Ancestral Influence on the Suffering of Descendants in a Japanese Cult

OBJECTIVE AND DATA

One of the anthropological preoccupations regarding ancestor worship has been to identify ancestral volition or disposition toward the living. Attempts have been made to ascertain whether ancestors in a tribe or in a society under study are benevolent, malevolent, ambivalent, indulgent, or punitive toward their descendants. A judgment on this matter appears significant or necessary primarily because it assumes the following kinds of relationship between the two generations.

First, ancestral will is responsible for an experience undergone by a descendant. If well disposed, forebears will benefit descendants and may ‘never cause disasters to befall the coming generations,’ as postulated by Hsu (1948: 241) regarding Chinese ancestors. If an ancestor is malignant, revengeful, envious, or punitive as is a Nayar ancestor (Gough 1958), then misfortune will be the inevitable outcome for the living. This logic can be reversed: if the living experience a misfortune, ancestral malignancy or wrath must be suspected.

Second, this causal relationship between ancestral volition and the experience by the living presupposes the power or authority held by ancestors over descendants. This has been extrapolated from the structural imbalance within this world between the power-holding generation (father, mother’s brother) and the deprived succeeding generation (son, sister’s son). The inevitable dilemma involved in intergenerational transmission of power may find its solution in ancestor worship as among Tallensi who believe ancestors ‘retain final authority, chiefly by virtue of the pain and misfortune they inflict on their descendants from time to time’ (Fortes 1960: 176).

Conversely, the same dilemma may result in repressed hostility, rather than ‘worship,’ toward ancestors; and this hostility may underlie a frequent attribution of illness to ancestral influence as among Okinawans (W. P. Lebra 1969). In either case, ancestral power or authority as the basis for efficacy of sanction seems unquestioned. Freedman (1966: 151) echoes this position when he sees Chinese ancestors in light of both their ‘relative ineffectiveness’ and ‘general air of benevolence.’ The implication is that Chinese ancestors are not punitive because their will is not bolstered by their power under the Chinese system of inheritance.
ANCESTRAL INFLUENCE ON THE SUFFERING OF DESCENDANTS

Third, ancestral influence is justified as a legitimate or at least natural response to the way the living are conducting themselves. A misfortune must be accepted as punishment for neglecting the welfare and wishes of an ancestor; whereas the proper attention to the needs of the ancestors will be rewarded by good fortune. Implied herein is the acknowledgment of guilt on the part of the suffering descendant. This projection of justice makes ancestral influence doubly contingent: upon the offspring’s behavior as well as upon ancestral predisposition.

The main objective of this paper is to present another case of ancestor worship where the above rationale for experiences by the living generation does not apply in any significant degree. A misfortune or suffering endured by a descendant, when attributed to ancestral influence, does not necessarily stem from an ancestor’s malevolence or wrath, or demonstrate an ancestor’s power over the sufferer, or verify the latter’s guilt. A benign, powerless ancestor may well cause trouble to an innocent descendant. What is the rationale behind this, then? I will attempt to answer this question.

The case introduced here is a Japanese cult which has been identified as the Salvation Cult in my previous papers (Lebra 1971, 1974, ip.). Founded in 1929, the Salvation Cult with its ‘headquarters’ in Tokyo commanded roughly 500 local branches scattered all over Japan, and claimed a membership of more than 170,000 as of 1970 (Shakyokenkan 1971). The doctrine of the cult is highly eclectic, accepts Buddhism, Shintō, Taoism, Confucianism, and even Christianity, and grants a legitimate supernatural status to every conceivable deity or spirit, be it a Buddha, nature deity, animal spirit, village tutelary god (ujigami), or deceased human. (For more detailed descriptions of the cult see my previous papers.)

Fieldwork was conducted during the summers of 1970 and 1971 with a primary focus upon two branches in what I will call Eastern City, central Japan, whose combined membership was estimated at around 200. This paper is based upon information obtained through interviews with the two branch leaders and fourteen members. All but two members were female – this sex distribution roughly corresponds with that of those attending branch meetings regularly – their ages ranged from thirty-eight to seventy-eight, and their occupations (active or retired) varied widely and included storekeepers, cabaret operators, schoolteachers, a maid, and a fisherwoman. Further information was added through semiparticipant observation of rituals as well as casual conversation with attendants at branch meetings. ‘Lecturers’ invited from other branches or the headquarters were another source of information.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ANCESTORS AND SUFFERING DESCENDANTS

In the course of fieldwork, it became apparent that the cult members almost without exception have undergone a variety of suffering, particularly illness and family disharmony. Like many other ‘new’ cults, the Salvation Cult finds a ready explanation for suffering in supernatural influence or in a certain relationship between the sufferer and a spirit. The responsible spirit is identified