



Jesus Christ as an Ancestor: A critique of Ancestor Christology in Bantu Communities

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Abstract

The theological and relativized usage of inculturation as a paradigm which serves the purpose of '*praeparatio evangelica*', otherwise known as 'the preparation for the Gospel', of Africans with the Christian doctrine of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, as a superior Ancestor, necessitates some considerations, if it is not to be abandoned altogether. At present, Ancestor Christology appears to remain a theoretical premise which bears no parallelism with the practical experiences of most African Christians, who practice ancestral rites and customs. This appears to be the case for the Bantu communities of Central, Eastern and Southern Africa. Ancestor Christology appears to merely justify the persistent veneration of ancestors in the name of Christ, rather than honouring him as the Great, supreme Ancestor over natural ancestors. For this insight, the paper critically evaluates the premise of Ancestor Christology as a paradigm which permits the contextualisation of Christianity in Bantu communities.

Keywords: African cosmology, Ancestor Christology, Contextualisation, Christianity, Bantu communities

Introduction

The contextualisation of Christianity, as a paradigm which serves the purpose of '*praeparatio evangelica*' of Africans with the Christian doctrine of Christ as Ancestor '*Par Excellence*' or 'Proto-Ancestor', necessitates some considerations, if it is not to be abandoned altogether. Currently, the paradigm of Ancestor Christology appears to be a theoretical premise which does not touch-base with the practical experiences of Bantu Christians. It rather appears to justify the persistent veneration of ancestors in the name of Christ. Against such a realisation, this paper critically evaluates the premise of Ancestor Christology in Bantu communities, and questions whether such a Christology is justifiable as a paradigm which permits the contextualisation of Christianity to communicate with the African cultural heritage.

The paradigm of Ancestor Christology

Due to the standing and significant role of ancestors, not only as guardians of family traditions but also as mediators in African cosmology (Gehman, 1999:178), their status has often been elevated to equate that of Christ. The equivalence of ancestors with Jesus is a relative paradigm which is commonly known as "Ancestor Christology". Ancestor Christology is a sub-branch in African Christianity, which falls under the field of Practical theology. It is a paradigm which has been developing over the last four decades. As a form of Christology, the Ancestor paradigm has been well accepted and used by African theologians to make Christianity more communicative with the African cultural heritage (Ezeh, 2003:17; Loba-Mkole, 2000:1119-1120; Stinton, 2004:112-142).



Ancestor Christology therefore, is one of the many contextual Christologies¹ that are propagated by African scholars and theologians. These African theologians contend that Jesus should be perceived and referred to as “our Ancestor Par Excellence”² due to his mediatory role on behalf of humanity to the Father (Mutiso-Mubinda, 1979:52; Kabasélé, 1991:123-124). Various cultural dimensions are used by African theologians to link Jesus’ role with that of ancestors. Charles Wanamaker (1997:291), for instance, begins his Ancestor Christology by tracing Jesus’ family lineage, and remarks that the starting point of ancestral reading to the story of Jesus must be Jesus’ family membership. Edward Fasholé-Luke (1974:209-221), on the other hand, argues that Ancestor Christology must begin with the doctrine of the communion of saints as a fixed theological premise from which the African cultural ideal of ancestorship may be included. François Kabasélé (1991:123-124) further attests that Ancestor Christology must begin with the role of Jesus as mediator, and argues that Christ fits the category of Ancestor because he is the synthesis of all mediations.

Since these various dimensions find a point of reference from the African cultural setting and African cosmology, Ancestor Christology has been gaining momentum in African scholarship. The problem, however, with Ancestor Christology is that it does not appear to do justice to the nature of Jesus Christ, and what he represents. By the nature of Jesus Christ, I refer to both his divinity and humanity. By what he represents, I refer to his redemptive work, which finds an interpretive significance in the embodiment of the dogma of the resurrection (1Corinthians 15). The nature of Jesus Christ and what he represents are therefore, the two basic components, which stands at the heart of the Christian faith. These can neither be undermined nor ignored. Any presupposed Christology must therefore, begin with, and be validated by these, to be regarded as binding. Apart from these, the notion of Christology is nullified. This is because the very concept of “Christology” is derived from the appellation of “Christ”, as the only begotten Son of God.

Conveying this understanding, Gerald O’Collins (1995:1) notes that “Christology” is the systematic reflection on the person, being and doings of Jesus Christ. This implies that Christology investigates the person (divinity and humanity), the being (who he was and is) and doings (what he did and is doing) of Jesus Christ. This enquiry is in relation to his humanity as the only-begotten Son of God, and his divinity as being of one substance with the Father. To this, David Cairns (1979:83) affirms that “the church of the fourth century declared its faith that Jesus Christ was the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God. Light of Light, very (true) God of very (true) God, begotten not made, Being of one substance (essence) with the Father, by whom all things were made”. Therefore, it is in this understanding that all merits of formulating a Christology, which may do justice to, and adequately reflect the nature of Jesus Christ, must rest.

I therefore employ this Christological understanding as the starting point, to critically evaluate the premise of Ancestor Christology, and to question whether such a Christology is justifiable as a paradigm which permits the contextualisation of Christianity in Africa. Of course, this cannot be done exhaustively but carefully reflected upon. The paradigm of Ancestor Christology employs a vast set of African ideals to connect Jesus Christ to ancestor philosophies. These ideals come from different parts of Africa and are underpinned by different, sometimes similar, interpretations of ancestor values. Therefore, due to this limitation, this paper focuses on the Bantu communities of Central, Eastern and Southern Africa³.

¹ Raymond Moloney (1987:506f) alludes to the Christologies of Inculturation, and Christologies of Liberation among other African Christologies.

² Benézét Bujo (1992:79) also suggests that we give Jesus Christ the titles, “Ancestor Par Excellence” or “Proto-Ancestor”.

³ The Bantu peoples are the largest group among the ethnic groups of Africa, occupying the majority of lands south of the Saharan desert. They are identified, in part, by the similarities in their native



These ethnic groups serve as a point of reference in evaluating the justification of Ancestor Christology in Africa. Two imperative dimensions are explored, from which strong motivations are made for Ancestor Christology, in relation to Bantu communities. These are, namely: the tracing of Jesus' family lineage and its correlation to the African understanding of ancestorship; and the function and role of Jesus as mediator in relation to ancestors. These two dimensions are critically evaluated against the confessional declaration of the fourth century church, and are linked to a theological discourse on the dogma of the resurrection.

The task of Ancestor Christology

To begin with, it is worth noting that Ancestor Christology, as a subdivision of the various African Christologies, attempts to achieve two tasks. The first is the task of inculturation, which tries to explore different ways in which Christianity can be made to communicate with the African cultural heritage; and the second is the task of praxis, which looks at how Africans can find meaning and gratification in the practice of Christianity (Moloney, 1987:505-506). Because these tasks are interconnected, they occasionally overlap. But the essential thing is that they both seek to make Christianity communicative with the African cultural context. For Ancestor Christology, the meeting point between Christianity and African culture, is death – which in this case implies a transition from the physical to the spiritual realm. This is because one may not be considered as an ancestor until after their death (Nyamiti, 1984:26).

Death therefore 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 (Kabasélé, 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). In this sense, the death of Jesus Christ merits him – when using an 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, ephemeral and worldly realm to the immortal, sacred and celestial sphere where personages partake of existence in the spiritual form.

This understanding therefore, characterises, or is deeply rooted within the African worldview (Dickson, 1984:193). This African worldview however, is not unique. It is similar to the Christian understanding of life after death. Thus, both the African and Christian perspectives see death as a transitional phase and not the cessation of life. While the African view sees death as the beginning of ancestorship, the Christian view sees death as the beginning of everlasting life for those who are worthy of entering the Kingdom of Heaven. Variance only comes with the commencement of life after death. One is considered to be joining the league of ancestor immediately after their death in African cosmology. But in the Christian view, the commencement of life after death is closely aligned to the dogma of the resurrection. Thus, life after death only comes to actuality after the resurrection. Hence St. Paul argues that Jesus is the first-fruit of those who will be raised from the dead⁴.

This implies that the departed, within the Christian understanding, remain dead or asleep, and will continue to be so, until the day of the resurrection. Only on the day of the resurrection will

languages. Their worldviews are also similar, hence Malcolm McVeigh (1974: xiii) attests that the Bantu perceive the world as “a community of interrelationship of forces of persons and thoughts, animals and things, God and forefathers: a sense of community”.

⁴ In his epistle to the Corinthians (1Cor. 15), St. Paul addresses this issue. Since believers will be raised at the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of Jesus served as a sign of promise for those who remain dead (or asleep) and are waiting for the day of the resurrection. Some Scriptural references refer to death as sleep (cf. 1Kings 2:10; Psalm 13:3; 90:3-6; Job 14:10-12; Daniel 12:2; Matthew 9:24).



they be brought back to eternal life, and their weak, fleeting and worldly bodies transformed⁵, or replaced by glorified celestial bodies. St. Paul describes this process in the following manner:

So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: it is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body (1Corinthians 15:42-44 KJV).

This seems to indicate that life after death is an important teaching in Scriptures. It marks the beginning of an everlasting life (after the resurrection), for both the departed and the living – as their bodies will be transformed from the physical to the celestial ones. Therefore, with this link, between the African and Christian views of life after death, it is imperative to explore how Jesus fits the category of ancestors within the Bantu communities of Central, Eastern and Southern Africa. This is necessary in order to assess the validity of Ancestor Christology as a paradigm, which permits the contextualisation of Christianity to connect with the African cultural heritage. This may assist Africans to weigh up and adopt those biblically sound Christologies, while warding-away from erroneous Christologies, which are propagated in the name of contextualisation, even though they may be considered to be destructive to the Christian faith.

Jesus as Brother Ancestor – tracing the Adamite origin

The first dimension from which African theologians seem to connect Jesus Christ with ancestral philosophies, regards the tracing of Jesus' family membership to the first human being – Adam. Charles Nyamiti (1984:28), for instance, seems to employ this dimension to argue that Jesus' descent may be traced back to Adam, where his ancestorship as Brother-Ancestor⁶ may be qualified on the bases 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. He expresses this idea in the following manner:

Considered as *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, clanic 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 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).

According to Nyamiti therefore, it is in the common origin of all humanity in Adam that Jesus' ancestorship may be qualified and expanded to all human races. He further uses this understanding to show its relevance within the African cultural context – focusing on the Bantu concept of ancestorship (Nyamiti, 1984:31). In this sense, all members of the African Christian community are perceived as descendants of a common ancestor, who is Jesus Christ (Nyamiti, 1984:27-28). However, Nyamiti's composition of this African Christian community

⁵ Since the resurrection will correspond with the return of Christ (*Parousia*), the bodies of those who will be alive will be transformed (cf. Karl Barth, 1933:500; George Beasley-Murray, 1991:304).

⁶ According to Charles Nyamiti (1984:22), "[a] brother-ancestor is a relative of a person with whom he has a common parent, and of whom he is mediator to God, archetype of behavior and with whom – thanks to his supernatural status acquired through death – he is entitled to have regular sacred communication".



appears to carry some restrictions. The first is that “Jesus became the natural Brother-Ancestor only of those who lived on earth after His death” (Nyamiti, 1984:28). Thus, all those who had died and joined the league of ancestors, before the death of Jesus Christ, are excluded or in fact do not qualify to form part of this African Christian community.

Their exclusion rests upon the fact that they had already died, and therefore, could not be adopted into the Christian brotherhood-descent of Jesus Christ. The second restriction pertains to the adoption of members by Christ into the community. In this proviso, it is imperative that one is first adopted, through the habitual grace of God, into becoming the brother of the *Logos* (Jesus Christ). Nyamiti (1984:30) states:

With regard to the first aspect the very term “brother-ancestor” indicates common sonship to a progenitor of the ancestor and his brother-descendant. In connection with our common filiation with Christ, this is only possible through habitual grace whereby we become adopted sons of the Father and brothers of the *Logos*. Without this adoption Christ is our Brother-Ancestor only “in principle” but not “in fact”. Through His Incarnation, death and resurrection, He saved us in principle and became thereby our true Brother-Ancestor. This is not only because his Incarnation and paschal mystery enabled us to be God’s adoptive sons in Him, but also because through Him, as *natural Son of the Father even as man*, humanity was reconciled to God. On the other hand, by our acquiring of habitual grace Christ’s brother-Ancestorship no longer remains *principal* (= in principle) but becomes *factual* (= in fact). This is confirmed by the fact that what happens to His members affects Him also as Head.

Thus, in light of this citation, without the adoption of members by God into the Christian community, Africans remain a Brother-Ancestor to Christ “in principle”, and not “in fact”. It is when they have been adopted by God, through habitual grace, that Christ becomes their Brother-Ancestor in factual terms. In this sense, they are unified with Christ, so that if there is anything that “happens to His members affects Him also as Head” (Nyamiti, 1984:30). Therefore, even though Nyamiti’s Ancestor Christology begins with the tracing of Jesus’ family membership to Adam, the common origin of all humanity, it ends with the supremacy of Jesus Christ as the Brother-Ancestor over natural ancestors⁷. In this view however, the association of Jesus Christ, as Brother-Ancestor, with natural ancestors appears to be superficial.

Nyamiti seems to have acknowledged this discrepancy. He states that Jesus Christ “shines forth as the Brother-Ancestor *par excellence*, of whom the African ancestors are but faint and poor images” (Nyamiti, 1984:70). In light of this realisation, Jesus is said to belong to a superior league of ancestorship, which transcends the natural descent of African ancestry (Nyamiti, 1984:31-32). In this sense, Jesus’ ancestorship can therefore, be regarded as the highest accomplishment when measured against its African counterpart, because it is rooted in Christ’s divine sonship in the Trinity, and assumes its human origins from the first being, Adam⁸.

However, even under such circumstances, the parallelism of Jesus with ancestors does not seem to do justice to Jesus’ eminence and role as our redeemer. There are too many ways in which Jesus differs from ancestors (Palmer, 2008:68-72). In fact, among the Bantu communities, there are no obvious parallelisms between Jesus’ eminence and role as

⁷ John Pobe (1979:94), from a Ghanaian perspective, seems to share this view. He also argues that Jesus Christ should be proclaimed as the “Great and Greatest Ancestor – in Akan language *Nana*”. He further notes that as the “Great and Greatest Ancestor (*Nana*)”, Jesus inherits the position of control. In this sense, Jesus has “the power and authority to judge the deeds of men, rewarding the good, punishing the evil”.

⁸ John Pobe appears to have also recognised this supremacy. He argues that “even if Jesus is *Nana* like the other illustrious ancestors, he is a nonpareil of a judge; he is superior to the others by virtue of being closest to God and as God” (Pobe, 1979:94).



redeemer-mediator, and the understanding of ancestors as clanic (or communal), life-givers, and mediators (Hammond-Tooke, 1986:159). Therefore, in the midst of these many differences, of which some are highlighted by Timothy Palmer (2008:69-73), I reserve my attention to the more pertinent ones which are found in various Bantu communities. These attempt to critique and assess the relevance of Ancestor Christology as a form of contextualisation for African Christians.

The first point, which needs to be attended to, is the qualifications needed by the deceased for acceptance into ancestorship. The Bantu communities take an ancestor to be the “deceased senior males of the agnatic group or clan, who are the descendants of the common great-grandfather” (Hammond-Tooke, 1974:17–19)⁹. But in some South African groups, particularly in the Mpondo tradition, the concept of ancestors also includes all the deceased old people, and not just the deceased senior males (Hunter, 1936:123). Thus, in this description, a clanic relation to one’s ancestral lineage is imperative. This is because ancestors do not operate on behalf of other ethnic groups or clans (Goergen, 2001:5-41). Each tribe is unique, even though similarities may exist between them, and approaches in the practice of ancestor-hood are viewed differently (Nyamiti, 1996:38).

The process of ancestorship begins with traditional rites, which are conducted by ethnic groups for their deceased, as a form of welcoming back into the family, ethnic group or clan. Nokuzola Mndende (2006:43) notes that this traditional rite is “performed in order to officially unify the spirit of the deceased with the living members of the clan”. The Shona ethnic groups in Zimbabwe, according to Healey and Sybertz (1996:210), further perform a traditional ritual of a second burial in honour of the deceased person, especially to release the person from the “land of isolation” and to send them to the abode of ancestors. This is commonly known as the reinstatement of the deceased persons (Healey and Sybertz, 1996:210).¹⁰ This process is therefore, necessary for the deceased to be considered as ancestors.

After they have been brought back home or re-established into the family, ethnic group or clan, they must then begin to show their continued relevance as spiritual members of the community (Staples, 1981:186). But if they remain unwelcomed, the deceased become wondering spirits (Crafford, 2015:7). In this sense, the welcoming back of the deceased, into the family, ethnic group or clan, is an important and necessary step towards their recognition as ancestors. Clearly, Jesus did not partake in this process. His family did not conduct the traditional ritual of welcoming him back into the ethnic group or lineage after his death. Within the African view, this would make Jesus a wondering spirit, rather than an ancestor.

In relation to Ancestor Christology, Nyamiti (1984:27-28) seems to overlook the welcoming back or the re-incorporation of the deceased into the family, but capitalises on the link between Jesus and his ancestry through the common origin of all humanity in Adam. In that sense, Nyamiti (1984:27-28) reasonably traces Jesus’ ancestry to a clanic relation in Adam, which is a necessary component for ancestorship within the Bantu communities. In Nyamiti’s view, it is this clanic relation from Adam, which qualifies Jesus to be regarded as an ancestor. But by tracing Jesus’ ancestry to Adam, through the common origin of all humanity, Nyamiti seems to be reducing the divinity of Jesus.

Jesus’ clanic relation from Adam appears to remain a natural disposition that does not account for his divinity. It gives too much emphasis to his humanity as an ancestor, and ignores his

⁹ This patrilineal lineage largely applies to Nguni ethnic groups, or bi-lateral Sotho-Tswana groups (Wannamaker, 1997:287).

¹⁰ Meyer Fortes (1965:128) alludes to a similar ritual practice, which is conducted by some Ghanaian ethnic groups to bring back their deceased into their family, ethnic groups or clans. Fortes notes that the deceased must first be “brought back home again’, re-established in the family and lineage, by obsequial rites” to be considered as ancestors. But this is highly dependent on their manifestation after re-establishment into their family or lineage. They cannot receive proper ritual services until they manifest themselves in the lives of their descendants and are enshrined (Fortes, 1965:129).



divine role as the second Adam. Even though he alludes to the fact that the scriptures designates Jesus as the second Adam, and therefore a different kind of Adam altogether, Nyamiti (1984:28-29) continues to look at Jesus as the descendant of Adam. What is baffling about this argument is that Nyamiti (1984:28-29) seems to be suggesting that Christ, by assuming an Adamite origin, “radically vanquished our racial ailment, namely origin sin”. He expresses this idea in the following manner: “Consequently, we propose the thesis that Christ took to Himself our Adamite origin primarily in order to destroy the sin we incur through that origin. In other words the *immediate purpose* of His assumption of the Adamite descendancy was the destruction of original sin”. This is interesting because Christ was born of the Spirit and not of the flesh, and since ancestry is biological at least for the Bantu communities, Jesus’ ancestry should primarily be spiritual.

That is why the New Testament depicts Jesus’ descent as superseding the natural origins of Adam. This is made clear by St. Paul when he refers to Jesus as a different type of Adam – as the second Adam (1Corinthians 15:45). The first Adam is a natural man, who was created by God in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:7), but the second Adam is a divine man, who came from heaven (1Corinthians 15:47). The scriptures therefore, portrays Jesus as the opposite of Adam rather than the progeny of Adam. This is further validated by Jesus’ miraculous birth (Luke 1:28-31). He came by the intervention of the Holy Spirit, and not by the seed of man - Joseph (the descent of Adam).

But because he was born into the royal family of the house of David, a lineage from Adam; we may agree, but only “in principle”, that Jesus was the descendant of Adam. But as the antithesis of Adam, we may “in fact,” question his association with Adam, through the origin of all humanity. Adam is depicted, in scriptures, as a bad model for humanity, while Jesus is portrayed as a perfect example (1Corinthians 15:22). Adam is the source and transmitter of sinfulness, but Jesus is the source and transmitter of salvation. This contrast automatically leads to the next requirement for the qualifications of ancestorship – that the deceased must have lived a good and exemplary life (Kabasélé, 1991:118). Also referring to this quality, Pobe (1979:46) states that “[t]o qualify to be an ancestor one must have lived to a ripe old age and in an exemplary manner and done much to enhance the standing and prestige of the family, clan or tribe”¹¹.

No doubt, Jesus lived a good and exemplary life, but he did not focus his attention in enhancing the standing and prestige of his family, clan or tribe. That is the traditional role of ancestors. It is the ancestors that work towards the advancement of their families, ethnic groups or tribes (Pobe, 1979:46). On the contrary, Jesus’ mission and vision was universal and not tribal (John 3:16). Having lived a sinless life, Jesus became the source of salvation, for all those who believe in him. His mission expanded beyond his ethnic group, even though he may have initially came for them (John 1:11). Ancestors, on the other hand, are mortal beings who were born into the state of sin. Therefore, whatever good they do, or intend to do, is quantifiable – it is a matter of striking a balance between good and bad deeds, so that they are not utterly consumed by wrong doing; or it is a matter of having good deeds outweigh bad deeds, so that they are considered as virtuous.

To this, Kabasélé (1991:118) notes that a good life is measured by virtuous qualities for Bantu communities. In this sense, the deceased must have been a law abiding citizen, not wrathful or quarrelsome; and they must have been advocates for unity, in order to qualify for

¹¹ Ogbu Kalu (2000:57-58) also mentions that: “[a]n ancestor must have lived a morally worthy life and must have died a good death. This means that the person was not killed by lightning or a falling and was not killed by a strange disease such as smallpox or leprosy. [...] An ancestor must have received a second or third burial to smooth the sojourn through the spirit world to reincarnation. Obviously, those who died bad deaths or did not get fitting burials do not reincarnate and, indeed, turn into malevolent spirits which hound their progeny for failing to bury them properly”.



ancestorship (Kabasélé, 1991:118). Nyamiti¹² (1984:15) adds that “[n]o one can be regarded as ancestor unless he led a morally good life on earth; for an ancestor is also a model of behaviour for the living”. This makes a good conduct, or virtuous life, a necessary qualifier for ancestors. This qualifier is further coupled with old ripe age. One must have lived an old ripe age to be an ancestor (Pobee, 1979:46). But in relation to Christology, Jesus did not live to a old ripe age, but died young¹³. Some Biblical scholars argue that Jesus died, roughly, around the age of 34 (Schaefer, 1990:53; Nothaft, 2012:26). That is not a ripe old age within the African context.

From these qualifying characteristics, it is evident that Jesus does not meet the criteria, or requirements of being considered as an ancestor. Judged from these qualifiers to ancestors, it appears that there is absolutely nothing that warrants Jesus’ referral as an ancestor. Such parallelism does not seem to apply for Bantu communities. That is probably why Nyamiti (1984:7) brings up some restrictions relating to this matter. He argues that Jesus’ ancestry, as Brother-Ancestor, does not consider those who have died before Jesus’s death, but applies to those who were adopted by habitual grace into the African Christian community after his death. In this sense, “Christ’s Brother-Ancestorship to us is impossible without habitual grace on our part” (Nyamiti, 1984:17).

In this view, Nyamiti appears to be transferring the Bantu understanding of ancestors into the Christian system, but at the same time, reinventing ancestors as if it were beginning afresh with those African Christians who possessed the knowledge of Christ, and have been adopted, through habitual grace, into the African Christian community. In this reinvention, ancestors is said to begin with African Christians, not non-Christians, who were part of the Christian system, or who died in the state of friendship with God; and is further sustained by all those saints in heaven and purgatory, who can be regarded as our true Christian ancestors. This ancestry is therefore applicable for all those African Christians who died in Christ, or within the bounds of the Christian church. This is made clear by the following statement:

Theological inquiry revealed that not only African ancestors who died in the state of friendship with God but all the saints in heaven and purgatory can be regarded as our true Christian ancestors. Further scrutiny showed that if the deceased Africans and the saints are true Christian ancestors they are so only in virtue of their participation in Christ’s unique Ancestorship. In other words, the ancestral relationship of the saints and of the African so-called living dead is a supernatural imitation and prolongation in men of the Saviour’s Brother-Ancestorship towards us. This is what led us to classify the subject of the ancestors of the African and non-African saints [...] (Nyamiti, 1984:7).

Thus, in Christ, the deceased African Christians belong to a special community which is led by Jesus, as the Ancestor-Brother, due to his superior role and divine ancestry. Nyamiti (1984:30) puts this ideal in the following manner: “his (Jesus) Incarnation and paschal mystery enabled us to be God’s adoptive sons in Him”. At face value, this seems to be reasonable. But it conveys both the positive and negative effects, from which the negative effects may completely minimise the positive. On the positive side, it means that a new order, or new system of ancestors is being re-established within the church, to formulate a Christian community which looks at the deceased African Christians as ancestors. In this sense, the

¹² Charles Nyamiti gives a similar interpretation on the expectations to ancestors. He also alludes to the expectation of one having lived a good life to be considered as an ancestor, from an East African perspective.

¹³ There are certain groups, in African view, or cosmology, which do not qualify for ancestors. This includes the people who were not born properly, unimportant men, unmarried people, those who died without children or died as young adults (less than 18 years). Richard Gehman (1999:12-13), for instance, notes that women, children, unimportant men, unmarried men, those who died without children, as well as young adults less than eighteen years of age, are not likely to become ancestors.



deceased African Christians are spurred away from being incorporated into the natural hierarchy, or a league of non-Christian ancestors, but are sensibly positioned and added into the sacred community of the saints (Daneel, 1971:272-274).

Against this narrative, this seems to advocate for a contextual approach towards the Catholic teaching of the veneration of the Saints (Theron, 1996:35). But on the negative side, it appears to bear no parallelism with the lived experiences of Bantu communities, who often strive to keep the memory of their ancestors alive. This is because the ancestor remain active within their ethnic groups or clans as long as they are remembered by their descendants (Crafford, 2015:15). Neville Curle (2016:41), commenting on the state of the church in Swaziland, (now known as Eswatini), asserts that:

Within the wider Church, the earthly life of Jesus is acknowledged as the way of truth and living [...], and his death on the cross is recognised as an act of atonement [...]. Yet, his current resurrected status appears to be somewhat shrouded within the ancestral belief system in which, firstly, Christianity is recognised as being just one of the ways to approach God [...] and secondly, Christ is viewed as the white man's ancestor [...].

This seems to give the impression that the introduction of Jesus Christ as Brother-Ancestor, in some African churches, may cause some major problems for Christianity. As Curle (2016:41) noted, when understood as an Ancestor, Jesus, and also Christianity, may be "recognised as being just one of the ways to approach God". Thus, even if this contextualisation were possible, it would nullify the relevance of Christ, and ultimately that of Christianity, since Christ will be looked upon as just another way to approaching God. This appears to be the state of affairs in some African Independent/Initiated Churches, mainly in South Africa. To this, Luvuyo Ntombana (2015:114) emphasizes that:

Currently, the African independent churches in general still do not separate Christianity from African cultural life, meaning that there is no conflict between Christian conversion and the performing of African rituals and other practices. There is no separate traditional and Christian life to them; all life is one and complete so they do not have to hide that they performed traditional rituals. They do not see ancestral practices as worship of ancestors as suggested by missionaries but as a way of appeasing or venerating them. Generally, African independent churches agree that ancestors are an important part of African culture; therefore, they should not be demonised. As a result, they have incorporated them in their church liturgy. For instance, it is common among them to use language usually used by traditional healers¹⁴ such as *camagu* (let it be so) and *siyavuma* (we agree) instead of "Amen" used by most Christians. It is also very common that the church ministers can also be traditional leaders and church members openly consult them. At times, in church they even announce that a church member will have a ritual ceremony and also encourage others to attend.

As one may notice, African Independent/initiated Churches have incorporated ancestral veneration into their church liturgy. The ancestors are highly revered and also feared in these

¹⁴ A traditional healer, also known as *Sangoma*, is the most senior of diviners. She or he is a person who defines an illness (diagnostician) and also divines the circumstances of the illness within the cultural context. Diviners are known by different names. They are known as *Igqirha* in Xhosa, *Ngaka* in Northern Sotho, *Selaoli* in Southern Sotho, and *Mungome* in Venda and Tsonga. But most South Africans generally refer to them as *Sangomas*—from the Zulu word *Izangoma*. Traditional healers do not perform the same functions, nor do they fall into the same category, but each traditional healer has a field of expertise, with their own methods of diagnosis, and a particular set of knowledge for traditional medicines and remedies (Ilse Truter, 2007:57–58).



churches (Moller, 1978:123). As cited by Molobi (2005:117), Moller has shown that the spirits of African ancestors need to be placated. If they are not placated, catastrophe may overtake those who fail to honour them. An example, according to Molobi (2005:117) may be the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, which has no immediate cure. It could be regarded by many grassroots believers in AICs as punishment by the ancestors (Molobi, 2005:117). In such an understanding, the acceptance of Jesus as Brother-Ancestor, may not change anything, as it may not erase the reverence, or fear of neglecting the ancestors.

On the contrary, it may be as Nürnberger (2007:48) postulated - that if Jesus becomes an Ancestor, it would mean that the complete system of ancestor veneration, with all the implications that are associated with it, may be acknowledged by the church. This however, does not solve the problem. The contextualisation of Christianity should not be about “acknowledging the legitimacy of ancestral authority and power within the Christian faith, but to fill the vacuum left by the absence and irrelevance of the Christ we preach in Africa” (Nürnberger, 2007:48).

For Mainline/Mission Churches, the consideration of Jesus as an Ancestor remains inconclusive. There are those who stand strongly against it, those that are neutral on it, and those that are sympathetic towards it (Afeke and Verster, 2004:50). Ntombana (2015:114) shows how this issue has often been approached by Mainline/Mission Churches:

[T]he Mainline Church members separate church life from African ritual life, in the sense that individuals or family members can perform their African rituals at home, even consulting an *igqirha* as long that is kept a family matter. Members who are called to traditional healing are also accepted in the Church as long as they only consult at their private spaces and that they keep it to themselves, otherwise the Church does not promote that.

This seems to suggest that the introduction of Jesus, as Brother-Ancestor, within the Mainline/Mission Churches, could be problematic. Some Mainline/Mission Churches strongly stand against ancestor veneration, and would not entertain the equivalence of Jesus to ancestors (Nürnberger, 2007:52). But at the same time, the position of some Mainline/Mission Churches appear to send mixed signals, since their stance is neutral or inconclusive. The Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches, on the other hand, utterly reject the notion of ancestor veneration. Allan Anderson (1991:81), for instance, notes that:

For many Pentecostal-type churches contact with the ancestors is rejected, while for others there is a far more tolerant and ambivalent attitude to the ancestor cult. Our research shows that the majority of the members of Christian churches reject ancestor veneration.

From this point of view, Ancestor Christology only appears to apply in theory rather than in practice for Bantu communities. It does not resonate with their daily experiences. The exception comes when it is practiced within the scope of the Roman Catholic Church, in the form of the veneration of the saints. In that narrative, it does find a practical context for expression. Otherwise, it does not find a solid premise within which to stand in most African churches, without challenging the divinity of Christ and his redemptive work.

Jesus as Mediator – A link with natural ancestors?

The second dimension from which Ancestor Christology begins, is with the function and role of Jesus Christ as mediator in relation to African ancestors. In this paradigm, Charles Wanamaker (1997:291) notes that Christianity takes Christ to be the mediator between humanity and God, from which the functional role of ancestors in Bantu communities may be



derived. Benézét Bujo (1992:79) further supports this model by arguing that a theology of ancestors considerably connects with Ancestor-Christology from which Christ may be considered as a Proto-Ancestor over natural ancestors. This connection, in light of this paradigm, is understood to be based on Christ' death rather than his life, the nature of his death, or his resurrection.

Wanamaker (1997:293), for instance, states that “[f]rom an African point of view, it is also not the nature of Jesus' death, which is important. What matters is the fact of his death since from the African perspective, Jesus' death leads to his life as an ancestor”¹⁵. With this linkage decisively established, the role of Jesus Christ as mediator, on behalf of the Christian church, is ingeniously compared to that of an ancestor as the source of benefit, a giver and sustainer of life to their descendants. Wanamaker (1997:294) assumes this approach when stating that:

The major role of an ancestor is the opposite to that of bringing about misfortune to maintain good behaviour and social order. The ancestor is also a source of benefit, a giver and sustainer of the life of his descendants. Jesus after his death performs this task continuously for his living family, the church.

Thus, within this paradigm, the death of Jesus Christ serves as a point of reference or contact between African ancestorship and mediation in Bantu communities. According to Bright Afeke and Pieter Verster (2004:53), Wanamaker's opinion, is that:

Christ's death and afterlife are assumed to be of the same character as that of all other ancestors, as the resurrection does not fit into an African worldview and does not play a significant role in the acceptance of Christ as ancestor, though an African would be quite comfortable with the idea that resurrection appearances are visionary visitations for an ancestor.

With this understanding, Wanamaker appears to be reducing the entire existence of Christ into one particular event – his death, so that he may qualify Jesus' ancestorship. Even at this point, certain imperious elements which surrounded Jesus' death are deliberately ignored. These include the nature of Jesus's death and why he had to die (as a paschal lamb), his level of mediation (as God and by his blood), and his resurrection, which does not fit into the African worldview (Wanamaker, 1997:293). The omission of these, indeed, question the consideration of Jesus as an ancestor. If these imperious elements are not regarded as important by the proponents of ancestor theology, why do they refer to this form of contextualization as “Christology?” Anyway, does Christology not regard the systematic reflection on the person, being and doings of Jesus Christ? Then why does Jesus' death serve as the only point of contact with this Christology, and not his entire existence?

Understood in this manner, Jesus becomes an ideal ancestor but he is one who serves no other purpose beyond death. He remains united with the deceased, and is practically used by African Christians as an overarching guise for the continual veneration of natural ancestors. Using Nxumalo to show how insignificant Jesus' life and resurrection is, Wanamaker (1997:293) quotes the following as evidence:

In my view, there is a relationship between Christ and the ancestors, for the simple reason that Christ died too. He is therefore an *idlozi* [this term refers to the living-dead as those who appear to and communicate with the living] to us, since those who are dead are *amadlozi* [plural of *idlozi*] for us. Therefore Christ and those who have died are united together. We call them together in Christ [...] (Wanamaker, 1997:293).

¹⁵ Charles Wanamaker's argument, in this instance, is directed at the Bantu groups of Southern Africa.



In his interpretation, Wanamaker (1997:293) asserts that “[t]his statement clearly reflects a person who has assimilated his understanding of the centrality of Jesus for his Christian faith to his continued commitment to his ancestors whom he places under Jesus as their senior”. At face value, this appears to be agreeable, which, for African Christians who venerate their ancestors and seek to keep their memories alive, is something very important. It seems to suggest that the contextualisation and the long awaited realism of Ancestor Christology has finally materialised, particularly among the Bantu communities. But, in essence, it undermines the nature and redemptive work of Christ. Christ remains a fixed theoretical symbol, from which his unduly ascribed status of “Ancestor *Par Excellence*” never moves beyond the point of death. As Wanamaker rightly contends: “His afterlife is assumed to be of the same character as all other ancestors, reflecting the fact that resurrection does not fit with African world views” (Wanamaker, 1997:293).

This, in my view, is where the crux of the matter lies. There is just no paradigm which may accommodate the dogma of the resurrection in Bantu communities. The “resurrection does not fit with African world views” (Wanamaker, 1997:293). Therefore, the Christ who is accredited with the status of Ancestorship, is the “dead” Christ, who never went beyond the grave. In that sense, Ancestor Christology confines Christ within the state of death and deliberately excludes his victory over death. This is because there is no paradigm which may support such a notion in African cosmology. In my view, this is the basic component which nullifies or in spirit discredits the whole notion of Ancestor Christology. Furthermore, if the whole notion of Ancestor Christology is viewed against the significance of the resurrection, it becomes clear that it annuls the very essence of Christianity.

The scriptures teach that the effectual gift of salvation, of eternal life, and of the truthfulness of the gospel rests upon the dogma of the resurrection (1Corinthians 15; Romans 10:9). St. Paul conveys this idea in the following manner: “And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished”. This implies that without the actual act of the resurrection, Christianity is void, and if Christianity is void, then all those African Christians (including the Saints in purgatory and heaven), who died within the bounds of the church, are lost. It is only through the actual act of the resurrection that Christianity is established. But this dogma does not find context within the African worldview.

How then, are African Christians to begin speaking about Christ who is Superior to their natural ancestors, when he is no different from them? More especially when “his afterlife is assumed to be of the same character as all other ancestors?” (Wanamaker, 1997:293). The imagery of Christ never moves beyond the state of death for Bantu people. Rather, they are “quite comfortable with the idea that resurrection appearances are visionary visitations for an ancestor” (Wanamaker, 1997:293). Thus, in Bantu communities, ancestorship is a fixed ideal, which is constantly kept alive by the active serve of ancestor veneration. It is not a mere metaphor which can be used to explicate the role of Christ, on behalf of believers, to God. Ancestors are perceived as living spiritual members of the community, and continue to show their relevance through visionary visitations.

In this sense, when Christ is introduced as an Ancestor, he inevitably competes with an existing ideal and a fixed understanding of ancestorship in African cosmology. Under such circumstances, one may not even speak of the contextualisation of Christianity, but of competing paradigms – as Christ seeks to replace an old-age understanding of ancestorship. Other metaphors however, such as Christ as Shepard, Traditional healer, or Great Chief, are more sympathetic than Christ as Ancestor. This is because at the heart of ancestorship, there is a great contest for veneration, and a profound requisite for recognition. Ancestors need to be recognised, and must often be placated (Molobi, 2005:117). Where they feel that they are neglected, they tend to retaliate, sometimes with calamities or bad luck faced by those who neglect them (Moller, 1978:123). That is why they are generally feared but also revered.



The paradigm of Ancestor Christology therefore does not seem to serve the purpose of contextualisation, but instead seems to compete with the traditional understanding of ancestorship. Mainly because the understanding of Christ in Bantu communities does not move beyond the point of death. Christ remains an *idlozi*, and is called together with the living-dead (Wanamaker, 1997:293). Against this backdrop, one may argue that Ancestor Christology is non-practical as a paradigm which seeks to contextualise Christianity for Bantu communities. It competes with the traditional understanding of ancestorship in African cosmology.

Ancestor Christology and the Nicene Creed

The Nicene Creed is a declaration of faith of Orthodoxy, which is widely used by the Christian church in her liturgy. It is a normative guide for Christians, which safeguards the stance of the Church and her teachings on the doctrines of Christ, both at a local and universal level. It unfolds the universal beliefs and teachings of the Church, and presents a unified understanding of the character of Christ. In light of this declaration therefore, Jesus is understood to be “the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God. Light of Light, very (true) God of (true) God, begotten not made, Being of one substance (essence) with the Father, by whom all things were made” (Cairns, 1979:83). This puts Christ high above natural ancestors. Two fundamental aspects stand-out from this declaration about Christ, in relation to natural ancestors. These are, namely: Jesus’ incarnation, and his divinity.

With regard to his incarnation, Jesus is believed to have existed before all the worlds and was therefore begotten and not made. Natural ancestors, on the contrary, are the product of his creative work, and were hewn from the dust of the earth (Genesis 2:7). With regard to his divinity, Christ is said to be God of very God, and is of the same substance with the Father. This means that Christ is of one essence with the Father, and is not any less in status from the Father (John 10:30; 17:21). Thus, Christ enjoys an equal status with the Father, while natural ancestors fade in comparison with God. This, in my view, breaks all grounds for comparison between Christ and natural ancestors. Largely because the association of Christ with natural ancestors reduces his “Being” – as God, and lowers his status to the level of his created order (Colossians 1:16).

Conclusion

The paradigm of Ancestor Christology does not seem to serve the purpose of contextualisation, or of preparing Africans for the doctrine of Christ. Rather, it seems to be competing with the African understanding of ancestorship. Mainly because the understanding of Christ in Bantu communities does not seem to move beyond the point of death. In Bantu communities, Christ remains an *Idlozi*, and is called together with the living-dead. Against this backdrop, it appears as if Ancestor Christology is a non-practical paradigm which only justifies the veneration of ancestors under the name of Christ. Furthermore, as ‘God of very God, being of one substance with the Father’, Christ exists at a higher level than natural ancestors. The reduction of his “Being”, in order to fit him within the paradigm of Ancestor Christology, is thus a compromise of his nature and redemptive work. Christ mediates at a higher and deeper level than natural ancestors. Thus, the paradigm of Ancestor Christology does not seem to do justice to the character of Christ, and strongly needs to be reconsidered or abandoned as a contextual paradigm which seeks to make Christianity communicative with the African cultural heritage.

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