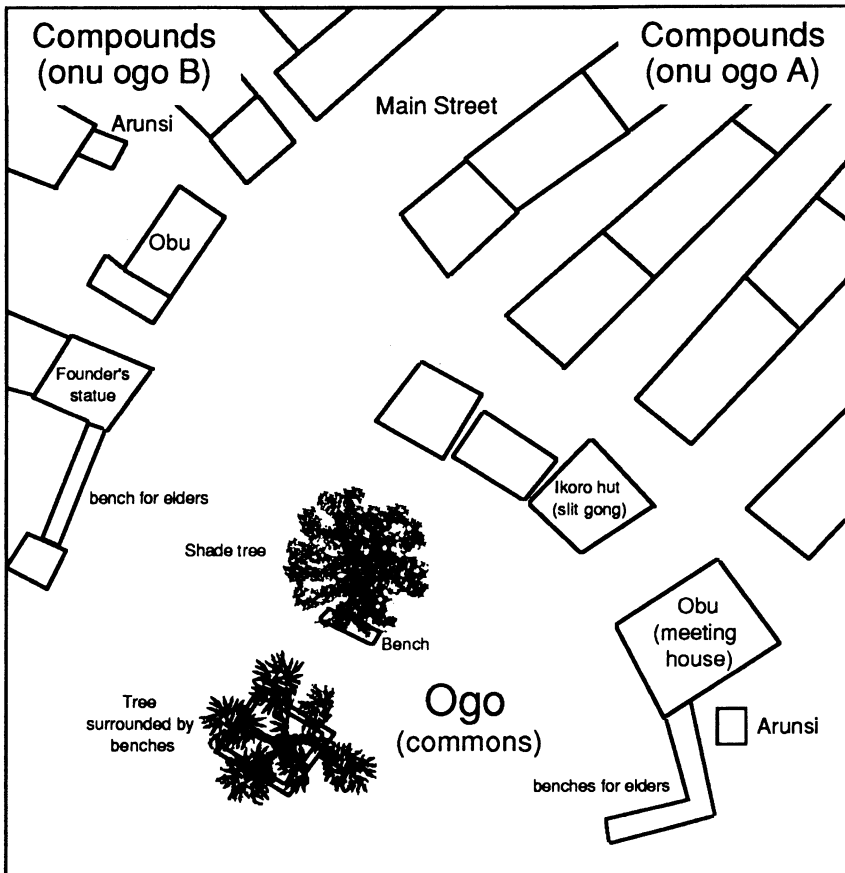


FIG. 1 A public commons (*ọgo*) shared by a village section (*isi ọgo*). Two meeting houses (*obu*) with shrines (*arunsi*) mark the entry from the public commons into different groupings of residential compounds (*ọnu ọgo*) which comprise the *isi ọgo*. Larger villages may have as many as four *isi ọgo*.

These are traced to the founders of the village, who are often represented by statuary in or around the *ogo*. Large villages may have as many as four of these *isi ogo*.<sup>9</sup> The term *ogo* refers to the open commons itself and, by metonymic extension, to the grouping of compounds that share the commons. In its broadest application the term *ogo* means village. The *ogo* is a public space where people meet and where dances and masquerade performances take place. It is the site at which expressive representations of kindred community and shared past are situated.

Every performance in an *ogo* is positioned in space by an oration which serves as a performative evocation of the ancestral history. Such events begin with a call and response which emphasise consensus. The orator calls the name of the *ogo*, followed by the entreaty *kwen!* which is a call to respond to the orator's pronouncement.<sup>10</sup> To this the gathered crowd replies with an affirmative *hu!* Then the village section is called by name to agree and again comes the reply: *hu!* The village is called by name, then Ohafia as a whole, and, each time, solidarity is signalled by a resounding *hu!* This oratorical device which introduces nearly every public statement or performance is an elegant expression of the concentric levels of inclusion which constitute Ohafia social identity. At major events the sweep of identity is extended to include Igbo, Nigeria and on occasion Africa. At most public events this introduction is followed by an offering of libations for ancestors. As the orator pours wine or gin on the ground the founder of the *ogo* and his successors are called upon to come and share the wine and join in the festivities. These ancestors are asked to bless their descendants with good fortune and health. In this way the names of ancestors associated with the place of performance are ceremonially linked with the unfolding situation and the ambitions of those gathered in that space. These libations recall common ancestry to the collective memory and evoke in Ohafia people an experimental realisation of their shared links of place and family.

The representation of kindred community elicited in public oration and physically embodied in the landscape of names suggests a vast kinship chart. It is an indigenous model of segmentary society in which each level of inclusion and exclusion is elicited in performance and inscribed upon the terrain by monuments to common ancestry. This indigenous Ohafia representation of social time and space is analogous in structure to the anthropological models of kinship proposed by Evans-Pritchard and Fortes. However, as critics have observed, this indigenous model is an idiom of identity rather than a charting of patterns of descent. In practice the landscape of names is a dynamic lived phenomenon and it is continually moulded and reshaped. Unlike a fixed map, it is made up of multiple representations of the past that may interact to produce many potential forms, many possible interpretations. Ohafia's history is continually constituted and reconstituted. It is a knowledge of the past which lives in the experience of the village inhabitants themselves: agents of the selective memory of history.

#### LOCI OF KNOWLEDGE, TRUTH AND POWER

The 'official' past expressed in the naming of compounds, and continually reproduced in oratory, is a history of inclusion and common descent. In



this representation the historical processes by which the community has been constructed are submerged in an overwhelming sense of commonality and kinship. However, if we return to the contours of the experiential landscape we find that detailed knowledges of these histories are associated with shrines, known as *arunsi*, which are found near the boundaries of paternal compounds, at the edge of the bush and at points where spring water emerges from the earth. The narratives associated with *arunsi* contain knowledge of migrations, social disruptions and other discontinuities of the past. Scrupulously preserved, these potentially polarising knowledges often come to light in times of crisis and social negotiation. The priests of these shrines harbour stories of the men who established the shrines to 'cool the land' and make it habitable. Unlike the official oratorical references to the ancestral founders, these are non-valorised tales of homeless men, often outcasts, who were forced to establish new homes.

Most of these stories recall the age prior to the twentieth century. In those days the men of Ohafia and other neighbouring groups were warriors and they regularly participated in martial expeditions organised by the Aro chiefs, whose centre was at Arochukwu, to the south of Ohafia. The Aro built an empire as they acquired land, slaves and booty through internecine warfare. The Ohafia, however, received few of these rewards. Their primary interest was the acquisition of human trophy heads. These heads were highly coveted because young men were required to bring heads from battle as proof of manhood and to establish clout in their age grade. Men who had taken many heads in battle were regarded as 'heroes' and enjoyed much influence in their villages. An elaborate and somewhat unstable network of peace treaties and contracts prevented Ohafia men from taking the heads of people residing in the regional groups. These included not only the villages of Ohafia and Arochukwu but also the neighbouring villages in Abam to the east, Abiriba to the north-east and Nkporo to the north-west. Ohafia people would tell me that the Ohafia man of that period maintained two faces. The outward-looking face—that which regarded the outside world—was that of a ruthless warrior whose desire for heads was paramount. The inward-looking face—that which regarded his own domain of regional and domestic affairs—was that of a negotiator, peacemaker, husband and father. These two paradoxical ideals of manhood were played out in many of the stories of Ohafia's past associated with *arunsi*. The following story is abridged from one told to me by an *arunsi* priest of Ndi Awa compound in Akanu, Ohafia.

The father of this compound was called Udumali. He was living at Nkporo and had a compatriot named Odaukwu who lived at Abiriba. The two of them were brave men who travelled here and there to cut human heads. There were times when both of them took the heads of Abiriba people. When this was discovered they were driven out of those communities, so they moved into Ohafia, Udumali at Amaekpu and Odaukwu at Elu. While there Udumali gave birth to a son, whom he named Awa Imaga, after the person with whom he lived in Amaekpu. The two men continued their head collecting and were soon driven from these villages and moved down to Ububa. But they had trouble in Ububa, and Odaukwu's wife advised her husband and Udumali to leave that place and go to the home of her family at Amuke. They moved to Amuke but soon a dispute arose between the two men. One day

they went hunting and killed seven animals. In the sharing, Odaukwu claimed that he would take the heads. Udumali also claimed the right to the heads. [Claiming the heads is a right of seniority, which in the case of two men who became established in the village at the same time would be ambiguous.] Udumali, knowing that they had come there together, decided that he could not live under Odaukwu, so he performed a ritual separation. He coiled a leaf into a cone and filled it with soup which he drank, saying, 'Two fish will not be put together on a single stick.' [A single compound cannot contain the two men.] Udumali moved to what is now Isi Ugwu. He sent his second son, Awa Imaga, to live in nearby Akanu. Before Awa Imaga left he went to a stream in Isi Ugwu called Iyinta at which there was an *arunsi*. The *arunsi* asked him to bring it out of the earth and through the water. He did so and the *arunsi* was brought here to protect the new compound of Awa in Akanu. The *arunsi* is called Nkuma Ndi Awa [stone of the descendants of Awa]. To this day the sons of this compound go to that stream in Isi Ugwu each year at planting time to offer sacrifice.

This story revolves around motifs of criminality, exile, conflict, and homelessness. The tension between the value that Ohafia culture traditionally puts on violent bravery and the potentially disruptive consequences of such violence is central. That these two headstrong men were finally able to settle their differences through a ritual act of truce (drinking from the leaf) rather than killing one another barely balances (and certainly does not 'mediate') this antisocial representation of a founding father.

A 'founder' is often a person without a home and in need of one: a person 'out of place', to paraphrase Mary Douglas. Kopytoff (1987: 18) has observed that 'African societies were so constructed that they systematically produced frontiersmen' and he cites the common theme in African history of the migration of 'the disgruntled, the victimized, the exiled, the refugees, the losers in internecine struggles, the adventurous, and the ambitious'.

That this ragged lot are the source of that most exalted category of ancestor—the 'founding father'—would seem to contradict the common observation that only those who have lived long and morally upright lives can attain the status of ancestorhood (see Uchendu, 1976: 293). My enquiries revealed that—as the above story demonstrates—it is often scandal, conflict or disaster that leads to a particular individual attaining the status of 'founding father'. This is not merely a product of the disjuncture between the present day and a past removed to quasi-mythical times. It is an on-going process which can be witnessed in the present. The following is an abridged example from my own field notes.

As I was walking from a remote compound back to the village with two friends, we left the main path to take a short cut through a large maize field adjacent to the village. As we reached the crest of a hill we came across a fresh and unmarked grave. Knowing that this was a strange place for a grave, I asked what circumstances had led to a burial in this unlikely spot. One of my companions explained that the man had lived most of his adult life in a distant city and had failed to return home periodically to share his wealth, maintain his links with his relations in the village and retain a room in his compound. While men often pursue careers in distant locations it was vital that they should return periodically to affirm their family ties and maintain a room in the compound. Membership in the paternal descent group is marked by maintenance of a personal space in the paternal compound and upon death a man should be buried under the floor of that room. Those who fail to maintain this symbolic presence are referred to as 'lost sons'. When

this particular man's body was returned to the village for burial there was no appropriate place to bury it and so he was interred in a maize field. The entire situation was scandalous and constituted a great embarrassment to his family. As this explanation was completed my other companion suddenly chimed in: 'But his son could put things right if he were to build a new compound over the grave.' It took me a moment to recognise the significance of this remark. I asked, 'Then what would that compound be called?' 'It would be named after this man', he answered, pointing at the mound of earth.

Posterity is not concerned with whether the man is buried under the floor or the floor is built over the grave. Socially constructed images of the past are complex, shifting and multi-vocal. They manifest themselves as representations of social/spatial relations as well as historical/temporal ones. The boundaries between the public knowledge of oration and the ritually obscured knowledge of the shrines are simultaneously social and topographical. This realisation is essential to an understanding of the power manifest in the shrines themselves. *Arunsi* are arbiters of truth. Oaths taken on them are bound by death. *Arunsi* can be called upon to punish thieves and wrongdoers and are said to respond quickly and ruthlessly. While I was living in Ohafia a woman was struck by lightning while she was violating the taboo prohibiting people from going to their farm when a family member has died. No one doubted that Kalu (an *arunsi* associated with lightning) had 'met' her.

The village landscape is punctuated with *arunsi*. They physically mark the passages between one kindred grouping and another and consecrate the shared space of the *ogo*. These shrines constitute loci of truth and power. Rituals and aesthetically framed performances employ such places, and the ritual objects associated with them, in strategic manipulations and reconstructions of the interstices of social relations. Thus a multiplicity of histories permeates the village environment, each with the power to evoke a cluster of relations and identities rooted the past.<sup>11</sup>

One of the most vividly elaborated expressions of a history associated with an *arunsi* in Ohafia is the *Okwankò* masquerade of the hamlet of Ndi Mba in the village of Ohafia. Performed each year during the New Yam festival, *Okwankò* involves a full day of music and dance and a series of performances by sixteen masked figures. The masquerades sing in the dialect of Abiriba, a group of villages to the north-west of Ohafia. Each mask is carried by a representative of one of the various paternal groupings said to be descended from the founder, who is believed to have migrated from Abiriba over two centuries ago. In this day-long performance the foreign origin of the compound, normally effaced by the unifying rhetoric of Ohafia clanship, is celebrated.

As with the earlier story of the *arunsi* of Ndi Awa, it is necessary to undertake a pilgrimage to the site of origin in Abiriba to offer a sacrifice before the festival takes place. As one Ohafia man put it, the yearly performance of *Okwankò* 'fills the space between Abiriba and Ohafia'.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to the rhetoric of identity which usually prevails, the performance of *Okwankò* is a celebration of alterity. It foregrounds the foreign origins of the residents of Ndi Mba in a dramatic presentation of masks which are distinct in style and form from any of the masks common to Ohafia communities. When I investigated *Okwankò* it was emphasised that the masks did not represent

*ndichin* (ancestors) or *mōn* (ancestral spirits) but that they were *arunsi*. *Arunsi* embody and focus the tremendous power which is associated with truth and with alterity. In the case of Ọkwankọ this includes the power to heal illness and cure barrenness in women. As a result the women of Ndi Mba are said to be free of barrenness, but other people can also approach the elders of the compound and request treatment by the *arunsi*. The connection between *arunsi* and ancestors is not one of direct identity, and the power of *arunsi* should not be construed as something which is attributed to ancestral spirits. However, as bearers of truth *arunsi* act as historical markers which place ancestors in an historical landscape. These shrines, masks, stones and streams are loci of power which resolve discontinuity and difference even as they celebrate it. They faithfully record the disjunctures of history which have recently come to dominate discussion of African social organisation. But the truths of *arunsi* are heard not as voices in opposition to the rhetoric of kindred community but rather as another level of complexity. The *ifu mōn* of paternal ancestors which stand as markers of shared kinship are also considered to function as *arunsi*, particularly to the extent that they are sites where oaths can be taken and absolute truth established. They serve as markers of shared kinship and also as the locus of histories which record the historical disruptions of the past. Thus they exist simultaneously as symbols of identity and symbols of alterity.

#### CONCLUSION

In summary, the structural-functional model of ancestor 'cults' as a component in a system of jural authority and land tenure appeared to reach a dead end when the theories of lineage and segmentary social organisation upon which this hypothesis depended were called into question. Ethnographic and historical research indicated a preponderance of migratory activity and a high degree of discontinuity and reorganisation in kin relations. Thus it was concluded that the models of traditional African social organisation proposed by Evans-Pritchard and Fortes were too static to be compatible with the dynamism evident in African historical processes. I have suggested that the structural-functional model of ancestor-related practices reached its epitome in Kopytoff's (1971) article 'Ancestors as elders in Africa'. I have also noted that the historical model of African social dynamics was cogently formulated by Kopytoff (1987) eight years later in his introduction to *The African Frontier*. On the basis of my own data I suggest that both the structural-functional model of social stasis and the historical model of social dynamics are reflections of indigenous modes of knowledge such as those embodied in the representations of the past found in Ohafia. In academic discourse these two models may seem to be opposed. They are taken to constitute 'schools of thought' which provide incompatible explanatory arguments. However, both these representations form an aspect of Ohafia people's lived experience of historical truth. Unlike academic discourse, which tends towards a reduction of experience to non-contradictory, essentialised and universalised truths, lived experience encompasses—indeed, even demands—multiple truths. In his essay entitled 'On ethnographic truth' Michael Jackson (1989) examines the limitations of applying universal

truth constructs to ethnographic data. He concludes with the possibility that '... truth is not binding. It is in the interstices as much as it is in the structure, in fiction as much as in fact' (1989: 187).

What may appear to be contradictory in theoretical abstraction becomes, in the richness of lived experience, parts of a complex whole. This insight is essential if we are to avoid positivistic tendencies towards reductionism. A truly non-reductionistic approach to ancestors in Africa must account for the fact that while previous theories do not contain *the* truth they do reveal glimpsed truths. In Ohafia differing representations of the past act as complementary bodies of knowledge, each with its own domain of application. Could it be that the scientific quest for the best explanation is more a product of our rhetorical practices than an 'objective' process for the construction of a scientific truth? I suggest that Ohafia's multi-faceted view of social dynamics in time and space allows for the possibility that seemingly contradictory 'paradigms' simply reflect different perspectives and that privileging one or the other for the sake of argument diminishes our understanding of the whole. The Ohafia model of knowledge represents truth as an irreducible, multi-faceted object. In Ohafia the embodied spirit which is manifest in masquerade performance is an enactment of the play of truth and illusion through which all human knowledge exists. The fact that it is a man in costume in no way diminishes the truth that it is an embodied spirit. In remarking on the irreducible quality of this knowledge proverbial wisdom advises that 'you cannot watch a masquerade from only one position'. Thus in evaluating the knowledge that our anthropological ancestors have bestowed upon us it may be appropriate to remember the wisdom inherent in the Ohafia view: that truth can be found not in the valorisation or vilification of our predecessors but in learning to retrace thoughtfully the paths that lead to where we are today.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Uchendu's model of ancestors in Igbo cosmology is indistinguishable from those produced by Igbo theologians (Ilogu, 1973; Obiego, 1984; Metuh, 1985; Okorocho, 1987). These works are devoted primarily to arguing a fundamental commonality between Christianity and Igbo traditional belief. In this view ancestors are structural intermediaries between humans and the supreme god (Chukwu). Nwoga (1984) has criticised this self-referencing body of literature of Igbo religion, arguing that the notion of 'Supreme God' was introduced to the Igbo by missionaries. He suggests that the importance of ancestors in Igbo ritual is seriously distorted by studies devoted to constructing a model of Igbo religion based on a Christian paradigm of doctrine rather than on indigenous practice.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson (1963: 28) also refers to 'ancestral presence' in some forms of African art, music and dance.

<sup>3</sup> The *oko* tree (*Pterocarpus soyauxis*) is known as *oha* in Umuahia. In the Anambra valley it is called *ora*.

<sup>4</sup> Traditionally Ohafia women retained their father's names throughout life. In recent times, however, the European practice of taking the husband's 'surname' has become common.

<sup>5</sup> In other parts of Igboland the patrilineage is called *umunna* (children of the same father) rather than *umudi* (children of the same husband). The latter is identified from the wife/mother's perspective rather than that of the children or father. In Ohafia *umunna* refers to a grouping of several related *umudi*. Ohafia's matricentric terminology may be related to the importance of maternal descent in Ohafia, a characteristic which distinguishes it from most other Igbo groups. The Ohafia term for the immediate matrilineage is *umunne* (children of the same mother). The more extensive matrilineal grouping is called *ikwu*.

<sup>6</sup> Ohafia terms for 'lineage' refer to groups of people of common descent which are concretised in terms of residential space occupied and utilised. This model differs from the anthropological notion of lineage, which invokes the image of a 'line' or 'tree' extending through time. A spatialised conceptualisation of ancestry seems to be common in African societies. Michael Jackson (1989: 10–11) observes that both Fortes and Evans-Pritchard remark on this distinction but fail to heed the epistemological implications.

<sup>7</sup> Nsugbe (1974) challenged Goody's (1961) classification of Ohafia's kinship as a system of double descent, arguing that it should be considered matrilineal. Nsugbe supported this contention by using Goody's own criteria for defining a lineage. Nsugbe's argument contained fundamental errors that I cannot review here. Suffice to say that I think Nsugbe would have been more successful had he used the Ohafia example to challenge the limitations of Goody's criteria rather than to question the classification of Ohafia kinship as double descent.

<sup>8</sup> The Ohafia term *mōñ* is cognate with the terms *mmōu*, *mmo*, *mmōnwu*, etc., in other Igbo dialects. However, in Ohafia it is used only to refer to *ancestral* spirits and not to bush spirits or other entities as are cognates in other regions. The term *ifu* is used in various contexts in Ohafia to indicate points of intersection and interaction between the world of the living and the world of the spirits. As a noun *ifu* means 'face', but it can also be used as a locative meaning 'to face'. In the context of shrines it carries both these senses. The *ifu* is the face of the spirit manifest in the material world and it is the point in space where one can face the spirit.

<sup>9</sup> In some cases the *ōnu ogo* is referred to as *ezi* (compound) while the *umudi* is called *ime ezi* (inner compound). Nigerian government literature identifies the *isi ogo* as a 'ward' or 'hamlet'. Nsugbe (1974: 40) eschews official and indigenous terms and refers to the *isi ogo* as the 'primary division', the *ōnu ogo* as the 'secondary division' and the *umudi* as the 'tertiary division'.

<sup>10</sup> *Kwen* is a contraction of the imperative *kwee-nu*.

<sup>11</sup> *Arunsi* were often points of contention for Christian converts in Ohafia. The first church in the village of Akanu was established by Scottish Presbyterians and built in a small, undisturbed area of bush near the main *ogo* where the most powerful *arunsi* in the village was situated. The *arunsi* was subsequently relocated to a more secluded place but challenges from converts continued to erupt on occasion. Local lore includes numerous stories of a hunchbacked Christian zealot who attempted to destroy various *arunsi* in Akanu. The tales of the demise of his kinsmen and his eventual descent into madness are part of another body of stories associated with *arunsi*, these clearly intended to reinforce the perception of the *arunsi*'s power of retribution. While it is difficult to generalise about the attitudes of the members of the thirty-some denominations that are active in Ohafia, *arunsi* are tolerated by most Christians and many continue to employ them to increase their success in the world.

<sup>12</sup> This concise statement of the ritual instrumentality of the *Ōkwankō* performance was made by an Ohafia indigene, Dr J. Akuma Kalu Njoku of Akanu, Ohafia. Dr Njoku is currently a professor of folklore at Western Kentucky University.

#### REFERENCES

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brain, James L. 1975. 'Ancestors as elders in Africa—further thoughts', *Africa* 41 (2), 122–33.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1938. *Rules of Sociological Method*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1940a. *The Nuer: a description of the modes of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 1940b. *The Political System of the Anuak of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan*. London School of Economics Monographs in Social Anthropology No 4, London: Lund.
- 1945. *Some Aspects of Marriage and Family among the Nuer*. Rhodes-Livingstone Paper No. 11, Lusaka: Rhodes-Livingstone Institute.
- 1951. *Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Fortes, Meyer. 1945. *The Dynamics of Clanship among the Tallensi*. London: Oxford University Press.
- 1949a. *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi*. London: Oxford University Press.

- 1949b. 'Time and social structure: an Ashanti case study', in M. Fortes (ed.), *Social Structure*, pp. 54–84. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 1953. 'The structure of unilineal descent groups', *American Anthropologist* 55 (1), 17–41.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1976. *New Rules of Sociological Method*. New York: Basic Books.
- 1979. *Central Problems in Social Theory*. New York: Basic Books.
- 1986. *The Constitution of Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Goody, Jack. 1961. 'The classification of double descent', *Current Anthropology* 2 (1): 3–25.
- Gottlieb, Alma. 1992. *Under the Kapok Tree*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press.
- Ilogu, Edmund. 1973. 'Worship in Ibo traditional religion', *Numen* (Leiden) 20 (3), 229–38.
- Jackson, Michael. 1989. *Paths toward a Clearing: radical empiricism and ethnographic inquiry*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press.
- Karp, Ivan. 1978. 'New Guinea models in the African savannah', *Africa* 48 (1), 1–16.
- Karp, Ivan, and Maynard, Kent. 1983. 'Reading *The Nuer*', *Current Anthropology* 24 (4), 481–92.
- Kopytoff, Igor. 1971. 'Ancestors as elders in Africa', *Africa* 43 (2), 129–42.
- 1987. 'Introduction', in I. Kopytoff (ed.), *The African Frontier*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press.
- Kuper, Adam. 1982a. *Wives for Cattle*. London: Routledge.
- 1982b. 'Lineage theory: a critical retrospect', *Annual Reviews of Anthropology* 11, 71–95.
- Maine, Henry S. 1861. *Ancient Law*. London: Murray.
- Mendonsa, E. L. 1976. 'Elders, office-holders and ancestors among the Sisala of northern Ghana', *Africa* 46 (1), 57–60.
- Metuh, Efeife I. 1985. *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes: the problem of interpretation*. Ibadan: Claverianum Press.
- Morgan, Lewis H. 1877. *Ancient Society*. New York: Holt.
- Nsugbe, P. O. 1974. *Ohaffia: a matrilineal Ibo people*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Nwoga, Donatus I. 1984. *The Supreme God as Stranger in Igbo Religious Thought*. Imo State: Hawk Press.
- Obiego, Cosmas O. 1984. *African Image of the Ultimate Reality: an analysis of Igbo ideas of life and death in relation to Chukwu-God*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Okorochoa, Cyril C. 1987. *The Meaning of Religious Conversion in Africa: the case of the Igbo of Nigeria*. Aldershot: Brookfield.
- Strathern, A. 1973. 'Kinship, descent and locality: some New Guinea examples', in Jack Goody (ed.), *The Character of Kinship*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- 1979. "'We are all of one father here": models of descent in the New Guinea Highlands', in L. Holy (ed.), *Segmentary Lineage Systems Reconsidered*, pp. 145–55. Queen's University Papers in Social Anthropology 4, Belfast: Department of Social Anthropology, Queen's University.
- Thompson, R.F. 1963. *African Art in Motion*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Uchendu, Victor C. 1965. *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*. New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston.
- 1976. 'Ancestorcide! Are African ancestors dead?' in W. H. Newell (ed.), *Ancestors*. Paris: Mouton.
- Van Leynseele, P. 1979. 'Les Libinza de la Ngiri'. Ph.D. thesis, University of Leiden.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The field research on which this article is based was conducted in Ohafia, Nigeria, between 1989 and 1991 and was funded by a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship, a Sigma Xi Grant-in-aid of Research and a Skomp Fellowship through the Indiana University Department of Anthropology. I have benefited from discussions of the research with Professors Paula Girshick, Michael Jackson, Michael Herzfeld and Ruth Stone. I am grateful to many people who assisted me in Ohafia. Among them, Ibe Nwosu Kalu and Joseph Agara deserve particular acknowledgement for the efforts they made on my behalf.

## ABSTRACT

Analyses of ancestor-related practices were a crucial component of structural-functional models of social organisations in Africa. In the 1970s the theories of lineage and segmentary social organisation upon which these studies depended were called into question. Ethnographic and historical research indicated a preponderance of migratory activities and a high degree of discontinuity and reorganisation in kin relations. As a result most anthropologists turned from lineage-based functional theory to historical models of social organisation. With the waning of lineage theory, studies of ancestors in Africa became a marginal issue for most scholars of African societies. Ancestor-related practices, however, continued to be important in the lives of many African people. On the basis of data from Ohafia, Nigeria, the article suggests that the structural-functional model of social structure and the historical model of social dynamics both have parallels in indigenous representations of the ancestral past. In academic discourse these two models are taken as 'schools of thought' which propound incompatible explanatory arguments. However, these apparently contradictory representations unite as an irreducible whole in the lived experience of the people of Ohafia. It is suggested that this indigenous paradigm of knowledge about the past provides valuable insights, not only into how we might productively theorise the social, but also for how we evaluate the contributions of our own intellectual ancestors.

## RÉSUMÉ

Les analyses des pratiques ancestrales ont été un constituant crucial des modèles structurels-fonctionnels d'organisation sociale en Afrique. Dans les années 70, les théories de lignage et d'organisation sociale segmentaire sur lesquelles ces études dépendaient ont été mises en question. Les recherches ethnographiques et historiques indiquaient une prépondérance d'activités migratoires et un niveau élevé de discontinuité et de réorganisation au sein des rapports familiaux. En conséquence la plupart des anthropologues se sont détournés de la théorie fonctionnelle de lignage pour préférer les modèles historiques d'organisation sociale. Avec l'érosion de la théorie de lignage, les études ancestrales en Afrique sont devenues un sujet marginal pour la plupart des érudits des sociétés africaines. Cependant, les pratiques ancestrales ont continué à être importantes dans la vie de beaucoup d'Africains. Se basant sur des données d'Ohafia, Nigeria, cet article suggère que le modèle structurel-fonctionnel de la structure sociale et le modèle historique des dynamiques sociales ont tous les deux des parallèles dans leurs représentations indigènes du passé ancestral. Au sein des discours intellectuels ces deux modèles sont perçus en tant que "des écoles de pensée" qui proposent des arguments explicatifs incompatibles. Cependant, ces arguments apparemment contradictoires s'unissent en un ensemble irréductible dans l'expérience vécue de la population d'Ohafia. Il est suggéré que ce paradigme indigène de connaissance du passé permet de mieux comprendre non seulement comment nous pourrions théoriser le social, mais aussi comment nous évaluons les contributions de nos ancêtres intellectuels.