

Ontology and cosmology of ancestral reverence in Vietnam and South Africa: Relational personhood, moral community, and cultural difference

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Abstract

This article re-examines ancestral reverence in Vietnam and South Africa not from the simple dimension of similarities and differences, but as two distinct philosophical responses to a shared human concern: how the dead remain normatively present in the life of the living. Methodologically, the study combines documentary analysis, qualitative content analysis, and critical-comparative hermeneutics to move beyond descriptive juxtaposition toward a thicker interpretation of relational personhood, moral obligation, and cosmological order. The article argues that both Vietnam and South African traditions reject atomistic conceptions of the self and locate human existence within an intergenerational continuum sustained by ritual, memory, and ethical practice. However, both traditions institutionalize that continuum differently. In Vietnam, ancestral worship is organized through lineage, domestic altar space, and a moral cosmology shaped by filial piety and yin-yang harmony. In South Africa, ancestor veneration is embedded in a communitarian and often ecological cosmology in which *amadlozi*/*badimo* mediate moral life, communal cohesion, and sacred reciprocity. The central contribution of this article is, therefore, conceptual. Its findings show that ancestral reverence is neither a residual "traditional" belief nor a merely local custom,

but a serious indigenous philosophy of relational existence. At the same time, the study insists that Ubuntu should not be reduced to ancestor veneration; rather, Ubuntu provides a broader ethical horizon within which ancestral mediation acquires social meaning. These findings strengthen intercultural philosophical dialogue and reposition Vietnam–South Africa comparison within wider debates on religion, humanity, and Africanity.

Keywords: ancestral reverence, ancestor worship, ancestor veneration, ontology, cosmology, Vietnam, South Africa, relational personhood

Introduction

Ancestral reverence is one of the most enduring forms through which human communities confront mortality, continuity, and moral belonging. Yet its philosophical significance is often reduced to descriptive ethnography or confined within the vocabulary of "custom" and "tradition." This article argues that such reduction is inadequate for understanding either Vietnam or South Africa. In both settings, relations with ancestors are not peripheral to social life; they are constitutive of how personhood, obligation, memory, and the cosmos are imagined. The comparative task pursued in this study, therefore, is not merely to place two the traditions side by side, but to ask what they disclose about non-Western ontologies of the human.

In Vietnamese cultural tradition, ancestral worship occupies a central place and is often treated as a fundamental moral-spiritual institution rather than a narrowly bounded religion (Hinh, 1996; Them, 2001; Ngoc, 2002; Long, 2019; Chau, 2024). The ancestral altar at the center of the home materializes the co-presence of the living and the dead, while rituals of incense, offerings, and commemorative remembrance reproduce a lineage-based temporality in which descendants remain ethically indebted to those who came before them. Vietnamese ancestral worship is thus inseparable from *đạo hiếu*, from the symbolic order of *bàn thờ gia tiên*, and from a cosmological imagination structured by yin-yang, the five elements, and the Heaven-Earth-Human triad.

Among indigenous communities in South Africa, especially among Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, and Tswana peoples, the more precise term is generally ancestor veneration rather than ancestor worship. Here, the ancestors, often called *amadlozi* or *badimo*, are not objects of divine worship in the strict theological sense; rather, they are morally significant presences, intermediaries, and guardians within a living communal cosmos (Mbiti, 1990; Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005; Cordeiro-Rodrigues & Agada, 2022). South African traditions also require conceptual care: Ubuntu and ancestor veneration intersect, but they are not identical. Ubuntu names a wider ethical grammar of relational personhood, whereas ancestor veneration ritualizes one important mode through which relations among the living, the living-dead, the community, and the land are maintained.

The broader claim of this article is that the comparison between Vietnam and South Africa matters because it reveals two internally coherent but differently scaled philosophies of relational existence. Vietnam privileges the lineage-household as the primary site where the dead remain normatively active; South Africa more often extends ancestral

mediation into the communal and ecological sphere. Read together, these traditions illuminate a shared refusal of atomistic selfhood and a shared insistence that moral life is intergenerational. At the same time, their differences clarify how cultural worlds produce distinct answers to the questions of religion, humanity, and, in the South African case, Africanity itself. The issue examined in this article, therefore, is not simply whether the two systems are similar or different, but what kind of human world each one of them makes possible.

Building upon this problematique, the article frames the comparison of Vietnam and South African traditions through four questions designed to move beyond descriptive parallelism to philosophical interpretation. It asks not only how life, death, and ancestry are symbolized in each case, but also what larger claims these traditions make about being human, inhabiting a moral community, and locating the dead within the architecture of the cosmos.

Therefore, the following questions are advanced in this article: (i) on what theoretical foundations and symbolic representations are the ontological views

of human beings, life, and death constructed in the ancestral worship traditions of Vietnam and South Africa?; (ii) how do the cosmological models in these belief systems reflect the communities' understanding of the universe and the relationship between the visible and invisible realms?; (iii) what do the similarities and differences in ritual, ethical, and social dimensions reveal about the spiritual identities of these two cultures?; (iv) does the symbiotic interplay between yin-yang, life-death in both traditions reflect a universal archetype or a localized epistemology, and what insights can be drawn from their convergence for intercultural philosophical dialogue?

By analyzing the ontological and cosmological dimensions of ancestral reverence in Vietnam and South Africa, this article contributes to intercultural philosophy in three ways. First, it demonstrates that ancestor-related practices in both contexts are sustained by conceptually robust, non-Western accounts of personhood and moral continuity. Second, it proposes a stronger interpretive thesis rather than a simple inventory of resemblances: ancestral reverence should be understood as a philosophy of relational afterlife, albeit

one expressed through different cultural scales of belonging. Third, it clarifies that South African ancestor veneration must be read through indigenous categories such as *amadlozi*, *badimo*, and *uMsamo*, and in conversation with Ubuntu rather than as a mere derivative of it. In this sense, the article addresses broader debates on indigenous religion, humanity, and the epistemic value of Global South philosophies.

Literature review

Overview of research on ancestral worship in Vietnam

Ancestral worship is one of the most fundamental spiritual pillars of traditional Vietnamese culture, regarded as a foundational value system closely tied to morality, ethics, and collective identity. Numerous domestic and international scholars have studied this belief system from the perspectives of cultural studies, anthropology, history, and sociology, affirming its role as a resilient cultural, spiritual institution in Vietnamese life. Them (2001) argued that ancestral worship is not merely a symbolic ritual but a concrete method for maintaining "filial piety" (đạo hiếu). Van (2023) argued that the moral relationship between descendants and their ancestors

is anchored on traditional kinship structures and familial bonds. This belief reflects a continuous temporal flow, connecting past, present, and future, wherein ancestors serve as both the origin of life and a spiritual anchor for the living (Chau, 2024).

According to Vuong (1998), ancestral worship is a form of "collective memory", a social institution that maintains intergenerational connection not only through ritual but also through the physical space of worship and the symbolic architecture of families and lineages. He emphasized that the ancestral altar is not merely a ritual object, but a living symbol of ancestral presence in everyday life, where the living and the dead coexist in an interwoven reality.

From a ritual practice perspective, Hinh (1996) conducted detailed research on ancestral worship forms in Vietnamese families, from altar arrangements and offerings to commemoration rituals and their spiritual meanings. His findings suggest that ancestral worship in Vietnam is not only a traditional religious practice but also an effective moral educational space where individuals are nurtured in an environment that

emphasizes gratitude, reverence, and familial responsibility. Further, Quoc (2017) highlighted the moral and cultural pedagogical aspects of ancestral worship, particularly in the context of social transformation and globalization. He argued that ancestral rituals have the potential to reshape core ethical values in modern Vietnamese life and serve as a moral compass for family and community relations grounded in traditional ethical principles.

However, a notable gap remains in current research, in that, most studies approach ancestral worship from anthropological, historical, or ethnographic lenses, while few have systematically investigated it from the standpoint of ontology or cosmology. Foundational philosophical questions, such as: in what ontological forms are ancestors conceived?; what is the philosophical structure of their presence?; and by what metaphysical principles is the invisible world constructed in this belief system? remain insufficiently explored.

Research landscape of ancestor veneration in South Africa

Ancestor veneration is one of the most profound spiritual identity markers of

indigenous South Africans. One of the most influential figures in this practice is John S. Mbiti. In his seminal work, *African Religions and Philosophy* (1990; 2015), Mbiti developed the concept of the "living dead" to refer to ancestral spirits who, though physically deceased, remain active in communal life, influencing events such as illness, harvests, disasters, and fortune. According to Mbiti, the dead do not vanish but transition into another mode of existence, coexisting with the living in a form of intergenerational continuity. This reflects a distinctive African ontology in which death does not mean the annihilation of being, but the transformation of existential function.

Building on this foundation, Hammond Tooke (1989) investigated traditional healing rituals among Zulu communities as communicative acts with the ancestral world. In his view, healing practices are not only biomedical but spiritual-religious acts, where the *isangoma* (diviner) functions as a conduit between the visible world of the living and the invisible world of the ancestors. Ancestors in this context serve as both blessing givers and "metaphysical doctors", diagnosing moral imbalance

through physical or psychological symptoms.

Olupona (2004), in "Beyond Primitivism: Indigenous Religious Traditions and Modernity", expanded this discussion using an interdisciplinary religious study approach. He argued that ancestor veneration is not merely a folk religious phenomenon but a complex system, integrating metaphysics, ethics, and memory politics. In South African cosmology, ancestors possess not only supernatural power but also social authority for guiding behavior, maintaining order, mediating conflicts, and preserving communal values. This presents a form of "divinized social organization" wherein the past is not excluded but integrated as an existential force.

A particularly important ethical framework is the Ubuntu philosophy, explored by Mnyaka and Motlhabi (2005) in their article "Ubuntu/Botho and its Socio Moral Significance" (Black Theology). They argue that Ubuntu is not only a philosophy of life, "I am because we are", but also a normative ethical system based on symbiotic relationships between the individual and the community. Within this structure,

ancestors embody the "collective will", representing a form of communitarian ontology tasked with maintaining harmony between individual and collective beings. In addition, recent studies by Metz and Molefe (2021), Mudimbe and Kavwahirehi (2022), and Cordeiro and Agada (2022) have emphasized, in this context, that ancestral worship has become a moral obligation, reinforcing ethical norms across society.

Recently, some scholars have advocated for the incorporation of African philosophy into global academic discourse as an internally coherent and valuable knowledge tradition. Ramose (2002), in *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*, emphasized that only by analyzing the ontological foundations of Ubuntu and the conception of ancestors as both supra-sensory and existential beings can we truly comprehend the distinct cosmology of African religious belief.

In conclusion, ancestor veneration in South Africa constitutes a vibrant cultural–philosophical system with a coherent structure and profound existential significance. However, the absence of rigorous philosophical inquiry,

particularly in ontology and cosmology, remains a challenge for comparative research and intercultural dialogue. Addressing this gap will not only enrich global knowledge on indigenous religions but also contribute to repositioning South–South philosophies within the pluralistic intellectual landscape of the 21st century.

Although ancestral beliefs have been widely discussed in both Vietnamese and African scholarship, comparative studies rarely move beyond descriptive contrast. Existing Vietnamese research has concentrated on history, ritual, kinship, and cultural identity (An, 2010; Quoc, 2017; Long, 2019; Van, 2023; Chau, 2024), while major South African and African philosophical works have emphasized ritual efficacy, ethics, and indigenous metaphysics (Mbiti, 1990; Olupona, 2004; Ramose, 2002; Cordeiro-Rodrigues & Agada, 2022). What remains underexplored is a comparative framework capable of explaining why ancestors matter philosophically in both settings and what that shared concern reveals about relational personhood, moral order, and sacred continuity. The principal research gap for this study, therefore, is not simply empirical; but interpretive.

Although ancestral worship is a widespread phenomenon across numerous cultures, very few international studies have undertaken systematic comparisons between Vietnam and South African ancestor veneration from ontological and cosmological perspectives. Existing Vietnamese scholarship on ancestral worship is predominantly published domestically, in Vietnamese, and focuses on historical, cultural, and ethnographic dimensions (An, 2010; Quoc, 2017; Long, 2019; Van, 2023; Chau, 2024). In contrast, South African studies typically written in English by scholars such as Mbiti (1986; 1990; 2015), Olupona (2004), Kavwahirehi (2022), Cordeiro & Agada (2022) focus primarily on ritual practices and religious phenomenology, with limited engagement in systematic philosophical comparison with Asian belief systems.

Additionally, cosmological perspectives of ancestral rituals across both cultures are often treated only tangentially in anthropological studies (Taylor, 2007; Chidester, 2000), rather than being systematically analyzed as central philosophical categories. A lack of analysis regarding the structure of the invisible world, such as the interaction

between *yin* and *yang* in Vietnam or the triadic relationship among soul, community, and cosmos in South Africa, remains a shortcoming in current academic discourse. In the context of globalization and South–South intellectual dialogue, developing comparative philosophical research on ontology and cosmology in ancestral traditions holds the potential to significantly enrich the field of intercultural philosophy, a growing domain within global thought (Gadamer, 2006; Graness, 2015).

Overall, although existing studies have illuminated many social, ethical, and religious dimensions of ancestral worship in both Vietnam and South Africa, they still lack in-depth analysis of the ontological relationships among human beings, ancestors, and the cosmos. Addressing this lacuna will not only deepen our understanding of indigenous religious systems but also expand the boundaries of global philosophical inquiry by incorporating and interrogating non-Western models of thought.

Research methodology

Research design

To address ontology and cosmology in ancestral reverence, the current study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, based specifically on a critical-comparative design. Rather than merely arranging Vietnamese and South African materials in parallel columns, the article uses comparative hermeneutics to reconstruct each tradition on its own terms and then place them into dialogue around a common theoretical question: how do communities conceptualize the continuing presence of the dead in moral and cosmic life? This approach is based on a triangulation of the frameworks of existential and ontological philosophy, cultural and religious anthropology, and comparative religion. This is done by carefully paying attention to the risk of translating indigenous categories too quickly into external academic vocabularies. The aim is not to dissolve difference into universalism, but to identify a substantive meta-level argument about relational personhood and the social life of ancestors. Existential and ontological philosophy is employed to clarify conceptions of human existence, ancestral presence, and the soul within religious frameworks. Cultural

and religious anthropology helps in examining ritual practices, symbols, and the structural organization of ancestral worship; while comparative religious and cultural studies is utilized in juxtaposing the Vietnam and South African systems of belief to highlight structural similarities and cultural differences.

The above design enables a deep analysis of indigenous thought systems in alignment with the trajectory of intercultural philosophy, which increasingly transcends singular traditions to place diverse worldviews into dialogical frameworks.

Methods of data collection and analysis

The documentary method was employed for the data collection to generate data through secondary sources. The primary data set includes more than 35 academic works published in peer-reviewed journals, books, and canonical scholarly texts on religion and culture. In addition, Vietnamese language publications were utilized to provide internal cultural depth and to avoid Western-centric analytical bias.

On the other hand, the qualitative content analysis was employed to analyse the data set. Key cultural philosophical

categories, such as "ancestor", "soul", "post mortem presence", "yin-yang" and "Ubuntu", are extracted and analyzed to reconstruct the underlying philosophical models encoded within ancestral worship practices. This method is appropriate for decoding the deep cultural layers in which ontological philosophy is manifested not through abstract terms but those encoding lived and ritualized experiences.

Further, a comparative analysis (hermeneutic comparison) of the two cultures studied was done based on a bidirectional model of comparative hermeneutics. The two belief systems were analyzed within a shared framework consisting of: ontological philosophy, cosmological structure, ancestral function, and ritual form. This allows for the identification of structural similarities and cultural divergences.

Research findings

Ontology and cosmology in Vietnamese ancestral worship

(i) Communitarian ontology: the human being as a node in the stream of life

The Vietnamese understanding of human existence does not conceive of the individual as an autonomous, self-

contained entity, but rather as part of an intergenerational and interexistential continuum that binds the living to their familial lineage, ancestral spirits, and the metaphysical world. This relational model of being is foundational to Vietnamese cosmology and spiritual philosophy. In this framework, ancestors are not merely "the dead" but beings who undergo a sacred transformation from bodily presence to spiritual existence, from visibility to invisibility, without severing their existential ties to the living world.

This ontological model is deeply rooted in the notion of *đạo hiếu* (filial piety), which serves as the ethical and spiritual axis around which the relationship between generations revolves. The ancestral realm functions not as a distant otherworld but as a sacral dimension within the living world, accessible through acts of veneration, remembrance, and ethical conduct. Ancestors are the "roots" (sources) in the symbolic family tree, and every individual is a continuation of a timeless lineage, thus:

"Ancestors do not die; they become the sacred dimension of the living reality" (Them, 2001, p. 120).

"The blessing of the ancestors on their descendants is a sacred concept that future generations need to preserve" (Chau, 2024, p. 115).

Discussing the ancestral altars in Vietnamese households, Hinh (1996) affirms that the ancestral altar is not merely a ritual space for offerings or symbolic remembrance; it is an existential locus, a liminal space where the boundaries between the living and the dead collapse. According to Chau (2024), it is where ontological continuity is enacted through material, symbolic, and emotional practices. The presence of incense smoke, sacred objects, and whispered prayers constitutes a dialogical and spiritual engagement with ancestors, making the metaphysical tangible in daily life. For Long (2019, p. 64), "The altar becomes not only a cultural artifact but a theological and philosophical device that holds the temporal and eternal in tension"

Further expanding the above insight, Quoc (2017) emphasizes that Vietnamese ancestral worship constructs human identity through the temporal extension of a self that exists not solely in the here and now but through enduring ties to the ancestral past. This form of identity does

not dissolve the individual but embeds them within a living chain of being, where personal existence is validated and enriched through ancestral connection (Ewa, 2023). The continuity between generations is not passive remembrance; it is performative ontology, the self enacted through ritual and relational belonging.

In this worldview, the ancestral spirit is more than a cultural symbol; it is an ontological actor. The spirit exercises moral authority, provides spiritual protection, and guides familial order. As such, ancestral worship operates on multiple planes: ethical, spiritual, cosmological, and communal. The metaphysics underlying this practice assumes a non-linear temporality, in which the past is active in the present, and the present must account for its fidelity to the past. Human existence, therefore, is not a solitary project but a relational becoming, rooted in gratitude, obligation, and sacred memory.

(ii) Cosmological dualism rooted in yin-yang symbiosis: a harmonious universe of yin-yang and seen and unseen realms

Hinh (1996) observed that ancestral rites are designed in harmony with natural rhythms in Vietnam based on the lunar

calendar, with altars placed at the heart of the home, and incense rituals activating communication with the otherworldly realm. Each ritual realigns yin-yang relations, ensuring harmony across the domestic, social, and cosmic orders. Thu (2006) further explains that in Vietnamese popular Buddhism, ancestral worship does not contradict Buddhist practice, as both aim to uphold cosmic order through moral conduct. In this context, ancestors serve as intermediaries between the living and the spiritual realms, reflecting a belief in a multilayered universe where temporal, existential, and metaphysical dimensions interweave, thus: "The ancestral altar is a sacred space of intersection between the human and spirit worlds, between yin and yang, between the temporal and the eternal" (Thu, 2006, p. 312).

More recently, scholars such as Taylor (2007) have emphasized the simultaneity of visible and invisible worlds in Vietnamese consciousness. Through ancestral worship, Vietnamese people do not merely "remember" ancestors but sustain existential relationships with them as silently present entities embedded in everyday space: "Ancestor veneration in Vietnam is not only remembrance. It is a performative

ontology of continuity between the visible and invisible worlds" (Taylor, 2007, p. 2007).

(iii) Ontological and cosmological expressions in the ancestral worship rituals of the Vietnamese people:

Vietnamese ancestral worship is a religious and cultural phenomenon that reflects profound philosophical foundations, particularly in terms of ontology and cosmology. Far beyond mere remembrance of the deceased, ancestral rituals express a distinctive worldview and conception of existence, illustrating the relationship between humans and the cosmos, the visible and invisible realms, and the living and the dead. As analyzed above, ontology in Vietnamese ancestral worship is rooted in the concept of "tam tài" (Heaven – Earth – Human), where humans are not isolated entities but integral elements within a harmonious cosmos, thus:

Human beings are seen as the synthesis of three elements: celestial essence (thiên khí), paternal essence (dương), and maternal blood (âm), symbolizing the organic linkage between the universe and ancestral lineage. Through ritual acts as burning

incense, offering food, and reciting prayers, the living reaffirm their unbroken ontological connection with their ancestors and sustain the sacred lineage across generations (Hinh, 1996, p. 174).

The ancestral altar, placed in the heart of the home, symbolizes the co-presence of the living and the dead. Ancestors are not regarded as having vanished, but as having transitioned into another form of existence, a spiritual one. Ontologically, this worldview is non-linear: life and death are not sharply divided but part of a transformative continuum (Thu, 1996).

Vietnamese ancestral worship reflects a cyclical cosmology, structured around the order of Heaven – Earth – Humans – Ancestors – Descendants. As Van (2003) notes, belief in ancestral spirits is not only metaphysical but ethical, emphasizing continuity across generations within a cosmic-moral cycle. Rituals such as annual death anniversaries, ancestral commemorations, and Lunar New Year rites symbolize cyclical time governed by the lunar calendar, expressing continuity and cultural vitality. Furthermore, the arrangement of offerings according to principles like "east vase, west fruit"

reflects a binary cosmology of yin–yang and order, where performing the ritual correctly restores cosmic and moral harmony. Errors or neglect in rituals are seen as disrupting this equilibrium, potentially resulting in misfortune.

Vietnamese ancestral worship encapsulates deep philosophical values, intertwining the being of individuals with their lineage and the cosmos. Rituals are not merely religious practices, but enactments of a folk ontology and cosmology, which shape traditional ethics, communal consciousness, and national cultural identity.

Ontology and cosmology in South African ancestor veneration

Ancestor veneration in South Africa, particularly among Bantu-speaking tribes such as the Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, and Tswana, should be approached as an indigenous philosophical system rather than a residual folk practice. Its central concern is neither abstract speculation nor mere ritual repetition, but the maintenance of a living moral cosmos in which the dead remain socially consequential. The analysis here identifies four interrelated features of this worldview: relational ontology, layered sacred cosmology, ritual mediation, and

ethical communality. It is important to note that scholars do not equate Ubuntu with ancestor veneration; instead, ancestor veneration is treated as one culturally powerful site where wider communitarian values are enacted, tested, and transmitted.

(i) Ontology: the "living dead" and communal existence

One of the most profound philosophical contributions of South African ancestor veneration is the concept of the "living dead", introduced by John S. Mbiti (1990) in his seminal work *African Religions and Philosophy*. According to this ontological view, ancestors, though physically deceased, continue to exist as active presences within the community. They are not relegated to oblivion but remain part of the living social fabric, as engaged, responsive, and morally consequential beings. As Mbiti famously stated: "The dead are not dead; they are living in the memory, rituals, and daily lives of the people" (Mbiti, 1990, p. 25).

This understanding of death reflects an ontological continuum rather than a rupture, and positions the ancestral spirits within a relational and cyclical metaphysics. This conceptualization constitutes a communitarian ontology,

where the self is not defined in isolation but through a web of relationships within the community, and with the ancestors who form its metaphysical foundation. The human being is always a being with others, and the continuity of life is maintained not only biologically but spiritually through acts of remembrance, ritual observance, and ethical behaviour aligned with ancestral norms, thus: "Ancestors in the African context are often understood to be the guardians of morality. Ancestors are morally good entities, but they are limited and thus not morally perfect" (Cordeiro Rodrigues & Agada, 2022, p. 6); "Ancestors are bound by the moral code under which they lived on earth" (Wiredu, 2013, p. 30).

In addition, the continuity between life and death is interpreted not as opposition, but as complementary phases in a unified existential process. As Ramose (2002) elaborates in *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*, life and death are co-participants in a dynamic cycle of existence, where each person's identity transcends temporal boundaries. The dead become guardians, moral exemplars, and cosmic mediators. Their spiritual proximity to the living establishes a metaphysical bridge that links generations into a shared destiny.

(ii) Cosmology: a multi-layered sacred structure of mutuality between humans, spirits, and deities

The worldview inherent in South African ancestor veneration is conceived as a multi-layered sacred cosmology, in which *Nkulunkulu* (the Supreme Being), *amadlozi/badimo* (ancestors), human beings, and nature coexist in a reciprocal and interconnected relationship. As Olupona (2004) observes in *Beyond Primitivism*, Bantu cosmology does not uphold a strict dichotomy between the visible and invisible realms; rather, these domains are continuously linked through ritual and ethical practice, thus: "In African cosmology, the spiritual and material realms are not oppositional but permeable and relational" (Olupona, 2004, p. 137).

Ancestors function as sacred intermediaries between the human world and the divine; they serve as communicative channels for the will of the Supreme Being, and simultaneously act as moral overseers, protectors, and regulators of communal conduct. Hence, Chuks (2021) explains that: "Ancestors are spirits since they have moved to the realm of the dead, but they are viewed as part of the material world, and are

offered food and drink during prayer sessions invoking their protection and blessings" (Chuks, 2021, p. 469).

(iii) Ontological and cosmological expression in ritual practice

Ancestor veneration in South Africa is not an abstract metaphysical thesis detached from practice; it becomes socially real through ritual forms such as *ukubuyisa*, libation, sacrifice, prayer, consultation with an *isangoma*, and the sacral use of spaces such as *uMsamo* in Nguni contexts. These rituals do more than "activate" the presence of the ancestors, they organize memory, authorize moral claims, reconnect disrupted relationships, and locate the family within a wider communal and ecological order. For that reason, ritual must be read not simply as a symbolic performance, but as a grammar of ontological participation in which the living negotiate accountability before those who preceded them. Hence, "Rituals are the grammar of communication between the seen and unseen worlds" (Hammond Tooke, 1989, p. 63)

More importantly, these rituals are not merely metaphysical expressions; they are imbued with social and ethical structures. Ancestors are not venerated solely for

their supernatural power but for their role as collective moral exemplars and communal standards. Through ritual, the community enacts ethical memory and affirms social cohesion.

(iv) Moral values and ubuntu philosophy: ancestors as mirrors of the community

A more precise reading of the South African materials shows that Ubuntu and ancestor veneration are mutually illuminating but analytically distinct. Ubuntu expresses a broader ethical vision of relational personhood, reciprocity, and communal accountability; ancestor veneration, by contrast, concerns specific ritual and metaphysical relations with the living-dead. Their overlap lies in the fact that ancestors function as moral witnesses to communal life, but Ubuntu cannot be collapsed into ancestral practice. This distinction matters because it prevents conceptual inflation while still allowing us to see how ancestor veneration gives embodied, ritual force to wider communitarian ideals (Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005; Ramose, 2002; Udah et al., 2025). According to Mnyaka and Motlhabi (2005), "Ancestor veneration is an ethical compass rooted in collective memory and communitarian existence" (p. 221). For Udah et al. (2025), "The unique contribution that sets Ubuntu

apart from other philosophies is its depth of meaning on relationality, collective responsibility and communal accountability, social justice, recognition, and reciprocity" (p. 435).

From the above perspective, the ancestor is not only a metaphysical entity but a moral archetype, whose presence continues to shape communal values, mediate conflict, and sustain social equilibrium. Such an approach would contribute meaningfully to the recentering of African knowledge systems in global philosophical discourse. It would affirm the philosophical agency of indigenous traditions and expand the epistemological landscape of intercultural thought beyond Eurocentric paradigms.

Comparative analysis: from descriptive comparison to a theory of relational afterlife

The comparison developed in this article is not intended as a neutral juxtaposition of two ethnographic cases. Its analytical purpose is to theorize what may be called a relational afterlife: a mode of thought in which the dead continue to matter because personhood itself is unfinished without intergenerational recognition. Vietnam and South Africa both affirm this thought, yet they elaborate it

through different moral geographies. Vietnam domesticates ancestral presence through altar-centered lineage continuity and ritualized filiality; South Africa more frequently communalizes ancestral presence through public ritual, mediation, and sacred reciprocity with land and community. The significance of the comparison therefore, lies in showing that indigenous ontologies of the dead are also ontologies of the human.

Points of convergence

First, both systems conceive of the human being not as an isolated or autonomous entity, but as a relational node within an extended continuum of life that transcends physical death and temporal boundaries. In Vietnamese spiritual thought, the individual is understood as an embodiment of ancestral lineage, someone who exists as a continuation of those who came before. The term, *hương linh* (ancestral spirit) reflects this metaphysical transition, referring to the essence of the deceased, who has moved from the material to the spiritual plane but remains ever present in the family and community. Similarly, in African cosmology, particularly within Bantu-speaking cultures, the deceased are never considered fully gone. Instead, they become the "living dead", a concept

introduced by Mbiti (1990) to describe ancestors who continue to exist in a different ontological state, engaged in the life of the community, invoked in rituals, and remembered through ethical action. Death, in both systems, is not finality but a transformation of being, maintaining ontological relevance across generations.

Second, in both traditions, ancestors function not as distant historical figures but as spiritual interlocutors, mediators between the visible and invisible realms, between the human and the divine. They are entrusted with overseeing moral order, guiding individual behavior, and maintaining cosmic and social harmony. In Vietnam, ancestral altars placed at the center of the home are not mere symbols of respect but active loci of communication through incense offerings, prayers, and seasonal rites. The living seek blessings, report family events, and uphold ethical continuity. Likewise, in South African traditions, rituals such as *ukubuyisa* (calling the ancestors), libations, and consultations with *isangoma* (diviners) reaffirm the relational bond between the community and its ancestors. These acts are not optional cultural performances but essential mechanisms for balancing

spiritual energy and aligning human conduct with the will of the ancestors and, by extension, with cosmic order. Ancestors, in both cases, act as moral exemplars and supernatural regulators whose role is both metaphysical and societal.

Third, both traditions are best understood through the lens of communitarian ontology, which posits that individual identity has no meaning outside the social and intergenerational matrix. In contrast to Western philosophies of individualism, Vietnamese and African traditions emphasize that personhood is derived from one's embeddedness in a familial, ancestral, and communal structure. In Vietnamese thought, the Confucian ideal of *đạo hiếu* (filial piety) governs one's moral obligations not only to parents but to the entire ancestral lineage. To exist morally and spiritually is to maintain these obligations through ritual and everyday practice. Similarly, as Ramose (2002) argues in his exposition of Ubuntu philosophy, African thought understands the self through the principle "motho ke motho ka batho", a person is a person through other persons. This ontological stance is grounded in the idea that being is not individualized but distributed across relationships both with

the living and the dead. Thus, the self is not a detached consciousness but a relational being, co-constituted by kinship, memory, and ritual performance.

In sum, the traditions of ancestral worship in Vietnam and South Africa reveal shared metaphysical insights despite their geographical and cultural separation. Both traditions articulate systems in which existence is not bound to the present moment, nor to the individual ego, but deeply entangled with the past, with others, and with the sacred. These convergences provide compelling grounds for intercultural philosophical dialogue and offer alternative models of being that resist reductive dualisms and celebrate the enduring connectedness of life, death, and moral responsibility.

Points of divergence

The points of divergence are philosophically as important as the convergences above. Vietnam tends to organize ancestral presence through the household, bloodline, and a moral cosmology of order, balance, and filial continuity. On the other hand, South Africans, while certainly attentive to descent, more often situate ancestral presence within a broader communal and

ecological field in which ritual mediation, land, dreams, and collective well-being become central. This means that the two traditions, in different symbolic clothings, do not simply preserve "the same" ancestral logic. Rather, they disclose two different scales of moral community: one more lineage-domestic in its dominant

institutional form, the other more communitarian-ecological in its ritual dimensions. This distinction, as seen in Table 1, is what gives the current comparison its broader relevance for debates on religion, humanity, and Africanity.

Table 1.

Divergencies between Vietnamese and South African Ancestor Venerations

Criterion	Vietnam	South Africa	Evaluation
Ontology	Ancestral spirits (hương linh) are sacred entities tied to bloodline and family lineage.	Living-dead: ancestral spirits continue to exist within the community.	Both emphasize sacredness; South Africa places more focus on communal presence.
Cosmology	Yin-yang , Heaven-Earth-Human (Thiên - Địa - Nhân): a harmonious cosmic order.	Multi-layered sacred universe: Nkulunkulu - amadlozi - humans.	Shared sacred structure but different symbolic systems.
Moral Function	Emphasizes filial piety and family ethics.	Emphasizes communal ethics; Ubuntu is a broader ethical horizon, not a synonym for ancestor veneration.	Both regard ancestors as moral referents.
Ritual Practice	Household altar worship, prayer, offerings, merit - making.	Ukubuyisa, animal sacrifice, diviner mediation, communal rituals.	South African rituals are generally more communal and mediatory in structure.

Central Symbols	Altar, incense, genealogical tree, spirit tablets.	uMsamo, dreams, ritual mediation, sanctification rites.	Different symbolic references due to distinct cosmological frameworks.
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Causes of divergence

(i) Historical and cultural contexts of ancestral worship in Vietnam and South Africa

Vietnamese ancestral worship is deeply embedded within the philosophical and metaphysical frameworks of East Asian traditions, particularly Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. These systems provided the metaphysical language and ritual grammar through which the Vietnamese conceptualize death, the afterlife, and kinship continuity. Central to this cosmology are the doctrines of "âm – dương" (yin-yang) and the "ngũ hành" (five elements: wood, fire, earth, metal, water), which structure not only cosmological but also social and ethical order (Hinh, 2006; Ngoc, 2002; Long 2022). For example, the "bàn thờ tổ tiên" (household ancestral altar) is organized according to these doctrines, aligning spatial orientations and temporal rituals with cosmological harmony. Confucianism formalized "đạo hiếu"

(filial piety), turning ancestral worship into a moral imperative that links family obligation to cosmic balance.

In stark contrast, South African ancestral traditions emerged and evolved within indigenous knowledge systems that are orally transmitted, spiritually pluralistic, and strongly rooted in sacred ecology. As Mbiti (1991) asserts, African religions, including those in Southern Africa, are not "religions" in the Western doctrinal sense but integrated worldviews where belief, ritual, ethics, and environment coalesce into a unified cultural logic. South African communities such as the Zulu, Xhosa, and Sotho peoples possess ancestral belief systems that have largely resisted external philosophical colonization. Although Christianity has engendered colonial and missionary expansion, the core structures of ancestral belief have remained resilient, with ancestors (amadlozi, badimo) continuing to serve as guardians,

mediators, and sources of moral wisdom (Thorpe, 1993; Bujo, 2001).

Thus, while Vietnamese practices have been shaped by centuries of interaction with imperial Chinese thought, resulting in a literate, codified system of metaphysical beliefs, South African ancestor veneration retains its indigenous epistemological autonomy, emphasizing experiential knowledge and ritual praxis rooted in the land and community memory. This divergence in historical-philosophical trajectory fundamentally influences how each culture understands death, spirit, and continuity.

(ii) Social structures underpinning ancestor veneration in Vietnam and South Africa

Social organization plays a decisive role in structuring the forms and functions of ancestral worship in both Vietnam and South African contexts, albeit in markedly different ways. In Vietnam, the practice is fundamentally family-centered, oriented around patriarchal lineages and "gia phả" (clan-based genealogies). The ancestral altar, often placed at the center of the house, physically and symbolically anchors the continuity of the bloodline. Important rituals such as "giỗ tổ" (death

anniversaries) and "tế tổ" (ancestral feasts) not only serve to honor the deceased but also reaffirm hierarchical roles within the extended family, transmitting social ethics such as filial piety, respect for elders, and moral accountability (Thu, 1996; Phan An, 2010; Van, 2023). This practice reinforces "tề gia, trị quốc" (Confucian notions of social order), where governance of the family mirrors governance of the state.

In contrast, South African ancestor veneration functions more collectively and communally. While familial relationships are acknowledged, the social unit in ancestral rituals is often the clan, village, or tribal grouping. As Kopytoff (1997) observes, the presence of ancestors in African societies is tied not only to biological descent but to social belonging. Ancestors are guardians of the land, the moral order, and communal memory. For instance, rainmaking ceremonies, communal libations, and initiation rites involve collective invocation of ancestors not just for personal blessings but for the well-being of the entire community. Among the Xhosa, the ritual practice of *ukubuyisa* (bringing back the spirit) involves the collective recognition of the deceased's

role in ongoing community life (Hammond Tooke, 1989).

This contrast reveals two distinct orientations: the Vietnamese model emphasizes vertical transmission of bloodline legitimacy, while the South African model emphasizes horizontal social cohesion and ancestral guardianship of communal ethics and nature. The former institutionalizes ancestry within kinship hierarchies, whereas the latter embeds it within cosmopolitical networks of land, ritual, and communal interdependence.

(iii) Conceptions of the universe and spiritual ontologies

The ontological and cosmological frameworks underlying ancestral worship in Vietnam and South Africa diverge significantly in their metaphysical assumptions and spiritual mappings of the universe. Vietnamese cosmology, strongly influenced by Daoist and Confucian metaphysics, portrays the universe as a harmoniously ordered moral system in which every being has a designated position and role, governed by the *đạo* (the way). This worldview emphasizes hierarchical harmony and balance, where spiritual, familial, and cosmic orders are aligned. The ancestors,

residing in a realm that mirrors the living world, are believed to observe, influence, and guide their descendants based on the moral conduct of the living. Rituals serve not only as acts of reverence but as mechanisms to maintain moral equilibrium in the familial and cosmic spheres (Hinh, 2006; Chau, 2024).

In contrast, South African cosmology is neither hierarchical nor strictly linear, but rather multi-centric and deeply ecological. The universe is conceived as a layered spiritual ecosystem, where the visible world and the spiritual world interact fluidly through ritual performance, dreams, and environmental signs. Spirits of the ancestors do not occupy a fixed metaphysical realm "above" or "beyond", but are present in rivers, mountains, animals, and dreams, communicating with the living in multiple forms (Bujo, 2001; Chuks, 2021). This ecological spirituality recognizes sacred reciprocity: human beings must care for the land, respect ancestral protocols, and engage in rituals that uphold the natural and spiritual equilibrium.

The Vietnamese metaphysical framework tends toward moral rationalism and cosmological regulation, while the South

African model centers on relational spirituality and ecological balance. In this sense, Vietnamese ancestral worship reflects a "moral cosmology" grounded in order, while South African practices represent a "sacred ecology" grounded in inter-being and spiritual reciprocity. Both provide unique ontological blueprints for how communities relate to the dead, the divine, and the cosmos. The philosophical similarities between Vietnam and South African systems offer a promising basis for intercultural philosophical dialogue. However, their divergences are not superficial but deeply rooted in distinct historical trajectories, social configurations, and cosmological worldviews. An in-depth comparative analysis of these differences can contribute to the development of indigenous philosophy while challenging and expanding non-Western ontological frameworks.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that a meaningful comparison between Vietnamese and South African traditions lies not merely in identifying surface similarities or differences in ancestral practices, but in uncovering the shared philosophical problem they address,

namely, the constitution of relational personhood within a morally and cosmologically interconnected world. In both contexts, ancestral veneration affirms that human existence is never autonomous but embedded in enduring relationships with the dead, memory, and a multilayered cosmos. However, these insights are institutionalized differently: Vietnamese practices emphasize lineage continuity, domestic ritual space, and filial ethics, whereas South African traditions highlight communal mediation, public-spiritual presence, and broader communitarian values often articulated through Ubuntu. The findings confirm both convergence and divergence at ontological, cosmological, and ethical levels, offering a comparative framework that advances the interpretation of ancestral worship as an indigenous philosophical system rather than a residual belief. This repositioning contributes to the ongoing effort to foreground Global South epistemologies in contemporary philosophical discourse.

Nevertheless, the study is constrained by its reliance on secondary, largely English-language sources and the absence of sustained ethnographic engagement. Future research should integrate

indigenous-language materials and field-based methodologies to better capture lived practices amid rapid social transformation. Interdisciplinary approaches are also needed to bridge philosophical abstraction with ritual embodiment. Ultimately, this study calls for a dialogical and inclusive philosophical framework in which ancestral reverence becomes a critical lens for rethinking moral community, historical continuity, and plural ontologies of being human in a global context.

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