

# SOCIOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF YORUBA BELIEF IN ANCESTORS AND ITS CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS FOR MODERN NIGERIA

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.10967544](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10967544)

## Abstract

Several works have been written on different aspects of Yoruba beliefs and practices with little attention paid to the sociological investigation of Yoruba belief in ancestors and its cultural implications for modern Nigeria. The Yorùbá traditional society is a corporate and religious society that is endowed with rich cultural values. Every religion has not faced the eschatological question of what happens to man after the present life, and the answer depends upon man's conception of the deity. The cult of ancestors is an important feature in Yoruba belief. This work is an indication that death is not the end of man. The study adopts historical and sociological approaches with Emile Durkheim's functional theory, which describes religion as a tool for social effectiveness. Findings from the research revealed that religion is the strongest element in traditional Yoruba culture which exerts great influence upon the conduct of the African people generally and Yoruba in particular. Religious practice is closely bound up with the cultural way of Yoruba life; hence religion shaped the lives of the people. It is recommended that religion should be the focal point of Yorùbá culture and governing principle of life so as to make man responsible, responsive and accountable for their Actions.

**Keywords:** Sociological Investigation, Yoruba Belief, Ancestors, Cultural Implication, Modern Nigeria.

## INTRODUCTION

This research work is sociological investigation of Yoruba belief in Ancestors and its cultural implications for modern Nigeria. The Yoruba are mostly found in the southwest of Nigeria, now divided into six states, namely Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ekiti and Ondo. There are also Yoruba people in other states of Nigeria and beyond. There are five fundamental beliefs or basic themes which Idowu has described as the structure of African religion (Idowu, 1973). These include belief in God; belief in divinities; belief in spirits; belief in ancestors; belief in mysterious powers (Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979). Olórun or Olódùmarè is the supreme deity in whom they believe and worship. He is supreme over all on earth and in heaven, acknowledged by all the divinities as the Head to whom all authority belongs and all allegiance is due and His status of supremacy is absolute. Every religion has to face the eschatological question of what happens to man after the present life, and the answer depends upon man's conception of the deity. The cult of ancestors is an important feature in African belief.

There is no doubt that Yorùbá take worship into their day to day life. Virtually all their daily activities are done with the consciousness of the ever – watching eyes of the invisible presence of the ancestors, spirits, divinities, and of course Olódùmarè. With this in mind, they conduct their deeds and affairs with one another and the environment in mutual respect and selflessness (Ogunade, 2010). Yorùbá practiced this traditional religion, before the introduction of Christianity and each community worshipped

individual deity (or deities) in accordance to its devotional needs, for instance: in Ile-Ife –Ọlójó ; Ìbàdàn- Ọkè; Ọyó - Şàngó; Ìjèbú - Agẹmọ; Èjìgbò- Ọgìyán; Ìwó- Pópó. and so on. Yorùbá people believed in ancestors. These are dead family members who turned to deities and worshipped by the family members. At community level some individuals were elevated to this status and became deified. The ancestors take an active interest in members of their descent groups, and can give them advice through dreams and trances. Anyone can pray and make offerings to a dead parent for spiritual protection, or makes an annual offering on behalf of the descent-group members, usually on the grave of its founder. In other cultures, some family members became revered when they died a good death at old age with several children and grandchildren. Besides, there is Egungun worship, which represents the “collective spirit” of ancestors. Ancestral worship is common among Yoruba, and it is a major belief in the traditional religion. The word, Egungun has become a representation of dead individual/ancestor (Ọlajubu and Ojo, 1977).

Related to beliefs in Ọrìşà and ancestors is the belief in reincarnation. Reincarnation is the belief that the dead family members come back to life, as a new child into family where they previously lived. Many Yoruba are identified through resemblance, dreams or divination as being reincarnations of particular ancestors, and are given names such as Babatunde ('father returns') or Yetunde ('mother returns'). These ancestors are invoked to help their descendants. It is painful that African values are fast deteriorating and this trend is fomenting various kinds of disintegration among Africans. The young Africans are caught in this web of confusion and crisis of identity. Despite the efforts expended to rediscover these African values, a lot are still left unsolved because new problems and challenges arise and seemingly truncating any further progress. Thus, the themes or structures of African Traditional Religion could also be summarily and diagrammatically represented below:



**Figure 1: Structures of African Religion**

## Theoretical Framework

Essay of this type is never fully predictive that can offer the certainty like other fields. For instance, physics follow the laws of motion and chemistry follows the rules of molecular reactions. But like diagnosis, a theory can anticipate what will happen or why it happened. Emile Durkheim's functional theory, which describes religion as a tool for social effectiveness was adopted as the framework for the study. The research was premised on Emile Durkheim's theory of religion. This theory is about the role of religion in the human society which is popularly known as functionalism. That is, religion has a social function or functional role to play in the society. Durkheim gives a sociological interpretation of religion as a creation of the society. He believes that it is the society which creates and uses religion as an instrument of control. Thus, he focuses his attention on the impact and contribution religion makes to the social needs of society (Dzurgba, 2002).

Durkheim observes the general relevance of religious beliefs and practices to the life of man in society. He argues that there is truth about religion which sociologists should embrace because of its continuing and universal power. This is to say that religion has function to perform in the social life of the individual and the entire society. To him, religion was a true social factor because of some considerable positive impacts it has on the individual and society. Religion functions basically to create and maintain social solidarity. He opines that religion contributes to the maintenance of order in society by creating conditions for social well-being, self-discipline, social solidarity, social cohesion and continuity of culture and knowledge. Based on a unified and unifying value system, religion contributes to the integration of the whole society and the functioning of other social institutions. Emile Durkheim believes that religion contributes to social stability and to better adaptation of the entire social system. His analysis was based on the general relevance of the religious beliefs and practices to the people's social living. He doubts the survival of any society without the existence and support of religion. This is because religion according to him, structures the course of human civilization and social life for continuing existence. Hence, religion enhances confidence and conformity to the values, norms and rules of traditional society such as among Yoruba people of Nigeria (Odudele, 2013).

The relevance of this theory to our studies is seen under the interaction between religion and society. Religion influences social behaviour, thought pattern, social values, desires, actions and character formation. Thus, there is need for maintenance of order, advancement in people welfare, self-discipline, social solidarity and cohesion among the Yoruba people of Nigeria. In other words, Yoruba belief and practices has a crucial role to play in the maintenance of their cultural values with its cultural implications for modern Nigeria. It may be difficult therefore to have an acceptable and peaceful society without investigation and consideration of Yoruba belief in ancestors and its cultural values as a practical moral lesson in contemporary Nigeria. This theory shows the relevance of spirituality for the benefit of the people globally and to facilitate increasing awareness and understanding of the phenomenon. Based on the above submission, Emile Durkheim's functional theory is of great relevance to this research work multi-dimensionally.

## METHODOLOGY

As a study in historical ethnography, predominantly, qualitative methods through both primary and secondary sources were used in the research. Primary data collection involved the use of observation, survey interviews, sociological and interactive models of enquiry. Hence, the methods adopted in this study are the sociological and interactive models of enquiry from historical point of view. These methodologies are appropriate due to the nature of the study, which is multi-disciplinary. According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010), Sociology is the scientific study of the nature and development of society and social behaviour. It can also be defined as a scientific study of relationship existing among people living together in a given society (Odudele, 2006). In other words, sociology is the study of human, environmental and ideological components of society. Sociological model of enquiry becomes an appropriate tool because the study dealt heavily on social interactions. Here, thirty-six people of different categories were orally interviewed using both structured and unstructured methods as the need arose. Therefore, interactive model of investigation is of paramount importance when multi-disciplinary subjects like the case at hand is being discussed. It helps the researcher to freely move from one discipline to another, wearing as it were, dual lenses.

### **Yoruba Belief in Ancestors and its Cultural Implications**

In the Yoruba belief system, the ancestors occupy a very high position in the spiritual realm, where they serve as intermediary between man and God. The ancestors maintain law and order in the traditional Yoruba society. In African Traditional Religion, Ancestors are "Those who have realized to a remarkable degree the values and aspirations of their communities or groups" (Abanuka, 1994). These Ancestors are seen as "living dead" of the community. Again, Ancestors are the heroes because of their achievement in the community. From the negative point of view, Ancestors can be seen as those who did not commit scandal when they are in the flesh. Ancestors are revered according to the level of their achievement in a particular community. Those who died in a ripped age are also regarded as Ancestors, in that sense, old age is regarded as a blessing in the notion of death for the Africans. Also included in the rank of the Ancestors are those who died young but did outstanding things for the community. The final group of the Ancestors is the anonymous group. Those who lived godly lives but were not identified. Remarkably, the African notion of the Ancestors could be seen in the Christian notion of saint hood and canonization. According to Omojola (2010), the ancestors demand a high sense of respect for the traditional laws and customs; hence, reacting positively or negatively depends on the attribute and behaviour of the living. In this lime light, we therefore say that the traditional Africans drive ethical conduct from their respect to the ancestors who are believed to be the custodian of morality; and can equally provide for and punish the people in the traditional society.

The belief in ancestors springs from the idea that death does not mean the end of human life among the people of Africa. Thus, there is the general belief that communion and communication are possible between the living and the dead. Every religion has to face the eschatological question of what happens to man after the present life, and the answer depends upon man's conception of the deity. The cult of ancestors is an important feature in African belief. According to Yoruba belief, the deceased are truly members of the family on earth; but they are no longer of the same

fleshy order as those who are still actually living in the flesh on earth. They are closely related to this world; but are no longer ordinary mortals. They have become spirits and are therefore not restricted by time and space. The reality of the existence of ancestors constituted one of the most important features of Yoruba religion. According to Mercado (2009), the functions of Ancestors in the Yoruba society are as follows:

- They are guardians of family affairs, traditions and ethics.
- They act as invisible police of the family and communities (protection).
- They are factors of cohesion in traditional African society.
- They act as intermediaries between man and God.
- They can punish evil doers in the society.

They are called upon to discharge certain task which would benefit the community especially when there is no one else to do it. E.g. among the Yoruba, when an Oba becomes unbearingly despotic, the *Egungun* would discipline such a despotic Oba at the Egungun shrine, *Egungun* also performs the important function of expelling undesirable element from the community. See the below diagram for clarity.



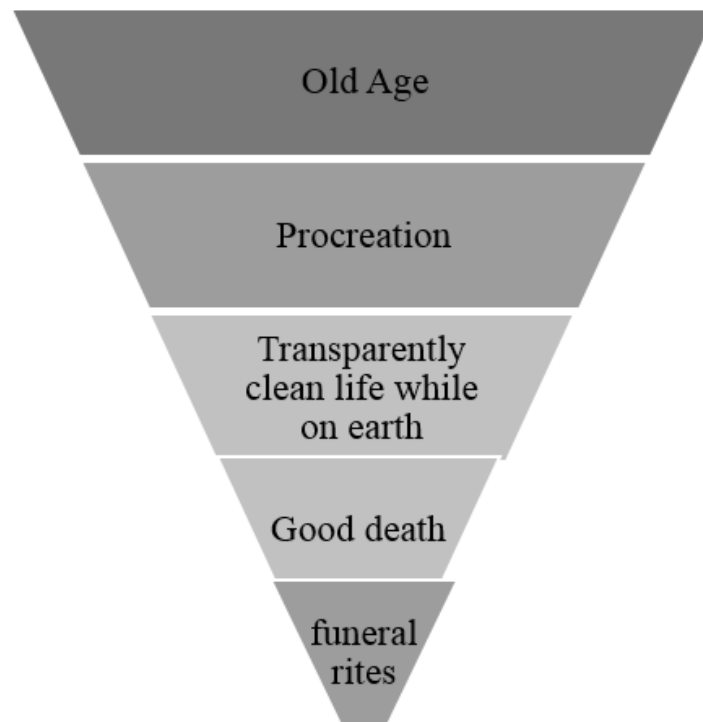
**Figure 2: Functions of Ancestors**

The question now is: Is it everyone that died among the Yoruba people of Nigeria that join the rank and file of Ancestors? The answer is No. What then are the conditions that determine peoples' entry into the ranks of Ancestors? It is obvious that the ancestral beliefs act as a form of constant reminder or social control by which the conduct of individual is regulated. It must be noted however that it is not every person



who dies that becomes an ancestors. To qualify to become one certain conditions must be fulfilled. These includes:

- Old age
- Transparently clean life while on earth.
- Procreation i.e. one must have married and have children.
- Good death i.e. certain deaths are considered bad such as committing suicide.
- All funeral rites of the dead person must have been performed.



**Figure 3: Requirements to Join The Rank and File of Ancestors**

Besides, Culture is the totality of a people's way of life which differs from one people or country to another. Culture is the characteristics of a particular group of people, defined by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts, (Zimmermann, 2012). All are interwoven to form their very life. It is therefore very difficult to draw a clear-cut line of demarcation between where their ethical life ends and where their religious life begins. Culture shapes the way we see the world. It therefore has the capacity to bring about the change of attitudes needed to ensure peace and sustainable development which, we know, form the only possible way forward for life on planet Earth, (UNESCO, 1999).

The Yorùbá passed on their culture from one generation to the other in a well-disciplined manner, and expressed in the form of myths, history, stories, riddles, proverbs, arts and craft. This cultural heritage of the Yorùbá, as of all Nigerians and indeed of all Africans, includes the belief in the existence of one Supreme Being, (Abimbola, 2005). In short, culture is the sum total of the beliefs and actions of everyone in Yoruba traditional society.

Yoruba has one of the richest, enduring and perhaps the most sophisticated ways of life on the continent of Africa. Yoruba people have similar culture which is evident in their beliefs, values, customs, practices and social behaviours; and this is manifested in their arts, music, political institution, local economy, family structure, burial, cuisine, numerals, literature and other related activities which defines Yoruba ways of life. (Yoruba culture <http://yorupedia.com/subjects/yoruba-culture/>). By all standards, they give a special character and local colour to their beliefs, religious observances and practices, language, psychological reactions and more generally to their behaviours.

Many missionaries considered African cultures and religions to be *primitive* and *pagan*. Consequently, these missionaries tried to force African Christians to reject most of their cultural and religious beliefs and practices. Faced with continued missionary opposition to adapting Christianity to African culture, some Christian leaders decided to leave mission churches and form their own independent churches that incorporated aspects of African cultural practice that they felt were not inconsistent with Christianity (NigerianMuse, 2012). This discontent at European paternalism was one of the factors that led to the foundation of the African churches and by the late nineteenth century some African Christians decided to break away from missionary churches and form their own churches.

### **Derivation and Enforcement of Cultural Values in Yoruba Traditional Societies**

The scholars of African Traditional Religion have divergence views on the sources of Yoruba cultural values. On the final analysis, common ground is established. In his own view, Oloruntele (2002) asserts that morality is both naturally acquired and developed in mankind. He further stressed that morality in a particular locality may be immorality in another one. Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), however opines that fundamentally, Cultural values are the fruits or offspring and not just human inventions. To them, from the beginning, God has put His law in man's heart, and has endowed man with the sense of right and wrong. Such things which are forbidden and must not be done are taboos. Nabofa (2000) posits that the elders and leaders of African societies came about the conducts through life's experience. This was borne out of meticulous studies and observation from family members from which they know what should be done and what should be avoided by the family members. This taboos should be registered permanently into their sub-consciousness, which are later transmitted from one generation to the other (Nabofa, 2002). Idowu (1962), equally and strongly postulated that morality is basically the fruit of spirituality and that, to begin with, it was dependent on it. He did not welcome the views of the school of thought which hold that morality is of sociological origin. He also opposed those who opined that what we call morality is little more than making a common sense. These two schools of thoughts did not see any connection at bottom between religion and morality.

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that Yoruba values is religiously based. With the Yoruba, what have been named 'tabu' took their origin from the fact that people discerned that there were certain things which were culturally approved or disapproved by the Deity (Omojola, 2010). In order to be able to make meaningful suggestions for the enforcement of cultural values in the modern society, it is important that we should have some idea about how cultural values were enforced in Yoruba traditional society. Williamson (1995) writing about the Akan of Ghana, records that "in the olden time, there was no policemen and no need of them; the gods were the policemen". In the light above, and from my discoveries out of interactions with some Yoruba elders

purposely for this work, the enforcement of cultural values is enshrined on two major classifications, the religious factor and social factor.

According to Williamson (1995), he argues that “the customs and traditional ways of life sanctioned by the spirit-ancestors and the gods provided the frame work of the Akan cultural code”. Similar statements are echoed again and again by many Yoruba elders recently interviewed. In Africa, natural disasters are benefits enjoyed from Olodumare (Supreme Being) the deities, spirits and ancestors are for those who keep the cultural values, whereas violation attracts the wraths and punishment by the spirit-powers. This kept people doing what was right and avoiding what was wrong. Thus, for the Yoruba, spirituality is said to be closely connected to morality. So, rewards and punishments are believed to come from the Supreme Being in reaction to human behaviour. The Yoruba will say of a person. “Iwa re laye yii ni yoo da o lejo”-Your character here on earth will pass judgements on you”. In other words, according to Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), it is the character of man that deity judges.

The Yoruba among other African tribes walk in the consciousness of the fact that, nothing is hidden before the All-seeing eyes of Olodumare. One of His attitude is: ‘A bi eti lu kara bi ajere’, that is, God is having eyes full all over His body. That is why they usually say, “A-mookun jale, bi oba aye ko ri o, oba oke n wo o”-“You who steals in the cover of night, know for sure that if the earthly king does not see you, the heavenly king (God) does.” In traditional African societies, this enhances the people compliances to the cultural values whether in the open or secret.

Equally, the people’s beliefs about the various deities were invoked to enforce cultural value in traditional Yoruba society. It is futile to wish to commit a crime in secret, for no violation of cultural values (whether publicly or in secret) can escape the divine justice. In reference to the opinion of the people interviewed, it was stressed that in the African traditional society, cultural values are not the creation or invention of the society, rather, the expressions of the transcendental moral order which is beyond man and to which both man and the society must conform. Besides, according to my informant there are some anti-divinities who punish cultural offenders on behalf of the supreme Deity among the Yoruba in particular and other tribes across Africa in general. A good example is the Divinity of thunder and lightning-Sango and Sokogba among the Yoruba and Nupe respectively. If there is any case of theft, the wrath of the deity can be invoked on the unknown criminal. Also Esu divinity can be invoked to punish criminals who refuse to confess his/her evil deeds. These constantly show man the need to be culturally upright and be of good conduct to avoid the wrath of deities (Ige, A.86years, a Chief and Herbalist in Ikere Ekiti, interviewed, April 25, 2021).

It is apposite to add that in African traditional society, there are socio-religious groups and societies which enforce the compliance of cultural values. Among the Yoruba for example, the Ogboni society and Oro cults are principally socio-political organizations established for the purpose of maintaining law and order in the society. According to Nabofa (2002), Ogboni is a council of elders; whose duty among others is to meet time to time to settle civil disputes, to deal with criminal charges and to discuss general matters concerning the well-being of the community. The Oro group is said to be militant arm of Ogoni Aborigin. They punish offenders and can declare any erring person guilty as well. They would say “Oro gbe e”, that is “Oro has carried him away into the spirit world”. The cultural connotation of this is that any family where the victim of Oro came from was regarded and treated with contempt in the society, no lady or



young man would even want to marry from the family. This in fact instilled fear into the heart of the people and it therefore checked misbehaviour in the community (Arinze, 2005). Thus, this work will enhance the understanding and appreciation of the African exposition of the importance of the Yoruba cultural values.

### **Sociological Influence of Modernity on Yoruba Spiritualities and Cultural Values**

There is no doubt that values is at heart of Yoruba traditional religion. It is not surprising that increasing research in sociology of religion over the past decade has led to a renewed interest in cultural values tremendously. The word had a quite different meaning in the religious lives of the ancients. Thus, the contemporary usage of the word cultural values has portrayed the operational value as something unrealistic.

Another influence of modernity on Yoruba spirituality and cultural value is the influence of new religions. That is, the imported religions such as Christianity and Islam has portrayed the activities and involvement of Yoruba traditional religion as a negative phenomenon with negative implication. Many over-zealous missionaries used pejorative or derogatory terms to devalue some of our traditional beliefs and practices in which cultural value is one (Asha, 2004). It is highly painful however that this imported or preached religion that have criticized every aspect of traditional religion later engaged in different kinds of research to solve immoral behaviour in the society.

The impact of urbanization on Yoruba spirituality and cultural values has adversely affected the practice and effective operation of the phenomenon. According to Oso (1978), one of the common problems emanating from urbanization is the breakdown of Yoruba kingship and family life in cities. The obvious consequence is a gradual collapse of extended family rites and inevitable damage to Yoruba traditional practices such as cultural values. For the Yoruba, that is a tragic reversal of their spiritualities and values since families in Yoruba land are close-knit. Since Yoruba traditional religion has no written literature; beliefs, practices and formulations are taught orally to their descendants who also pass them on to other generations. It is painful today that the few elders who are the custodians of the spirituality and cultural value rites are left in remote villages.

Moreover, there is no doubt that the impact of Western culture cannot be over-looked in this matter. Olalere (2006) argues that African have become cultureless as a result of acculturation. He opines that every mistake in London is a style in Nigeria. Many of the old customs and practices are disappearing though they served useful purposes. As a result, some of these ancient practices can in no way stand the test of modern life. The response of various people interacted with in the course of this work shows that Yoruba spiritualities and cultural values are no more a popular rites. It is generally considered as old school phenomenon with little or no importance in the contemporary society. Thus, Yoruba cultural values such as personal integrity, self-discipline, patriotism, respect, hard work, goodwill, kindness, honesty, loyalty, devotion, modesty, accountability, competence, etc. has been drastically gone done when compared with the olden days.

From modern point of view, Yoruba spiritualities and values has a multi-dimensional benefits. With it, there will be harmony, success, advancement progress, peace and peaceful co-existence in the society. Hence, basic human values promote positive or good relationships among Yoruba people when they all accept such societal norms, attitude or ways of doing things. Understanding our value system helps us to resist pressure to conform to other people's values and behaviour which may not be

acceptable to generality of people (Odanye, 2009). The society that do not embrace these values that are inherent in the Yoruba spiritualities especially to the young ones will end up in social disorder. Life is not about who you are, what you gain or make from it; but about how many lives you have touched or influenced positively.

Similarly, the relevance of religion could be seen in cultural development. Religion helps in the transforming the Society by introducing new cultural elements. Religious doctrines, laws, organizations, modes of dressing, dogma, buildings, patterns of marriages, training of children, burying the dead and many other items of culture are influenced through religion. Morality is used to give meaning and purpose to the cultural behaviour. Wherein the culture deviates from the real religious meaning, then it has to be checked, so that there is balanced relationship between the cultural elements and religious ideology. Those who are religious tend to be more obedient, conforming and less deviant. This is because religion as an instrument of social control provides an integrative ideology. Religion introduced taboos in order to promote harmony, ethical standard and Peaceful co-existence in the Society (Odudele, 2010). Some religious laws have forbidden the mechanism of birth control, the sale of alcoholic beverages, abortion, conducting business on sacred days' adultery, stealing, murder, lying, unhealthy rivalry, competitions, crisis etc. Religion enhances cohesion, orderliness, stability, unity, harmony, co operations, security consensus, cordiality and peaceful co-existence. Thus, religion serves as a pivot of togetherness in its eradication of loneliness and isolation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

It is obvious in modern times that the Yoruba are making frantic efforts to salvage and protect their belief system and cultural values and particularly from threats of other religions as well as from modern challenges. It could be argued that people attach little or no importance to Yoruba spiritualities and values as an inevitable output of modernity. The interview conducted are strongly in support of this assertion. Thus, the Yoruba should make frantic efforts to salvage and protect their cultural values and particularly their spirituality from threats of modern and sociological challenges.

Here is a country blessed with abundant human and material resources, good climate conditions that permit the production of virtually any agricultural plants or animals, tourist attractions minerals, energetic people, abundant rainfall, numerous religious leaders, plenty of sunshine etc. yet sixty-two years after independence the people are still suffering and far from living as human beings. Part of the reasons for these is that many innocent blood had been shed; ordinary citizens are grossly cheated, oppressed and exploited. This is as a result of peoples' attitudes towards Yoruba or African spiritualities and values which are of low importance in contemporary Nigerian society. Hence, the work will assist an individual to be responsible, responsive and accountable for his actions.

Any culture that loses its identity does not exist in the real sense of the word. Every culture strives to protect and promote its values. This work will enhance the understanding and appreciation of the African values by the Africans. The significance of the work lies primarily in its exposition of the importance of the African cultural values. It will provide the framework for the continuous motivation and urge to retain these values in spite of the misguided conception already imbibed.

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