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Jesus Christ as Ancestor

Reuben Turbi Luka

One of the recurring themes in African Christian theological discourse is that of Christ as ‘an ancestor’. This article considers the meaning of Jesus Christ as an ‘ancestor’, first by introducing African ancestral belief and then examining perspectives from African theologians who apply ancestor language to Christology. The article then assesses the interface between Christian and African traditional beliefs within the themes of mediation and cosmology. Rather than seeking to comprehensively describe Jesus as an ancestor in African theology, this article explores the proposal that Jesus Christ can be helpfully conceived as Yesu/Jesu in the African context.

African theologians employ contextualization and inculturation as theological methodologies to formulate ancestor Christology. This article engages with an African linguistic affinity Christology methodology by using the transliterated Hebrew *Yeshua* and the Greek *Yesus* (the African version of which is Yesu or Jesu). The term ‘African linguistic affinity christological methodology’ is used to refer to a particular form of Christology formulated in Africa that explores a universally accepted name for Jesus in the continent – one which seeks to be faithful to the Bible and also aligns with Yahweh’s promises and covenants made to the Jewish patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses in the Old Testament that have been fulfilled in the New (see Luka 2019: 7–10, 279–358). As such, this entry delves into the hermeneutical and grammatical distinctions between the English definite article, ‘the’, and the indefinite article, ‘an’, as they pertain to the references of ‘the Christ’ and ‘an Ancestor’. This analysis is conducted considering the impact of globalization on contextual theologies.

Perspectives on ancestor Christology from African theologians are considered, after which it is suggested that the positioning of Christ as ancestor offers a diachronic and synchronic weaving of Christian theology and African tradition. The entry concludes with a consideration of the future of ancestor Christology.

Keywords: Jesus Christ, Ancestor, Christology, Africa, Methodology, Yesu/Jesu, Contextualization, Inculturation, Christian theology, Traditional African religions

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1 Introduction

The cult of ancestors is a religious phenomenon observed in diverse cultures, with particular prevalence in Africa, Asia, and select Indigenous societies. The practice entails the act of venerating, showing reverence towards, and engaging in worship of deceased ancestors, who are seen as intermediaries connecting the living with the divine realms. Rituals and ceremonies serve as means of commemoration and communication with ancestors, placing emphasis on the significance of lineage and the intergenerational links. (For detailed information about the ancestral cult in African traditional religion, see Ige 2006: 26–31.)

According to John S. Mbiti (1969: 68), African traditional religion is characterized by a prevalent belief across numerous African communities that individuals should not, or are unable to, directly approach God on their own, but rather must seek mediation via designated individuals or other entities. The biblical notion of Jesus serving as the intermediary between humanity and divinity is not a novel concept, and holds significant appeal among Africans. In fact, it holds great importance within the African Heritage, as Stinton (2004: 132) asserts that African Christians have inherently understood Jesus in relation to these ideas of mediation.

This article aims to contribute to the scholarly discourse about, and critical analysis of, the widespread recognition of the significance of ancestors in many belief systems and cultural traditions. These beliefs attribute great importance to ancestors, who are seen as bearing the responsibility of preserving and safeguarding the legacy of their successors. This function has a natural alignment and resonance with the redemptive actions of Jesus Christ. Therefore, from the perspective of Christian theology, it may be asserted that the transformation of Yahweh into the Christ resulted in Jesus becoming an ancestor.

The study of Christian theology and African tradition has employed a range of diachronic and synchronic methodologies derived from the study of linguistics. These methods comprise complementary approaches to the analysis of language as it changes over time (diachronic) and as it is used in a particular moment in time (synchronic). This article adopts these approaches in its examination of the concept of 'Jesus as ancestor'. In particular, linguistic approaches are used to analyse the hermeneutical and grammatical distinctions between the English definite article 'the' and the indefinite article 'an' in relation to the terms 'the Christ' and 'an ancestor'. The discussion will focus on the Christian perspective regarding the essence and ontology of Yahweh (God), as well as the African anthropocentric worldview.

To illustrate how the distinction between the indefinite article and the definite article can carry significant theological import, a brief consideration of John 1:1 offers an exercise

in the hermeneutical implications of an apparently small issue of translation. The Greek text underlying John 1:1 affirms that ‘the Word was God’ (*theos*). However, the New World Translation (NWT) renders the verse as: ‘the Word was with God, and the Word was a god’ (emphasis added). The rationale behind the NWT’s translation revolves around the presence of the definite article (Greek *ton*, ‘the’ in English) in the initial mention of God inside the verse, and its subsequent omission in the second mention. According to Dirk Van der Merwe (2016), the justification put forward suggests that the term ‘*ton theon*’ is indicative of the God (Jehovah), while ‘*theos*’ in isolation just describes the godlike attributes of the Word. Interpreting *theos* as ‘a god’ therefore characterizes Jesus (the Word) as possessing godlike qualities rather than being God in essence, presenting a Christology that runs counter to Christian orthodoxy.

In the context of understanding Jesus as ancestor, diachronic approaches – as advocated by proponents of ancestor Christology – aim to replace Christ with an ancestral figure who mediates between human and divine. Diachronic linguistics focuses on the connections between sequential developments in language use that are not consciously perceived by those using that language – specifically, sequences of linguistic components that replace each other without forming a system (De Saussure 1986: 98). Conroy Charles (1992: 602) defines diachronic as being ‘through time’ and characterizes it as the examination of the developmental processes involved in the creation of a literary work. In contrast, the term ‘synchronic’ refers to a certain moment in time or the occurrence of events simultaneously (Nyamiti 2005: 607). In linguistic analysis, synchronic approaches are concerned with rhetorical criticism (Telman 2020), which involves the study of composition and persuasion techniques. Rhetorical critics, including those who advocate for ancestral perspectives, seek to identify literary approaches that enhance the appeal, descriptive nature, interpretive potential, and persuasive power of a piece. By employing such synchronic/rhetorical and diachronic techniques, scholars aim to provide a greater understanding of the Christian concept of Christ’s ancestral lineage.

2 In the beginning: the concept and being of ancestors

To understand how the title of ‘ancestor’ may be applied to Jesus, it is first necessary to understand the concept of ancestor in African culture. This section provides a brief explanation of the term, sketching the trajectories and scope of the belief in African religious practice before offering an evaluation of the idea of ancestorship from a Christian theological perspective.

African societies possess a considerable level of religious knowledge and understanding: they are not devoid of religious literacy (Mbiti 1970: xiii). Religion permeates the entirety of an African individual’s existence. Individuals do not require any formal introduction

or initiation into a religious belief system, as they naturally become integral participants in the cultural heritage passed down to them by their ancestors. As they mature, they gradually adopt and engage in the collective customs and observances of their community as a matter of course. Religion is founded upon a system of beliefs. The African traditional religion exhibits inclusivity. The prevailing belief centres on the veneration of ancestors within the ancestral cult. According to the African worldview, individuals are not disconnected from the realm of the living but rather regarded as an integral component of the community and actively engaged in its affairs.

The Oxford Advanced Dictionary (8th edition) says, '[a]n ancestor is a person in your family who lived a long time ago' (Hornby 2010: 47). In African primal beliefs, the concept of being ancestors is rooted in the family, which is one of the basic units of society. All social and cultural practices find their context within the family. In African cosmology, there are two categories of spiritual beings: those who were created or emanated, and those which were once human beings (Mbiti 1969: 97). The ancestors belong to the second category, and comprise one of the essential elements of African traditional religious belief.

The notion of the existence of ancestors is thus not only universal but replete with religious significance. In the biblical context, Yahweh himself tells Moses that 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob' (Exod 3:6). Even though in this passage of the Pentateuch the writer does not categorically confirm the identity of the ancestor ('father') in the context of this narrative, certainly in the Christian tradition Yahweh chooses to be identified as the God of the Jewish ancestors: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob/Israel.

2.1 The trajectories and scope of African ancestral belief

Edward B. Idowu (1973: 188) wrote, '[a]ncestors are traced as far back as the beginning of things'. While in Christian theology the notion of ancestor took its root and shape with the call of Abraham (Gen 12:1–3), in African worldview, ancestorship derives from the consanguineous relationship. Edwin W. Smith (1950: 24) pertinently notes '[i]t is an essential element in African belief that the "living" and "dead" live in symbiosis, interdependent, capable of communicating with one another. No iron curtain separates them'. Perhaps the best description of an ancestor is,

One who has reached a great age and acquired a vast experience of life, who dies in a way that conforms to the rules of society to which he belongs, who enjoy(s) their physical, psychic, and moral integrity stemming from a mastery of the self and of one's world, and who is an organic member of the family, of the lineage, or of the tribe to which he belongs. (Nyamiti 1984: 15)

In some instances, Dominique Zahan (2000: 10) points out, '[d]ead is a necessary condition'. At the death of a person, traditional ceremonies are performed at home to demonstrate the African belief in the existence and potency of ancestors: turning all pictures to face the wall and covering all mirrors, windows, and reflective surfaces so the dead cannot view themselves.

2.2 The rationale for African ancestral belief

The African belief in ancestors, in my estimation, is the concept of continuity between this life and the hereafter that particular people are believed to enjoy. As Yusufu Turaki aptly notes,

[b]elief in and reverence for the ancestors is fundamental to traditional African thinking. It is believed that those who die at a mature age do not cease to be members of the community but continue to play an active role in the lives of their descendants. (Turaki 2006: 480)

Turaki's succinct description reveals that Africa's inclination for ancestral belief is based strongly on relationship and honour. If you like, it is the 'debt' owed to the departed loved relatives. As such, it is a delicate matter in which one sees the departed soul as still part of the community, though translated in the non-material state; and yet they still influence this life and deserve to be remembered and honoured, especially for the good they were to the community when they were alive. This concept is compelling for the fact that it is inspired by love, and the hope to unite someday with those who have gone ahead from this life.

This particular custom is evidently expressing the perpetual essence of existence. The African concept of life extends beyond the confines of our physical world, suggesting a correlation between the material and spiritual realms. In this framework, the spiritual realm possesses the ability to influence the physical realm through deliberate choices, and as such the physical realm is subject to the mercy of the spiritual realm. While the ancestors formerly inhabited the corporeal realm alongside their relatives, they now dwell in the netherworld and continue to exert an impact on the existence of the living. The actions of individuals can either appease or neglect the spiritual realm, which in turn impacts their own wellbeing in the physical domain. The ancestors in question serve as moral regulators and were commonly referred to as the living deceased. It is in this regard that the sense of naming children is meant to perpetuate ancestry, or to preserve the bond of families or communities. To an extent, it is a means of propagating or preserving history, in that the naming of a newborn baby after a departed ancestor is to preserve the memory of that departed individual. In this sense, it is legitimate to contend that ancestors exist only in the memory of their loved ones.

By this reasoning, it may be suggested that African belief in ancestors arises from the universal human quest to explain the meaning of life, to understand what life holds beyond the grave, and to account in some way for the kind of life once lived on earth. This explains why Idowu forthrightly states:

The proper meaning of the ancestral cults derives from the belief of Africans that death does not write 'finish' to life that the family or community life of this earth has only become extended into the life beyond in consequence of the 'death of the ancestors.' Thus, the cults are a means of communion and communication between those who are living on earth and those who have gone to live in the spirit world of the ancestors. (Idowu 1973: 186)

According to Ifeyinwa Cordelia Isidienu and Ann Chinazo Onyekelu (2021), ancestral cults hold a prominent position within African religious systems and have exerted a notable impact on the religious practices of Christians in Africa. These cults frequently intermingle with traditional Christian beliefs, thereby shaping diverse aspects of African Christian spirituality and rituals.

As mentioned above, there exists a prevailing idea that personalities possess the ability to influence the wellbeing of their family members, either through the bestowal of prosperity or the infliction of disaster, contingent upon the nature of their interpersonal connections. Individuals engage in acts of veneration towards these ancestral entities as a means of cultivating and preserving a positive and mutually beneficial rapport with them. Nevertheless, the strength of this bond has diminished over time, as a significant number of individuals are no longer reckoning with the potential impact that forebears might have on their own lives and those of their families. This shift in perspective can be attributed to the pervasive influence of Western culture and the embrace of modernity.

2.3 The perceived role of ancestors in African traditional beliefs

Ancestors hold a profound place within African traditional belief systems, assuming pivotal functions in matters of fertility, spiritual mediation, healing, and the preservation of customs and traditions. In addition, they are perceived as guardians of the living, providing spiritual safeguarding against harmful influences and directing individuals and communities towards security and prosperity. Consequently, they are held in high esteem and venerated through the observance of ceremonial practices and the presentation of offerings. This section provides a brief overview of how ancestors are commonly regarded as the primary reservoirs of sagacity, erudition, and moral principles that contribute to the formation of communal identity and social unity.

2.3.1 Fertility and procreation

In traditional African society, the phenomenon of fertility and procreation is commonly associated with the belief that ancestors possess the ability to bestow blessings upon their living offspring (Tabong and Adongo 2013; Lesthaeghe 2022). It is widely postulated in traditional African society that these entities possess the capacity to exert an impact on the reproductive capabilities of both individuals and animals, as well as the fecundity of the land. It is also widely held that ancestors possess the ability to refrain from bestowing these gifts if they are not appropriately appeased. Against this background, ancestral veneration involves the act of making sacrifices and offering prayers to ancestors with the intention of seeking their blessings in matters pertaining to fertility and procreation.

2.3.2 Protection and guardian

Africans place high premium on the good life, which often is defined in terms of longevity. For this reason, ancestors are commonly perceived as individuals who fulfil the role of protectors and guardians for their living progeny. M. T. Ndemanu (2018) observes that it is widely believed that ancestors provide a safeguard against physical damage. However, this safeguarding is not unconditional. Mekoa (2020), suggests that the entities (ancestors) in question possess a significant ethical function by withdrawing their protection when the living breach customs and expected moral behaviour, and only causing harm when they are individually disregarded. This explains why the enforcement of lineage and societal norms, coupled with the punishment of moral transgressions, can be observed among those who hold ancestral beliefs (see [section 2.3.4](#)).

2.3.3 Mediation and intercession

Invocation of deities is facilitated by the performance of prescribed rites and the utterance of prayers that are addressed to the ancestor for their mediation, with the primary objective of seeking divine guidance and soliciting assistance. Through these rites, ancestors are regarded as intermediaries who possess the ability to engage in communication with deities and spirits, acting as representatives for their progeny. The concepts of mediation and intercession are frequently discussed in several academic disciplines. According to Peter Lee Ochieng Oduor (2021), it is thought that ancestors serve as intermediaries between individuals and God or the Supreme Being. In this vein, P. T. N. Tabong and P. B. Adongo (2013) note that ‘those possessing this authority possess the ability to provide guidance, confer favourable circumstances, and demonstrate respect towards their current beneficiaries’. This submission reveals that ancestral veneration involves the act of making sacrifices, offering prayers, and engaging in worship rituals as a means of seeking the intercession and mediation of ancestors, with the ultimate goal of receiving blessings and protection. Accordingly, M. G. Mokgobi (2014: 24–34) notes, ‘[i]t is believed that the

ancestors maintain a vested interest in the daily affairs of their surviving descendants and fulfil the role of intermediaries between the living individuals and the divine entity’.

2.3.4 Custodians of customs and traditions

In Africa, ancestors are commonly recognized as caretakers of customs and traditions (Tabong and Adongo 2013). I. Mekoa (2020) suggests that individuals maintain ethical behaviour through asserting their expectations for respect and attention, and expressing anger when such regard is not reciprocated. This relates to the ancestors who, in U. M. Ushe’s (2017) view, have a crucial role in endorsing the practices, norms, and ethics of society through granting wellbeing to those who abide by them and causing harm to those who disregard them. Grounded on this reasoning, the absence of ancestors according to traditional worldview would deprive Africans of moral principles and drive. Ancestors are thus perceived as actively safeguarding cultural legacy and assuring the preservation of ancestral practices.

2.3.5 Healing

Makunga N. Edwards, S. J. Thwala, and B. Mbele (2009) are keen to emphasize that healing emerges as a prominent function of ancestors within the context of African traditional religion and culture. It is often thought that ancestors possess the ability to provide healing to their current descendants. According to Mokgobi (2014), compassionate spirits, who are believed to be blood-related to their adherents, are commonly perceived in this cultural context. Furthermore, Edwards, Thwala, and Mbele state:

It is widely thought that ancestors play a role in facilitating healing through their connection with a higher power, namely God [...] individuals often use the concept of God as a means to facilitate the process of healing. It is believed that God operates through ancestral figures in order to provide assistance to individuals in need. (Edwards, Thwala and Mbele 2009)

For the purposes of this article, the definition of ancestral healing with by M. C. Vlach (2019) is useful: ‘A therapeutic approach that seeks to uncover and address intergenerational trauma, patterns of behaviour, and emotional wounds that have been passed down through ancestral lineage’. Likewise, Theodore T. Bartholomew (2016: x), observes that ‘[t]here is a belief that ancestral healing has the potential to address and alleviate intergenerational patterns of family dysfunction’. For Bartholomew,

[t]hrough engaging with ancestors who possess a strong spiritual essence, individuals can commence the process of comprehending and altering recurring instances of suffering

and mistreatment, so progressively restoring the favourable spiritual essence within their familial lineage. (Bartholomew 2016: x)

In the light of Bartholomew's view, ancestral healing practice also fosters introspection and enhances one's understanding of life's purpose, so cultivating increased personal satisfaction and a heightened sense of life's significance. Ancestral healing is a therapeutic modality that seeks to uncover and address any hereditary ancestral trauma, behaviours, and scars, with the ultimate goal of ameliorating intergenerational patterns of familial dysfunction.

Thwala and Edwards (2021) conducted a study that delves into the beliefs and practices associated with the function of ancestors in the healing process within the Zulu community of South Africa. On this note, the article explores the psychosocial aspects of the healing process, focusing on the role of divine mediation and ongoing communication with ancestors.

3 Jesus as an ancestor: the weaving of Christian theology and African traditions

In Africa, Christian theology is actively engaged in an ongoing conversation with the diversity of African culture and traditional religious belief. Schreiter (2005: vii) and Jenkins (2006: 8) observed that post-independence and post-missionary Africa was becoming the world's fastest-growing Christian continent at their time of writing. These estimation found justification in Jenkins' study, where he presented figure of the African Continent between 1900–2000 to be 360 million – from ten percent of the population to forty-six percent. More recently, the most vibrant centres of Christian growth are still in Africa itself (Luka 2019: 37–38; Jenkins 2006: 9). Jenkins (2006: 9, quoted by Luka 2019: 38) further notes: 'By 2025, Africa and Latin America will vie for the title of the most Christian Continent'. Within this continent, it is not uncommon to borrow Schreiter's epigram (2005: vii; Luka 2019: 38) one finds the full range of questions facing Christianity as a world church today. Thus, in post-independence Africa, Bediako had noted that two theological trends became apparent:

One was the theological dimension to the struggle for the social and political transformation of the conditions of inequality and oppression in South Africa, and it produced 'black theology.' The other was the theological exploration of the indigenous cultures of African peoples, with particular stress on their pre-Christian religious traditions. (Bediako 2002: 426)

The perspective above resulted in the emergence of African theology, of which the main emphasis is ancestor Christology. This theology seeks to explore the relationship between the emergent Christian faith and the traditional religions and cultures of Africa (Luka 2019: 38).

3.1 The concept and meaning of ancestor Christology

In African theology, ancestor Christology refers to a theological framework that incorporates indigenous African beliefs and customs regarding ancestors into the interpretation of Jesus Christ and his significance in the context of salvation. This approach recognizes the importance of ancestors in African cultural and spiritual contexts, perceiving them as intermediaries between the mortal realm and the spiritual realm (section 2.3). In African Christianity, Jesus Christ is often regarded as the quintessential progenitor, symbolizing the wisdom, potency, dominion, and transcendent essence of one's forebears. Ancestor Christology includes the integration of ancestral rituals into Christian worship, and the modification of songs and prayers to align with African cultural expressions, as well as the provision of direction, protection, and blessings.

3.2 Colonialism and African nationalist movement: impetus to ancestor Christology

African ancestor christological configuration derives its inspiration and its origin in Africa's social, religious, and political encounter with Western missionaries and colonial masters of the past. The struggle to achieve independence and thus be liberated from Western world powers and Western hermeneutical hegemony birthed the quest to formulate Africa's own concepts. A pervasively compelling trend during this time is African Nationalist Movement. In Africa, nationalism emerged in the first half of the twentieth century as a movement to oppose and/or resist colonialism. Crawford Young aptly wrote:

African nationalism started as an anti-colonial struggle. It refers to resistance against colonialism and the desire to gain freedom from the colonial state and to build a nation [...]. It is characterized by excessive zeal and love for one's nation [...] a political creed that underlines the cohesion of modern societies and legitimizes their claim to authority. (Young 1976: 70–71)

After colonialism, African nationalism became a central focus for calls for the unification of Africa. For Asante,

[t]he term nationalism is derived from the concept of nation. A nation is a collection of people who share, or are perceived to share, some common characteristics. These

characteristics include, among others, language, ethnicity, religion, and customs. On the basis of these shared values, people are seen as belonging to a 'community.' (Asante 2016: 2)

The rapid growth of national movements in Africa after the 1940s resulted from a variety of factors. The movements attempted to transform conceptions of African identity, from an initial focus on isolated ethnicities to racial identification, or an identity based on the territorial state carved out by colonial rulers. Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832–1912), a Liberian educator, writer, and politician, was widely regarded as a founder of African nationalism. His writings became widely influential across West Africa. He led the call for a revival of African cultures and traditions in response to colonial and missionary denigration of African cultures as backward, barbaric, savage, or uncivilized. Later nationalist figures, like James Africanus Horton (1835–1883) from Sierra Leone and S. R. B. Attah-Ahuma (1863–1921) from the Gold Coast, followed in his footsteps.

These are just a few examples that contributed to the resurgence of African traditional religion through which ancestral Christology became a capstone. David Chidester (1992: 13) is right to suggest that it is entirely possible that the ancestors provided that frame of reference in a strange and alien world that seemed to be particularly hostile to anything African. One can therefore argue that ancestor worship served a unifying function and, in a sense, constituted a form of defiance against white oppression which frowned upon the traditional practices (as was the case in South Africa, for instance, where such oppression marginalized Black South Africans). Hence, Chidester (1992: 13) points out that ancestor worship assumed a more urgent character in the nineteenth century, serving as a spiritual anchor which seemed to secure the traditions and nation itself which appeared to be threatened and destabilized under European rule.

3.3 Ancestral Christology as the product of the cult of the ancestors: historical complexity and trends

Discussions on the relationship between Christianity and African culture and religion eventually led to an inquiry about the possibility and legitimacy of African theology (Luka 2019: 48; Tiénou 1990: 27). Contemporary African theologians seek to formulate a contextualized Christology for African culture. In so doing, they employ categories from the African past – such as the concept and cult of the ancestors – to conceptualize and articulate Christian theology in an African mode. This concern for contextualization and inculturation places African Christology in tension with certain principles of Christian theological orthodoxy: in other words, with Christology as it is rooted in the doctrinal confessions and formulations of the apostolic and patristic eras.

Magezi and Igba (2018: 1–3) lament the difficulty and task of African theology and African Christology by pointing out the dichotomy in formulation between the African theological endeavours and liberationist Black theology – which, although originating and operating in different contexts, have interrelated histories and interests. Thus, they concluded:

The Southern African axis [...has] had to deal with issues of democratization and politics with getting rid of apartheid and transformation of society as a chief goal, thereby leading to the theology of bread, while their counterparts in Sub-Saharan Africa have had to deal with issues of culture and identity as a chief concern leading to their focus on the theology of being. (Magezi and Igba 2018: 7–10)

Against this historically and socially complex background, this article delimits itself to examining the African theological endeavours that hinge on ancestral beliefs from which the inspiration to formulate ancestor Christology was derived. To this end, the following section briefly introduces Christology in historical perspective, and offers a survey of different formulations of Christ as ancestor in the theology of various twentieth- and twenty-first-century African theologians.

4 The cosmology of traditional African religion

The term ‘traditional African religion’ covers a wide range of indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices that have been observed by numerous ethnic groups throughout the African continent over an extended period of time. These religious traditions exhibit significant diversity and can exhibit substantial variation among different communities. Typically, these practices encompass the reverence directed towards forebears, ethereal beings, and divine entities, while exhibiting a profound affinity with the natural world. Rituals, rites, and oral traditions hold considerable importance within these belief systems. It is imperative to acknowledge that the absence of a singular, universally acknowledged ‘traditional African religion’ originates from the extensive cultural heterogeneity across the continent. Moreover, these belief systems frequently coexist alongside other religious practices, such as Christianity and Islam. (For detail on the concept of traditional African religion, see Chiorazzi 2015.)

Turaki (2000) asserts that comprehending the prevalence of intermediaries in traditional African religion necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the cosmological framework that influences the beliefs and rituals of the African populace. The traditional African religious system comprises several key elements, including the Supreme Being, lesser divinities, ancestors, and spirits. Traditional African religious beliefs encompass the notion of a Supreme Being who holds a position of authority above the lesser divinities and the hierarchical structure of creatures. The Supreme Being is perceived as being detached

from the affairs of human existence, leading individuals to typically direct their prayers and sacrifice acts towards subordinate deities who serve as intermediaries between the human and holy domains.

In trying to analyse the cosmology of traditional Africa, it is important to note the fact that the constituent countries of the African continent are more than fifty, and that each has its distinct history, culture, and belief systems. However, while that is the case, it is also important to note that the African traditional religion as a whole is folk-based with no systematic or articulated account. This is the sense in which African religious thought is largely differentiated from Western religious thought.

In speculating a cosmology for traditional African thought, one common characteristic is that demons and spirits are encountered as a normal part of existence, and are regarded as beings whose actions have implications of tangible reality upon humans. Hence, their influence on human society is not underestimated: these demons and spirits must be appeased or kept happy just so that their goodwill may be entreated and obtained. As such, traditional African religion employs the services of intermediate agencies that mediate, appease, communicate and interact spiritually with elements existing in this incorporeal realm. This accounts for the presence of the many medicine men, rainmakers, spirits of the dead, elders, juju priests, seers, prophets, oracles, and diviners in most African societies. Such a perspective is not the case with Western rationalist thought, where the direct relationship of cause and effect explains almost every event and demonic or spiritual forces are not considered to have any influence on human existence.

Another fundamental aspect of traditional African religion is the prevalence of tiers of power. The hierarchy of powers accounts for why African traditional worship is said to be polytheistic. However, scholars in the field of religious studies have offered that African worship is directed to a single deity who is the Supreme Being. G. D. Stidham (2022) contends, in dialogue with Timothy C. Tennent, that within the African religious context it is crucial to differentiate between the concepts of 'deity' and 'divinity'. This distinction is necessary due to the prevailing monotheistic framework in the Western context, where the terms 'divinity' and 'deity' are often used interchangeably (Stidham 2022). As a result, Stidham argues (against Tennent) that numerous African traditional religions exhibit both monotheistic and polydivinistic characteristics concurrently (Stidham 2022). African religious traditions encompass the amalgamation of a belief in a Supreme Being alongside the veneration of additional deities and ancestors. These traditions employ ritual practices and magical elements to facilitate communication and interaction between human beings, the natural world, and the divine entities. In numerous African languages, the absence of a specific term denoting God can be observed, as these languages reflect a cultural legacy wherein divinity is perceived to be inherent within all entities and locations.

As Stidham implies, Tennent's use of 'monotheistic' and 'polydivinistic' represents the popular view that traditional African worship is devoted to a Supreme Being who also has multiple deities that serve the Supreme Being in a subsidiary way, since this Deity is a distant figure, a *deus otiosus* – a person, a deity that is beyond us (Stidham 2022). In their writings, both Mbiti and Idowu take the argument for monotheistic and polydivinistic one step further. For Mbiti, divinities are distinct from the Supreme Being. He asserts, '[d]ivinities are regarded as the personifications of God's activities and manifestations' (Mbiti 1985: 75). Idowu coined the phrase 'implicit' or 'diffused monotheism' to describe the African worship of a Supreme Being called Olodumare, while other gods in African religions are in fact ministers of the One God (Hesselgrave and Rummen 1995: 109).

In drawing these conclusions, Idowu and Mbiti propose that the presence of the many other gods or deities is only to serve intermediary purposes in the context of traditional African religion. Joseph I. Omoregbe (2012) also subscribes to this view; he is firm in his conclusion that, in traditional African religious thought, there is no rivalry between God and his chiefs (divinities) who are always loyal to him. Omoregbe makes the point that Africans do not see themselves confronted with a choice between worshipping God or the divinities, since it is God himself that they worship *through* his divinities (2012: 65). Ikechukwu A. Kanu also concurs in saying that divinities are deans of the theocratic governance of the Supreme Being – divinities are only means to an end and not end in themselves (Kanu 2005: 16).

4.1 The effect of African cosmology on Christian practice

With the complex cosmological schema that underlies traditional African worldview, it is no wonder that even when traditional Africans convert to Christianity, it is usually a challenge for them to take personal responsibility for their religious life, walk and grow independently without the influence of the traditional community to which they belong by consanguinity. Thus, as inculcated to them before their faith in Christ, God as held in primal beliefs is still being dreaded, avoided, and not related to as a loving Friend and Father. This goes a long way in revealing that when traditional Africans convert to Christianity, it is not only syncretism that is likely to be the problem, but even more so, they struggle with how to worship the one true God of the Christian scriptures directly; as such, direct fellowship is a far cry or a remote possibility in the religious practice which they once belong or have converted from.

When considering the coexistence of African traditional beliefs with Christian faith, it becomes apparent that there are discernible factors contributing to the emergence of certain phenomena within contemporary church practices. Specifically, one notable occurrence involves church members being required to provide monetary compensation

in exchange for receiving prayers. Individuals express a preference for engaging the services of a pastor whose fasting and prayer practices are perceived as more pleasing to God compared to their own prayer and fasting efforts, regardless of their sincerity. This desire for spiritual mediation has led to the proliferation of prayer houses, wherein prophets and individuals of religious authority engage in intercession activities in return for monetary compensation. From a practical theology perspective, such practices make the field of Christian ministry susceptible to the promotion of individuals who lack the requisite theological qualifications and training, yet manage to establish themselves as influential figures within the church. Through their ministerial position, they are able to assume pivotal roles in the spiritual development of their extensive congregations, taking on titles such as apostle, shepherd, prophet, papa, MOG (Man of God), messiah, bishop, etc., which emphasize their perceived spiritual authority. The positioning of church ministers as intermediaries between God and the church thus makes congregations vulnerable to manipulation and financial exploitation, since the minister is able to claim his teachings and actions come with divine authority, on behalf of God.

There are other ways in which the concept of ancestor veneration has exerted substantial influence on the religious practices of Christians residing in Africa, frequently amalgamating Christian and Indigenous beliefs and molding several facets of African Christian spiritual and ceremonial expressions. There are several specific manifestations through which this traditional notion of ancestorship can be observed in African Christianity.

Within the African Christian community, a prevalent phenomenon is the enduring bond maintained between individuals and their ancestral lineage. It is widely held that the deceased possess a significant role within the spiritual realm and have the ability to intercede on behalf of individuals. This idea nurtures a perception of connectedness between the living and the deceased within African Christianity. Within certain African Christian groups, customary practices such as conducting prayer services for the deceased or engaging in ceremonies at ancestral burial sites are prevalent. These practices facilitate the reverence of ancestors while upholding the principles of the Christian faith.

Numerous African Christian hymns integrate allusions to ancestors and their divine affiliation. The hymns in question serve as a means of celebrating the concept that faith transcends the boundaries of the present and include those who have preceded us, so highlighting the importance of a collective sense of spirituality.

The concept of ancestor veneration holds significant complexity and diversity within the context of African Christian spirituality, exhibiting varying degrees of influence across distinct geographical areas and denominational affiliations. Although syncretism may arise

under these conditions (and with its various theological and ecclesiological difficulties), the phenomenon also serves to underscore the capacity of Christianity in Africa to assimilate and incorporate local beliefs and practices, resulting in a distinct manifestation of the religion.

4.2 Evaluation of ancestral belief in light of scripture

As we have established in this article, many Africans have strong, deeply rooted beliefs concerning the spirits of their ancestors and the relationship between the living and the dead. This section discusses what the Bible says about the spirit world of the dead and our relationship with the dead. The Christian scriptures speak against consulting the dead, or seeking counsel, guidance, or any form of help from one's non-living relations. The Lord warns his people: 'Let no one be found among you [...] who consults the dead' (Deut 18:10–11, NIV).

In 1 Sam 28:8–19, King Saul – whose faith was being put to test – summoned the spirit of the dead prophet Samuel to ask his wisdom. Samuel's response was instructive: 'Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?' (28:15). Samuel confirms that the Lord has departed from Saul, and that the Lord's favour is now with his rival, King David. This scenario illustrates Saul's distance from God and suggests a clear prohibition of communicating with the dead. For this reason, Wilbur O'Donovan comments that 'God allowed Samuel to speak with Saul in this unusual case not to encourage or help Saul, but to condemn him' (O'Donovan 1992: 221).

In these scriptural examples, God forbids any social or spiritual intercourse between the living and the dead; and if scripture is recognized as authoritative in matters of orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxis (right practice), it follows that – contrary to what African traditional religion beliefs – a biblical Christian perspective would hold that the dead are the dead, fundamentally separate from those who are alive, and cannot in any way be a source of help or encouragement to the living.

What, then, is the recommended nature of our association with the deceased and, by extension, our ancestors, as prescribed by the Bible? The biblical texts do not address ancestors in the African conceptualization, since they were composed within a different historical and socio-cultural context. However, in terms of the most immediate sense of 'ancestor' – one's parents – Eph 6:1–3 emphasizes the importance of honouring one's parents, referring to it as the primary commandment that comes with a promise. A similar instruction exists in the Ten Commandments: 'Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you' (Exod 20:12).

Therefore, it can be considered legitimate to bring honour to a member of one's family who lived a good life, and who displayed great morality and virtuous character. This principle

can be applied to one's ancestors, whose names may be shown respect by honouring the good works which they did during their lives on Earth and by walking in their faith if they were Christians.

However, Christian doctrine teaches that one must be careful not to honour creatures – in this case, one's ancestors – in place of the Creator, God. An orthodox Christian position would be to assert, as O'Donovan does, that:

[a] Christian must look to only God through Jesus Christ for correction, for help and blessing for his or her life. He or she must not seek the blessing or guidance or help of any ancestor, divinity or spirit. (O'Donovan 1992: 223)

For this reason, participation in offering food, drink, or any liquor to one's ancestors are incompatible with orthodox Christian belief and practice. In the view of some Christian theologians, such as O'Donovan, '[t]he real Persons receiving these offerings are not ancestral spirits, but demons' (1992: 223; Deut 32:16–17; 1 Cor 10:19–20). Given his view that ancestral oblations are made to demons, O'Donovan warns that if we fail to make '[a] definite and permanent break from these beliefs and practices of traditional religion, we in effect gradually weaken the church in Africa' (1992: 223; Judg 10:13–14). Nevertheless, it should be noted that, in a discourse with the Corinthians regarding the efficacy of food sacrificed to idols, Apostle Paul explicitly conveyed that idols possess no inherent influence over a person of faith (1 Cor 8:1–8). Consequently, individuals who do not adhere to the Christian faith may find significance in this concept, whilst Christians perceive it as devoid of any meaning.

5 Christ as an (or 'the') ancestor: perspectives from African theologians

The field of African theology has demonstrated a growing recognition of the importance of contextualized interpretations of Christianity, with the objective of fostering a connection between African cultures and the Christian faith. A number of theologians have identified the conceptualization of Christ the Ancestor as a critical subject of inquiry. These concepts serve as a crucial avenue for theologians to explore the harmonization of African ancestor traditions with the fundamental nature of Christ's divinity. This section will consider six different but related models proposed by African theologians: Christ the ancestor *par excellence*; Christ the proto-ancestor; Christ the mediator; Christ the brother and greatest ancestor; Christ the African archetypal man; and Christ the ancestor progenitor.

5.1 Christ the ancestor *par excellence* – Abbé Marc Ntetem and John Mutiso-Mbinda

The notion of 'Christ the ancestor *par excellence*' provides a distinctive framework through which African theologians, such as Abbé Marc Ntetem and John Mutiso-Mbinda, analyse the divine nature and ancestral essence of Christ. This exploration of Christ's ancestorship seeks to promote a decolonized theological perspective that aligns with African cultural values and to enhance the sense of relevance and empowerment of Christian faith for African Christians. For proponents of ancestor Christology, such an approach emphasizes ways of encouraging African Christians to engage with the intricacies of their own identity and spirituality with a sense of confidence. It also emphasizes the significance of the African Christian experience and the continuous process of inculturation.

An examination of two particular viewpoints in relation to this framework will aid our comprehension of the intricate theological aspects and social ramifications associated with the concept of Christ as ancestor. This section undertakes a critical analysis of the connected but divergent perspectives of Abbe Marc Ntetem and John Mutiso-Mbinda concerning the concept of 'Christ the ancestor *par excellence*'. Both theologians place significant stress on the fundamental importance of Christ within the context of African spirituality. However, Ntetem's focus primarily centres on the religious and spiritual dimensions of Christ's ancestorship, whilst Mutiso-Mbinda's viewpoint tends to tilt towards its social ramifications. These overlapping perspectives contribute to a holistic comprehension of Christ's ancestral essence within African contexts.

Ntetem, a distinguished French theologian from Cameroon, has engaged in theological discourse surrounding the notion of Christ the ancestor *par excellence* within the context of a specifically African worldview. By extensively examining traditional African beliefs and practices, Ntetem posits that Christ, as the preeminent ancestor, serves as a mediator between the living and the deceased. According to Ntetem, Jesus' mediatorial role on behalf of humanity to God the Father qualifies Jesus for this nomenclature (Mutiso-Mbinda 1979: 52). Ntetem explains further that '[a]s the ancestor is the true master of initiation, so tribal initiation offers us a point of contact which makes clear [...] that Jesus Christ is the ancestor *par excellence*' (quoted from Mutiso-Mbinda 1979: 52). For Ntetem, tribal ancestors are the masters of initiation; assigning Jesus the role of an ancestor makes him, therefore, a master of initiation to the utmost degree.

Ntetem employs an inculturation methodology to argue that Jesus should be given the title 'Ancestor *Par Excellence*', as Reuben Turbi Luka (2019: 55) observes. Emphasizing the significance of ancestor veneration within African communities, Ntetem draws out the embodiment and transcendence of this ancestral bond with Christ, thereby establishing a Christology that is profoundly resonant for African Christians. Ntetem's conceptualization of Christ as the ancestor *par excellence* finds its foundation in the African worldview characterized by dynamism and animism. In this context, ancestral spirits are not perceived as just impersonal forces, but rather as entities with a personal bond with their

progeny (see Beyers and Mphahlele 2009). The concept of Christ being perceived as a personal and relational being aligns with the faith commitment of African theologians, who aspire to establish firm link with Christian tradition.

John Mutiso-Mbinda, a theologian who hails from Kenya, presents an additional viewpoint that contributes to the discourse. The primary focus of Mutiso-Mbinda's analysis is in the examination of the sociopolitical ramifications associated with Christ's ancestral lineage. Mutiso-Mbinda places particular emphasis on the manner in which this ancestral identity poses a challenge to prevailing systems of oppression, while simultaneously providing a means of emancipation for African people. Mutiso-Mbinda conducts an analysis of Christ's pedigree and ancestry, as presented in the biblical genealogies, and interprets it from an African perspective. This interpretation emphasizes Christ's identification with marginalized and oppressed communities, hence emphasizing his solidarity with them (Mutiso-Mbinda 1979: 52). For Mutiso-Mbinda,

as in African ancestors, Christ is the ancestor *par excellence*, because he is our mediator and has preceded us in passing over [to the afterlife]. And as the source of new life, he is the one in whom our common destiny is pegged on. (Mutiso-Mbinda 1985: 67)

5.2 Christ the proto-ancestor – Timothy C. Tennent, Emmanuel Martey, and Bénézet Bujo

In his publication entitled 'Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church is Influencing the Way We Think About and Discuss Theology', Timothy C. Tennent (2007) argues that a comprehensive understanding of salvation on a global scale requires acknowledging the pivotal role of Christ as the proto-ancestor. Despite being a non-African theologian, Tennent extensively explores the ancestral influences that have shaped the theological perspectives of many African ancestral theologians. He conceptualizes Jesus as the 'proto', 'supreme', or 'greatest' ancestor. From this perspective, Tennent perceives Christ as a figure who possesses the ability to restore health and grant vitality. He notes keenly:

The missionaries who came to African tended to de-emphasize the Supernatural aspects of Christ's healing ministry. Furthermore, they also tended to attribute illness to solely physical causes, calling more for a physician (even an unbelieving one) than the pastor. In light of the strong emphasis in the gospels on Jesus' healing and deliverance ministry, it is justifiable that African felt that the Christology they had been taught, was upon reflection, inadequate. (Tennent 2007: 117)

Like other exponents of African ancestor Christology, Tennent elucidates that this particular notion underscores the centrality of Christ's function as the origin of all existence, encompassing both corporeal and metaphysical dimensions. Tennent (2007) further argues that this concept aligns harmoniously with conventional Christian tenets, including the dogma of creation *ex nihilo* and the belief in the universal nature of sin. To this end, he emphasizes the burgeoning and dynamic nature of Christianity in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, underscoring the imperative to integrate the distinctive viewpoints, convictions, and customs of various locales into theological dialogue. Furthermore, Tennent (2007) posits that the theological tradition should be enriched by incorporating the lived experiences and cultural variety of many worldwide Christian communities.

In his work, Tennent further examines the various challenges and opportunities that emerged as a result of the diverse and multifaceted nature of global Christianity, including but not limited to the inherent conflicts arising from the interplay of contextualization and universality within the realm of theology. He underscores the significance of upholding an orthodox theological framework while concurrently accommodating it to diverse cultural milieux (Tennent 2007).

However, Tennent's viewpoint of Christ as the proto-ancestor may exhibit dissimilarities when compared to certain African theologians, particularly in regard to the significance attributed to Christ's role as the origin of all humanity. Both approaches recognize the significance of Christ as an ancestor. However, Tennent's thesis places emphasis on the inclusive aspect of salvation and the role of Christ in redeeming individuals from all cultural and racial backgrounds. This stands in contrast to the main contention of African theologians that Christ's ancestorship is exclusive to African believers, unlike Tennent's inclusive formulation as a non-African theologian.

Bénézet Bujo, a renowned African theologian and scholar, has made substantial contributions to the scholarly dialogue pertaining to the field of Christology. Bujo presents a distinct viewpoint of Christ as the proto-ancestor, alternatively referred to as the First Ancestor. This perspective introduces a novel and intellectually stimulating understanding of Christ's significance within the context of the Christian religion. Thus, in his aim to integrate biblical Christology with the contemporary social problems of Africa, Bujo (1992: 93) tries to map the biblical context onto the African context. He suggests that Christ is the 'proto-ancestor', a concept he believes carries particular significance for Africans. This nomenclature implies that Christ is the primary ancestor and the one who personifies the ultimate ancestor that one should emulate. Similarly, he refers to Heb 1:1–2, which he understands to indicate that God previously communicated with our African Fathers through the ancestors but now communicates through Christ (Bujo 1992: 83).

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. (Heb 1:1–2)

The notion of Christ as the proto-ancestor presents a departure from standard interpretations of Christology and the manner in which Christ is perceived in connection to humanity in Christian doctrine. However, Bujo argues that Christ, in his divine manifestation, serves as the epitome of humankind, embodying the fundamental prototype from which all of humanity originates. This approach is firmly grounded in Bujo's African theological heritage and demonstrates his dedication to African contextual theology, a method that aims to engage with the distinct requirements and viewpoints of African Christian communities.

5.3 Christ the mediator: Kwame Bediako

Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako's approach to African traditional religion tends towards inclusivism, parallel to his understanding of the approaches of Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria toward Greek philosophy. According to Keith Ferdinando (2007: 1), who has written on Bediako's theology, Christian inclusivist approaches argue that salvation/truth is found only in Christ but may be mediated through non-Christian religions or philosophies apart from any explicit knowledge of him. Bediako's argument comes from a discourse on the Ashanti chief, Korinchi, who was sympathetic to missionary criticism of human sacrifice and other traditional customs but was brutally executed by his king before anything apparently came of his contact with the gospel. Bediako asks whether one might not see Korinchi in the same terms as Justin Martyr saw Socrates, and he quotes Erasmus to similar effect: 'It may be that the Spirit of Christ goes farther and wider than we think. And there are many in the fellowship of the Saints, who are not in our catalogue' (Bediako 1992: 247).

Within his inclusivist view, Bediako applies the African concept of ancestorship to Christ: 'by virtue of his Incarnation, death and resurrection, and ascension into the realm of spirit-power (Jesus) can rightly be designated, in African terms, as Ancestor, indeed Supreme Ancestor' (1997: 217). Bediako identifies the functional mediation of Christ with that of African ancestors: Christ takes on an ancestor's mediating role between humanity and the spiritual realm. Indeed, as 'supreme ancestor', Christ mediates more truly than any other.

5.4 Christ the brother and greatest ancestor: Charles Nyamiti, François Kabasélé, and John Pobee

The fundamental basis from which African theologians seem to connect Jesus Christ with ancestral philosophies regards the tracing of Jesus' family members to the first human being, Adam (Gen 2–3; cf. genealogies of Jesus in the gospels). Charles Nyamiti (1984: 28), for instance, employs this dimension to argue for Jesus as Brother Ancestor. By Nyamiti's definition,

brother-ancestor is a relative of a person with whom he has a common parent, and of whom he is the mediator to God, the archetype of behavior and with whom – thanks to his supernatural status acquired through death – he is entitled to have regular sacred communication. (Nyamiti 1984: 22)

Since Jesus' descent may be traced back to Adam, his ancestorship as Brother Ancestor may be established, and qualified, on the basis of the Christian belief in the common origin of all humanity. Thus, Nyamiti traces the Africans' consanguineous relationship to Christ through the biblical understanding of common origins in Adam and Jesus' unique identity as fully human (as well as divine). He expresses this idea in the following manner:

Considered as the *man* Jesus is our natural Brother in Adam, like anyone of us is. It is obvious that when seen from this purely human perspective Christ was like all men a descendant of Adam, and had natural family, clan, and tribal relationships. After His death, He became again like all men – a Brother-Ancestor in Adam. This Brother-Ancestorship is purely natural, it is Christian in the origin of all men in Adam. In this case, however, Jesus became the natural Brother-Ancestor only of those who lived on earth after His death. (Nyamiti 1984: 28, original emphasis)

For François C. Kabasélé, a Catholic theologian and priest from the Dominican Republic, ancestor Christology must begin with the role of Jesus as a mediator. Kabasélé (1991: 123–124) argues that Christ fits the category of ancestor because he is the synthesis of all forms of mediation. In this view, death facilitates the shift of a person from the physical realm, as a mortal being, to a spiritual domain, where they exist as the living dead (ancestors). Jesus Christ is said to fit this category (1991: 123–124), mainly because he lived as a mortal being (with regard to his humanity), he tasted death (thus qualifying as an ancestor), and resurrected (transcending the physical realm to a spiritual domain) to act as the mediator between humanity and God (Bediako 1995: 217). Therefore, the death of Jesus Christ merits him, when using African imagery, 'to be looked upon as Ancestor, the greatest of ancestors, who never ceases to be one of the living-dead' (Dickson 1984: 198). Thus, the process of death conveys more than just the cessation of life. It embodies

the transition from the physical, short-lived, and worldly realm to the immortal, sacred, and celestial sphere where personage participates of existence in the spiritual form.

Prominent Ghanaian Anglican priest and theologian John Pobee (1979: 94) shares the view that Jesus Christ should be proclaimed as the 'Great and Greatest Ancestor – in Akan Language Nana.' As the 'Great and Greatest Ancestor (Nana)', Jesus inherits the position of spiritual power. In this sense, Jesus has 'the power and authority to judge the deeds of men, rewarding the good, punishing the evil' (Pobee 1979: 94). Pobee also suggests an Akan-language version of the classic philosophical formulation '*cognatus ergo sum*' (I think, therefore I am): 'I am related by blood, therefore I exist'. This, he believes, is an element that Africa shares with the biblical faith and a premise upon which dialogue between African traditional religion and Christian theology may begin (Pobee 1979: 44f).

5.5 Christ the African archetypical man: A. E. Orobator

In his work titled *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (2008), Nigerian scholar A. E. Orobator delves into the notion of regarding Jesus as an ancestor. Orobator posits that adopting this perspective has the potential to facilitate a connection between Christianity and the Indigenous spiritual practices of Africa. He adds that the perspective of Jesus as an ancestor facilitates a culturally pertinent and approachable conceptualization of Christ within the African milieu. This notion exemplifies the overarching principle of inculturation, which entails the assimilation of Christianity within the preexisting cultural and spiritual milieu of Africa.

According to Orobator, the concept of Jesus as an ancestor in African theological discourse serves as a means to establish a link between the Christian religion and the African cultural practice of venerating and seeking counsel from ancestors. Such a perspective resonates with Joel Mokhoathi's (2021) assertion that African Christianity frequently integrates the custom of venerating and seeking counsel from ancestors, acknowledging their significance within African culture and spirituality. In line with that thought, Aduloju (2023: 105) argued that this integration allows for the establishment of a correlation between the Christian religion and the African tradition of ancestor worship. African Christianity focuses significant emphasis on community and interpersonal connections, mirroring the communal characteristics inherent in African communities. Such integration takes place through the African conceptualization of the spiritual domain, wherein the notions of interpersonal connections and communal involvement have considerable importance.

Orobator's objective is to enhance the level of involvement with Christianity among African believers by portraying Jesus as a celestial entity who can be revered and addressed in a manner akin to ancestral spirits. This perspective further underscores the significance of connections and community within African religion, as ancestors are

frequently perceived as engaged participants in the lives of their progeny. For Orobator (2008), the incorporation of Christianity into African culture and spirituality has manifested in numerous manners, reflecting the wide array of traditions and beliefs present on the continent.

As innovative as his approach is, several researchers have expressed criticisms on the work of Orobator. R. Daniel Shaw (2020: 210–212), a (non-African) academic researcher and scholar, expresses reservations on the potential alteration of fundamental Christian principles and what Shaw considers to be the questionable theological rigour exhibited in Orobator's publication. Further to this, Canadian scholar David Matthew Munro Lewis (2021) highlights that the theology of Byang Kato may provide a valuable source for insights on, and responses to, Orobator's work. According to Lewis, Kato is renowned for his emphasis on the distinctiveness of Christ and the imperative to uphold the purity of Christian doctrine within the African milieu. Although not a direct interlocutor with Orobator's view of Jesus' ancestorship, Kato is cited as an African theologian who would perhaps harbour reservations regarding Orobator's spiritual framework and whose perspective can fruitfully be brought into dialogue with that of Orobator. Another leading African theologian, Turaki, may also express reservations with the incorporation of African traditional components and the potential ambiguity arising from the inclusion of Jesus as an ancestral figure. Turaki's scholarly contribution further underscores the imperative of establishing a comprehensive theological framework within the African setting (Turaki 2019).

5.6 Jesus as the ancestor progenitor: Jean-Marc Ela

Jean-Marc Ela, a notable expert in the field of African theology from Cameroon, has presented an original and thought-provoking viewpoint about Jesus Christ as an ancestor. Ela posits that Jesus assumes the role of the archetypal ancestor, serving as a conduit between the metaphysical domain of ancestral beings and the tenets of the Christian religion, as evidenced by his earthly existence, crucifixion, and subsequent resurrection. This viewpoint is firmly grounded in Ela's dedication to inculturation theology, a theological approach that aims to adapt Christianity to African cultural environments.

Ela's depiction of Jesus as an Ancestor introduces a unique theological framework that highlights the interconnectedness between African ancestral reverence and the Christian faith. Ela's notion of Jesus' ancestorship finds its foundation in African traditional spirituality, inculturation theology, theological syncretism, liberation theology, and cultural hermeneutics. Using these methods, he emphasizes the significance of ancestors within African societies and their function as intermediates connecting the mortal realm with the divine. In this framework, Jesus is perceived as the ancestor progenitor who is the embodiment of the African spiritual yearning, so fulfilling it. By articulating this idea, Ela

establishes connections between Christian doctrines and African ancestral reverence, so enhancing the accessibility and relatability of Christianity within African cultures. This theologically nuanced perspective on Christ as ancestor has the potential to challenge and reshape conventional Christian interpretations of Christology.

Ela's multifaceted approach facilitates a constructive exchange between conventional African spiritual beliefs and the Christian faith. His application of a cultural hermeneutical framework to interpret Christian doctrine promotes the engagement of African theologians in the contextual reading of the Bible. Through such engagement, the individual theologian – and through their work, the individual Christian – may perceive Jesus as the quintessential progenitor, bestowing salvation, reconciliation, and healing upon both individuals and communities.

5.7 Contested issues in the ancestorship of Christ

In doing Christology through inculturation/contextualization, two points of departure present themselves: from the Bible to African reality, and from African reality to Christology. Proponents of African ancestor beliefs and their integration into Christian theology appear to favour the latter in their arguments. This approach runs the risk of not only disagreeing with key biblical tenets or articles of faith but falls short of the test of orthodoxy and orthopraxis as construed within a Christian view. This is because an examination of the mystery of Christ from the perspective of the African worldview or culture – or from the angle of some particular theme taken from the African worldview or culture – cannot account for the universal nature of salvation which transcends cultural distinctiveness, and overlooks the scriptural context of how the Bible presents Christ's salvific work and identity (Nyamiti 1991: 5).

Nyamiti, quoting Kwesi A. Dickson, robustly held: 'In Africa, death is the door to beneficial ancestral status; likewise, by his death Christ "merits to be looked upon as Ancestor, the greatest of ancestors, who never cease to be of the 'living-death'"' (Nyamiti 1991: 8). Just as for the African, death does not negate natural self-expression (one's own identity), so also is the theology of the cross not opposed to its interpretation in African cultural terms. From a theological perspective, this raises the question: should not there be a quest to understand the death of Jesus in itself, rather than comprehend Christ's death in light of culture? Being human, no culture or worldview is perfect. It follows that using culture as the point of departure leads to using the flaws of culture to illuminate Christ, rather than Christ illuminating culture, thus revealing the errors in culture. Furthermore, in trying to answer the question of who is Jesus for Africans today, the theoretical framework from ancestor exponents is akin to developing a full Christology – an interpretation as to whom Jesus is in every context and situation. In creating a Christology based only or primarily on African ancestor beliefs, there is a tendency to jettison answers from Christian history

and ignore contributions from non-African churches and theologians, perpetuated by the argument that Africa's response to ancient christological questions should reflect African consciousness (Waruta 1991: 56).

In response to the question raised above, the following section examines the hermeneutical and grammatical usage of 'the Christ' and 'an Ancestor' in view of contextual theologies and the challenge of globalization in Christology in Africa.

6 Jesus, the Christ, as an ancestor: *apologia*

As shared sources may be significant for African Christology, so is shared christological language. An alternative approach known as the African linguistic affinity christological methodology seeks to explore a universally accepted name for Jesus in the continent that is faithful to the Bible, and which resonates with the promises and covenants made by Yahweh to the Jewish patriarchs in the Old Testament that have been fulfilled with the birth of Christ in the New Testament (see, e.g. Matt 1:21–23). One name that can be offered is *Yesu* or *Jesu*. When the name *Yesu* or *Jesu* is mentioned in the midst of any tribe in Africa, they will pause and think you speak the same language and share the same culture with them (Luka 2019: 25). The etymology for *Yesu* or *Jesu* derives from the transliterated Hebrew name *Yeshua*, and the Greek *Yesus* both carried and fulfilled Yahweh's redemptive plan for the world.

There is also significance to be found in the hermeneutical and grammatical gap between the English definite article 'the' and the indefinite article 'an'. The English definite article is 'opposed to the indefinite article "a" or "an," and is used specifically for a particular person' (*Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary* 2010: 1301). Consequently, in christological terms, the use of 'the' as a prefix indicates the uniqueness of the Christ, as he is 'the one and only' – there cannot be another one like him. In scripture, the Messiah would be 'a man' whose name is 'the Branch' (Zech 3:8; 6:10–12; Isa 11:14), using the definite article emphatically. The deity of Christ is drawn from the manifold witness of the New Testament; the 'I am' declarations of John's gospel gave the Council of Nicaea and Chalcedon the basis on which to refute the Arian heresy and affirm Jesus as truly man and truly God, as well as a member of the Godhead. Together, therefore, scripture and tradition affirm that 'the Christ' existed before creation and was, is, and has always been part of the Godhead who created all things in the beginning (Gen 1:1; John 1:1–3; Heb 1:10).

7 The strengths and weaknesses of African ancestor Christology

African theologians have articulated various strengths and flaws in their conceptualizations of Jesus as an ancestral figure. Among many works, a notable study appeared in the book titled *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, edited by Robert J. Schreiter (2015), which presents

a range of strengths and weaknesses pertaining to the portrayal of Jesus as an ancestor. A few illustrative points are listed below to highlight some key considerations in the evaluation of ancestor Christology.

7.1 Strengths

- **Relationality and community:** one of the key aspects of African theology is its significant emphasis on community and interpersonal ties. This viewpoint underscores the significance of Jesus in serving as an intermediary between the community and God.
- **Cultural significance:** the notion of Jesus as an ancestor-progenitor holds cultural resonance within African societies. This practice offers Africans a means of establishing a connection with their ancestral heritage and cultural roots, while simultaneously upholding their adherence to the Christian religious tradition.
- **Emphasis on the human nature of Jesus:** ancestor Christology acknowledges the human attributes of Jesus, placing significance on his affiliation with humanity. It offers a means of establishing a personal connection with Jesus, particularly for individuals who may experience a sense of detachment from the institutionalized church.

7.2 Weaknesses

- **Syncretism** is a potential pitfall in the integration of African beliefs and Christianity, which may manifest through ancestor Christology and the amalgamation of African beliefs and rituals with Christian practice. As a phenomenon, syncretism has the potential to result in the attenuation of Christian doctrines and the erosion of the distinction between traditional African religion and Christianity. The fusion of Christianity and African traditional religion seems to neglect the fundamental nature of both religious systems, as the tenets and practices of one religion are manifested inside the framework of the other. Bediako (1994: 14) acknowledges that the fusion of Christianity and African tradition religion has the potential to compromise the authenticity of both religions, as their distinctiveness appears not only to be diminished but blurred when practiced in conjunction with one another.
- **Possible diminishment of Jesus' divinity.** Certain opponents contend that the focus placed on Jesus as a progenitor and ancestor may potentially diminish his divine nature. The assertion made in this statement has the potential to generate disagreement within Christian communities that place significant emphasis on the divinity of Jesus.
- **Absence of widespread consensus.** The viewpoint that Jesus serves as an ancestor-progenitor is not universally embraced by all African theologians. Certain individuals may perceive it as a reductionist portrayal of the Christian doctrine, but others express disapproval due to its discerning interpretation of biblical texts.

Furthermore, grassroots Christianity is not involved in the exploration, development, and application of the notion of Christ as ancestor. Hence, African Christians at the grassroots consider ancestor Christology as an 'ivory tower' configuration by academics that has no real meaning for day-to-day Christian life.

- A further point, which relates to the implications of the approach rather than the weaknesses of ancestor Christology itself, is that the portrayal of Christ as ancestor runs the risk of holding African Christians to dual standards: those of African traditional religion and those of Christianity. The experience of adhering to dual standards among African Christians presents challenges in their development of a comprehensive understanding of their Christian identity. Consequently, some African theologians adopt contextualization and inculturation methodologies to formulate theology in an effort to illuminate African traditional belief from within a Christian framework. This, in turn, has raised questions concerning the appropriate correlation between an individual's Christian identity and their cultural identity within the context of Christianity.

8 Conclusion: the future of ancestor Christology

Ancestor Christology is a theological construct that accentuates the significance of ancestral figures within the context of the Christian religion. The concept acknowledges the impact and intervention of deceased African individuals who have influence on the lives of the living, specifically through acts of prayer and provision of spiritual advice. The trajectory of ancestor Christology in the future may be influenced by several key variables, including contextualization, ecumenical dialogue, theological reflections, church practices, evangelization, and mission, as well as a range of challenges.

8.1 Cultural and contextual transformations

The extent to which the significance of ancestors is acknowledged in religious beliefs exhibits variation throughout many cultures and geographical areas. As societal dynamics and cultural values undergo transformation, the comprehension and importance attributed to the practice of ancestor veneration may also undergo changes within the framework of Christian theology. One of the primary issues regarding the contextualization of Christianity in Africa pertains to the lack of attention given by African scholars to the topic of adiaphora (elements of religious practice that are not considered essential components of the religion). Instead, the primary emphasis has been placed on examining both the favourable and unfavourable aspects of the African cultural legacy. According to Ludovic Lado (2006: 7–21), there is a tendency among African scholars to prioritize the positive aspects of African culture and dismiss the negative ones. These positive elements encompass several practices, including but not limited to hospitality, humaneness (Ubuntu), respect towards God, life, ancestors, elders, and nature, as well as the utilization of drums within the context of religious worship. According to the works of Mbiti (1969)

and Bujo (1992), it can be observed that African culture has positive elements that can be incorporated into Christian practice. By contrast, the negative facets encompass activities such as witchcraft, theft, homicide, human sacrifices, disrespecting ancestral traditions, and disrupting communal cohesion, among others. The scholarly work of Magesa (1997), strongly advise Christians against engaging in these practices.

Hence, it is imperative for future research in ancestor Christology to explore the realm of adiaphora, which encompasses aspects of religious practice that are neither inherently positive nor negative (for illustrations of adiaphora given by Jesus in the gospels, see Luke 7:31–35). This will contribute to the establishment of a more balanced contextualization of Christianity in Africa, which has primarily focused on incorporating favourable elements of African cultural heritage into the Christian religion (Lado 2006: 7–21).

8.2 Contextual theologies and the challenges of globalization

Ancestral Christology exponents employ both contextualization and inculturation to argue that Christian theology should be formulated in the African categories derived principally from the ancestral cult. David J. Bosch (1991: 388) defines contextualization as ‘the conscious efforts to articulate the Christian faith in a way that is relevant to the cultural context of the target group’. For inculturation, Andrew Walls (1988: 11) explains that it ‘is the on-going dialogue between faith and culture or cultures [...] the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures’.

Proponent of ancestor Christology are facing the need to come to terms with the influence and impact of globalization on contextual theologies. As Reader argues:

Increasingly people have to think of themselves in terms of a multiplicity of identities [...] gone are the days when one could define oneself in terms of a singular geographic space. In large part due to technologies, there has been a ‘dissolution of oneself’, a fragmenting of interests, values and affiliations such as that the individual has different identities that can vary as widely as the different interests, values and affiliations one might have. (Reader 2008: 32)

Reader further expresses, ‘globalization creates homogeneity and a standardization of both place and culture, thus destroying real difference’ (2008: 26). Globalization erases the contextual uniqueness of particular cultural expressions, thereby ushering in a new paradigm of universalization of culture and homogeneity between ethnicities. It also has implications for an individual’s sense of self, their interests, values, and affiliations. A globalizing world calls for an all-inclusive theology that is not limited to a specific race or culture. Contextualization and inculturation in multiethnic services, where hundreds of people from various cultures participate, can produce christologies that present Jesus as

a multi-hydra figure who has a multiplicity of meanings, roles, and characteristics. This calls for a more global approach to Christology, but simultaneously raises the question of how the global village affects contextual theological models like contextualization and inculturation.

To put this in perspective, an excerpt from Neil and Clifton's lengthy discussion on this issue is useful:

The biblical world was divided into tribes and nations, each competing for land, resources, and worship. This division was not God's original intention for humanity, but rather a result of human sin. The Tower of Babel was a result of this division, leading to the multiplicity of tongues and nations. The Holy Spirit at Pentecost reconnected the division, and the gospel, which all hear in their own language, is used to overcome social, linguistic, cultural, and gender differences. God now desires all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Pentecost serves as a proleptic foretaste of what is to come, as Christianity aims to become a transnational, transcultural community, integrating diversity within a common faith. (Neil and Ormerod and Clifton 2009: 1–2)

Essentially, Neil and Clifton contend that culture-transcending catholicity was re-enacted at Pentecost due to the global outlook in God's original design of creation and Christ's emphasis on making disciples of all nations. This concept of 'all' presupposes globalization, which shrinks and narrows the vast expanses between human cultures and civilizations. This narrowing of theologies, they argue, should lead to a global theology that is inclusive – that is, one that speaks to each culture and yet remains consistent with a common faith. Jesus Christ's being in relation to the Father and the Holy Spirit is difficult to conceive and articulate in relation to African ancestor belief, as the rule of *expressio unius est exclusio alterius* states that the expression of one thing excludes all others. In other words, ancestor Christology continues to face challenges in cohering with a globalized understanding of theology rather than only within an African frame; and also in creating space for the exploration of Christ as ancestor in relation to God the Trinity.


8.3 Ecumenical dialogue

The term 'ecumenical dialogue' pertains to the interchange of theological concepts among diverse Christian churches. An area of possible investigation and expansion in these debates is ancestor Christology, which encompasses scholarly dialogues pertaining to the functions of saints, the practice of intercession, and the concept of the communion of saints throughout several Christian denominations (Lyimo 2020; Luka 2019; Calnitsky 2023). According to Lyimo (2020), it has been suggested that African ancestral Christology holds potential for the dialogue between Jewish and Christian communities.

Certain African theologians have articulated the concept of Jesus as the 'proto', 'supreme', or 'greatest' Ancestor. According to Kayode (2023), this perspective posits that viewing Jesus as an ancestor has the capacity to effectively convey an authentic understanding of Jesus Christ within the African context. Nevertheless, other Christian theologians emphasize that it is crucial to acknowledge that the practice of ancestor worship is incongruent with the tenets of the Christian faith (Bae and Van der Merwe 2008). Hence, it is imperative to thoroughly examine and assess any future advancements in ancestor Christology within the framework of Christian doctrine and theology.

It is worth noting that ancestor Christology does not enjoy widespread recognition or formalization within all African Christian theological systems. The acceptance and growth of this conceptualization among different Christian communities will be contingent upon the theological perspectives and cultural circumstances prevalent within these communities. It can be anticipated, therefore, that the trajectory of ancestor Christology in the future will be shaped by a multifaceted interaction of cultural, theological, and technical elements in how such a Christology is formulated.

Attributions

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