

## ANCESTOR AS A VITAL PART OF AFRICAN CULTURE

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### Abstract

*Ancestors in the African context are referred to as 'the living dead', in the absence of a more precise term. It denotes an idea that death is not annihilation or even separation. The ancestors are considered as living members of the community. They are responsible for channeling the life force within the community, and thus exert an influence on the vitality of the community. The initial breakthrough made by African Christian theology, namely, the theological interrogation of African existence, is being built upon and enhanced. The notion of ancestors in the African world-view is caught up in this interrogation, with implications for Christology, ecclesiology and ethics in the African context and beyond. This article examines the relationship between ancestral belief and African Christian theology. It argues that, the ancestors are vital, to African identity and so it would be Jolly to ignore them. Further, it seeks to discover how ancestral belief may contribute to Christology, ecclesiology and ethics and hold possible implications beyond Africa. Hence, it is crucial for the study to determine the extent to which the African understanding of ancestors is applicable to Jesus Christ and identify its effects on the expression of Christianity as a religion.*

**Keywords:** Ancestor, African, Christian, Culture

### Introduction

There is no definitive position on the ancestors in African theology. Theologians are not of one mind on this precise nature of the relationship with ancestors. Moreover, among theologians, this discussion is extremely delicate. It is also difficult to generalize, as varied concepts exist among different groups. Additionally, there are few biblical passages concerning relations with the dead. Some writers are of the opinion that Christians must reflect critically on some traditional notions about ancestors, including the notion that ancestors have physical power over living family members, and that, in addition, Christians must emphatically deny that ancestors cause death or can be reached through divination. In this case, a primary preoccupation with the ancestral cult is entirely unacceptable. However, with these reservations, many theologians embrace or adapt traditional beliefs about ancestors. In developing a Christian theology that speaks to the African understanding of ancestors, these theologians are confident that their insights will enrich Christianity worldwide ( Nyerere, 1997; Ormerod, 1997; Bediako, 1992; Hastings, 1989). It is important to note that the African traditional world-view has no concept of heaven and hell as in Christianity, but ancestors are thought to be closer to God i.e. the Supreme Being. In general, therefore, their continuing relationship with their family has medical, financial, moral, biological and social implications for the living.

The church has consistently proclaimed a Trinitarian understanding of God, so as to reduce Jesus to merely an ancestor, in fact, to remove a Trinitarian understanding from African Christianity, it changes the Christian concept of God, that leads to a defective Christology and reshape issues that led to the first ecumenical council at Nicea in 325 A.D (Parratt, 2004). Moreover, it also renders the Christian notion of salvation to be no longer viable or credible, but this is not what African theologians intend. Nyamiti (1994) posits five categories of ancestral functions - kinship, superhuman status, mediation, modelling an exemplary life and the right to sacred communication. He argues in regard to this five functional categories that with understanding of ancestral relationship, it is possible to examine the inner life of God that Jesus does not fit neatly into the Akpan concept of ancestor because every image is bound to be partial and a half-truth'. He rightly asserts, An African who affirms that Jesus is Nana also should relate that message to the issues of human and social justice in African countries as in the rest of the world. Hence, one needs to reflect theologically on the issue of the ancestors. He suggests that Christ's sinlessness and the frequency of his prayers to the father offer a solid basis for such theologising.

Walls (1996) pointed out that there was no similar equivalent in the West, either of ancestors or the clan lineage system to which the ancestors belong. What is important for us is Walls' sense of the pervasiveness of the ancestors in African life and therefore their significance for African Christianity. 'Christian faith therefore is necessarily ancestor-conscious, aware of the previous generations of faith. Thus, if a new form of Christianity is emerging, shaped by the configuration of African life, it will be bound to take account in some way of the ancestors. The role that the ancestors play among their descendants is of vital importance in this article. Hence, if Jesus is to be envisaged as an ancestor, there is need to be some correspondence between the function of the ancestors and Christ's own function in the lives of his followers. The church ascribes to Jesus an intercessory role and moral authority. Moreover, he is worshipped as the Son of God, the God whom we understand to be the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of all humanity. The initial points of contact are his incarnation and baptism. This functional approach presupposes his divine son ship. Clearly, Jesus' functions reflect, but also exceeds, those of the African ancestors.

### **Ancestors and Christology**

The complexity and multifaceted nature of the ancestors in African Christian theology has to be acknowledged. Yet there is generally a sense that the ancestors are vital to the Africanness of a person. Clearly, the ancestral tradition has slight variations among the Africans, for example, the Ga of Ghana, the Bantu of Southern Africa and the Igbo of Nigeria. If one should grant that Nyamiti's categories are fairly reflective of African ancestral belief as a whole, then the notion of Jesus as ancestor is plausible. According to Nyamiti (1994), The variations granted, the, concept of Jesus as ancestor is the unanimous conviction of all African Christian theologians that one can be fully Christian without compromising the essential values of African culture, just as one can be fully African without compromising the essentials of the biblical message. In other words, it is possible to be authentically Christian and authentically African at the same time. In fact, African theologians do not see this as merely a possibility but as an imperative that leaves no other options.

An ancestor Christology thus enables the development of a Christology that is both authentically African and also Christian. It is the task of African theologians to theologise the concept of 'ancestor', so that the naming of Jesus as ancestor becomes the beginning of the

christological process, not its end. This title places Jesus in the culture, but theologians have to continue the theological task of interpreting the title of ancestor for the church.

Generally, theologians work around the theme of Jesus' humanity and divinity, with differing emphasis depending on their point of departure. However the designation of Jesus as ancestor is premised on his incarnation as the meeting point between God and humanity. Nyamiti (1994) states that incarnation is the highest fulfillment of personality as understood by the African. For the African, to achieve personality is to become truly human and, in a sense, authentically Black; hence, the incarnate Logos is the Black Person par excellence. There is therefore, no genuine blackness or negritude outside him. As an instance of the fulfillment of personality in the African sense the incarnation is directly linked with the mysteries of the Trinity, grace, the paschal mystery, Pentecost, Parousia, and ecclesiology.

So Jesus became incarnate as our ancestor in our African culture. In the light of revelation, Jesus becomes the Father's gift to Africa, as Africa offers itself to God. Hence, the concept of ancestor and its accompanying world-view remain distinctly African while also becoming Christian.

Most scholars agree that the turning-point in Jesus' life was his baptism (Nyerere, 1997; Nyamiti, 1994). What is significant about Jesus' baptism by communal immersion is that it designated a lifestyle and exhibited solidarity. As such, he is the architect of what conversion and transformation must entail: for African theology, the conversion and transformation of the ancestral cult require its immersion. What this entails goes to the heart of African Christian theology's attempt to create one new person out of two - Christian and African.

Jesus' baptism, as paradigm, reveals how we may be changed beyond simply being African or Christian. It reveals, in other words, how we might become fully human within our particular cultural environment but this is possible through mutual engagement during the process of engagement, we dispense with notions of superiority and arrogance. Here lies the real task, of baptism - its profound initiatory function, which is the death and resurrection of a person. Baptism plunges its initiates back into the formless depth of the world -back, that is, into its 'primal' existential moment, which as such, precedes a forms of socialisation. In effect, Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist signifies how Jesus allowed culture and religion to impinge upon his own existential horizon. In this sense, Jesus opens himself to us. The implication for Christianity and the ancestral cult is that this baptismal orientation is essential for effective and meaningful engagement. For there can be no true community in Africa in a situation where there is a refusal to learn the new social possibilities offered by immersion into Christ. Baptism involves handing oneself over to God in Christ, so as to receive oneself back as a gift. The church remains one of the profound gifts from Christ to humanity.

#### **Ancestors and Ecclesiology**

The church has a responsibility, as the community is formed, to define and declare the gospel. With image appropriate to circumstances, so that truths implicit in the understanding of the first believers may, over the centuries, assume richer. Scripture embodies the gospel and does not stand independently of time and circumstance. Scripture has to be interpreted and explained, for the cultural assumptions that determined the manner in which its message was communicated or have to-be interpreted. It is the living church that does this, and the process is a creative one. Once it is granted that Scripture has different christologies, we must also acknowledge that the biblical writers worked with certain assumptions. The Scriptures presuppose the revelation of God, meaning that God enters into a relationship with humanity. The scriptural portrayal of Jesus presupposes that he is the Son of God - a theological point. Hence Scripture is primarily

theology, and secondarily history. In other words, the Bible is a theological interpretation of history. A century after Africa's first evangelisation by Europeans, the time has come for African Christians themselves to appropriate the gospel message of Jesus Christ.

It is the responsibility of the African church to read Scripture as the Word of God and to draw from its essential theological teaching a creative blend of African culture and the gospel. Thus a reflection on ecclesiology that takes ancestors seriously will stress the importance of community and the cult of the saints in the church. However, it has Christ the ancestor as its ultimate foundation and focus.

Moreover, the relationship between ancestors and the community is a two-way process. The community holds up certain persons as ancestors and it is believed that the ancestors bless the community. Hence the ancestors are dependent on the community for their existence. Theologically, the church remembers Jesus as its founder and depends on him for its focus and purpose, but Christ also needs the church to make him known in the world, In other words. African Christian ancestral beliefs require a christological ecclesiology.

### **The Saint and Ancestors**

The Christian affirmation of the communion of saints finds an echo in the general African belief in the ancestors. The saints belong to the very essence of the church, which is called to be the holy covenant community. Jesus alone is sinless. Only he could be called 'the Holy One of God' (John 6:69). In effect, Christ is the basis of sainthood. If the church, as the people of God, had no saints, it would not be what it is meant to be - the symbol of God's victory in human history and in the real lives of persons. In other words, the acknowledgement of the saints confirms us in the hope that an exemplary life is an achievable goal. McBrien, (1994) suggests that 'the term "saint" should include those who have been sanctified by the grace of Christ, whether living or dead, whether Christian or not'. The term can also be applied to Moses and the prophets, who lived before the time of Christ, but in a manner that anticipated his teaching and example. The term could also be applied more widely, to non-Christian persons, such as Mohandas Gandhi, who were perceived to be holy.

Accordingly, the church must allow Africans to express the relationship with the ancestors as one of communion and solidarity. Nyamiti (1994) mentions the importance of kinship in the ancestral system. With reference to the indigenous churches, Gibellini (1994) opines that, the kinship system of the African people has been utilized by these churches in developing communities of faith where no-one is left without genuine emotional and physical support'. The inclusiveness described here may well embrace the ancestors also. Nthamburi (1991) agrees, with reference to the independent or indigenous churches that they incorporate from the African religious ethos, 'the controversial attitude of veneration of ancestors.

One must agree that the ancestors, like the saints, are fellow disciples in the community of disciples. They are not situated between Christ and us; they are with us, in Christ, as sisters and brothers with whom we share a common humanity, a common faith, and a common eternal destiny. Hence we can pray for one another, in as much as we accept that it is Christ our Mediator who makes it possible. The church is a community in itself, and the ancestors are a part in as much as they lived an exemplary lives.

### **Ancestors and Ethics**

The conviction is that ethical reflection and action are intrinsic to the nature and life of the church. Thus, ecclesiological reflection and ethical reflection are inseparable: Christian ethical engagement is an expression of our deepest ecclesiological convictions, and our

ecclesiology must be informed by our experience of ethical engagement, how we live out the gospel in the complex situations of the world (Osei-Bonsu, 2005). It is, for example, an empirically verifiable observation that commitment to, and working for, particular moral causes creates community among people. Clearly, an ecclesial-centred approach to Christian ethics can relate to African ethics in a highly positive way.

Traditionally, African thinking has been described as holistic and systemic. In African spirituality, there is no separation of religious and social elements, since in the African traditional world-view, no real distinction exists between the sacred and the secular, between religious and non-religious life. In such a world-view, ethics cannot be regarded as a separate discipline, because morality is indistinguishable from the rest of African social life. One has to observe and reflect upon the social life of the people - their rituals, customs and practices, events and relationships - to grasp their ethical notions, Mbiti, (1991) writes: Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am. This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man.

Within the African context, meaning, authority and identity are communally conferred. Hence African traditional ethics are communal and so constitute a living-out of the nature of African community. Hence to the extent that it is meaningful to speak of African ethics, those ethics are the expression of particular communities with their memories, stories, and rituals - all of which are understood in profoundly religious terms.

The saints, like the ancestors, lived exemplary lives. Thus, both the saints and the 'living dead' have great moral authority in their respective communities. However, ancestors maybe conceived, ancestorship primarily implies moral activity. The ancestors oversee the moral behaviour of the individual, the family, the clan and the entire society with which they are associated. No serious misbehaviour or negative attitude among their descendants, in thought, word and deed. The ancestors are in a real sense 'authority figures, which maintain the norms of social action and cause trouble when these acts are not obeyed. They are never to be forgotten and provide a crucial reference point for those facing important decisions and moral dilemmas. In other words, ancestors ensure social harmony by cementing the entire community, the present with the past and those that are yet to be born.

Abundant life is the most precious aspect of the African social arrangement. One is reminded that illness or misfortune represent broken communal relationships and consequently imply the disturbance of harmony and peace, in the community. Rituals become acts of contrition (repentance), so that, life may be restored- Since the ancestors are seen as the sustainers and channel of the community's life force, various rituals are directed towards the ancestors. Hence, in the light of Christ's role, any christology, ecclesiology or ethics that promote life are authentically Christian and authentically African.

### **Implications for the word Church**

In the light of our discussion, we may ask the question, who is an African without his ancestors? Baur (1998) provides an answer by relating an Eastern fable: An ancient Oriental fable illustrates the dangers that await the theologian who has; only a shallow grasp of the dynamics of culture. Once upon a time a monkey and a fish were in a huge flood. The agile monkey was able to save itself by grasping a tree branch and pulling itself to safety. Happy at last, the monkey noticed the fish fighting against the massive current and, deeply moved by the plight, he bent down to .save it. The fish was not happy, for it bit the monkey's hand. Whereupon

the monkey, being terribly annoyed at the fish's ingratitude, threw the fish back into the water. To be thoroughly involved in the dialogue between the Gospel and cultures, we need a lot more than the goodwill of a monkey.

African Christian theology carries implications for the wider African understanding of God historically; Christian theology has asserted that-God is transcendent, yet immanent in the traditional African world-view, the Supreme Being is distant and unfathomable. African Christian theology offers Africans, through its ancestor Christology, a view of God who is not only transcendent but also *as accessible as the ancestors are*. Clearly, this offers the opportunity for mutual enrichment and new life for both.

All Africans - Black and White - are thereby challenged to take African Christian theology seriously in its own right. However small the gestures of resistance, however unorganised and quickly co-opted is the opposition, the vindication of Africaness and African theology is not being achieved without a struggle. So when the opponents of African theology have not gone so far as to attack it openly, they have usually contrived to ignore it, in the belief, presumably, that it is an irritant that will simply disappear. The Western church, for its part, must not only learn the language of African theology but also allow Africaness to sharpen the discourse of its theology. In other words, it is not enough merely to read books about people of other cultures, one needs to enter into the culture of the people.

Furthermore, African Christian theology offers the Western church the taste of judgment ahead of time. The Western church is living largely in denial of a judgment already clogging its own veins. If so, then the Western church must learn again the words of the prophet Micah: 'He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what the Lord requires of you, but to do justice, and to love, to show kindness and to walk humbly with your God? Many Western theologians are so influenced by the Enlightenment, that they cannot distinguish theology from other secular-ideologies. African theology uses primarily a dialogical approach that takes the lived realities of Africans seriously. In others words; it is not primarily 'professional or academic theology.

African theology can contribute positively to Christianity in the Diaspora as well, and particularly to the question of identity. African theology can help in the recovery of lost socio-cultural aspects of many communities in the Diaspora. Millions of Africans crossed the Atlantic during the Slave Trade era and were denied opportunities to openly practice their African culture through religious and political imposition. The emphasis of African theology on the redemption of the pre-christian past can help to reverse centuries of humiliation and loss of socio-cultural identity (Muzorewa, 1985; Kung & Tracy, 1989). Discovering echoes of Africa in the Diaspora can help to affirm 'one's socio-cultural identity. No longer, will we feel the need to defer to the West and be judged right or acceptable according to their standards.

The African church, through its theological enterprise, can point to what is of value in African culture that can enrich our identity as persons with an African heritage. An ancestor Christology that feeds into ecclesiology and ethics overturns any notion of the supremacy of the individual in moral choice. The point of departure for such a Christology is the community as the sculptor and protector of life-affirming ethical values. Consequently, the gospel becomes the story of a particular community that, given its unique experience of God in Christ, moves through history, challenges and trials as a community of resistance and hope. Katongole, (2011) notes: Scripture is not only an account of a community's journey with God: it in turn creates a 'community of memory' people capable of reading and reliving the same story by placing themselves in the biblical tradition.

Clearly, there is an overlapping of the notion of community in the traditional African world-view and Christianity. It is from this rich tradition that we are called to engage with ethical issues. This has serious implications for the present liberal agenda that stresses the right of the individual to determine matters of morality. At present, the pendulum in the Western church has swung with the secular liberal tide towards individualism. Yet Best and Robra (1997) rightly assert that the Christian community is a place where... the gospel tradition is probed permanently for moral inspiration and insight, and where incessant moral counsel keeps the issues of humanity and world alive in the light of the gospel.

A creative blend of African culture - represented in the ongoing theological working of the ancestors - and the gospel may be able to move the notion of community from the periphery of Western culture to the centre. Ethics ought not to be thought of only in individualistic terms, but communally. Consequently, moral practices will require communal sanction. The church's problem lies not in the need to understand more deeply or articulate what it knows, but rather, in the challenge to stand with integrity and practice what it means 'to be made in God's image'. This affirmation has tremendous value for our psychological health and development. In effect, one's dignity and identity are located more in one's person in the functions one performs in society. Africans' sense of worth will improve when it becomes natural not to have their identity defined through the Western world-view. Certainly, it is here that the church in Africa has to make its most meaningful contribution theologically. The God whom we worship has a creative blend of attributes, to which the manifold cultural variations of humanity are intended to bear testimony. As new Christian theologies emerge from among these diverse cultures, the richness of such a creative blend is recovered for the church and enhances our fullness. Hence the African church needs to take stock of the continued psychological damage to Africans and non-Africans if it continues, consciously or unconsciously, to ignore concerns that are vital to our Africanness in its theological agenda.

Africanness is a profoundly contested and multi-faceted space of identity and meaning. It is also not simply homogeneous. Some will argue that African Christian theology is a non-entity. Others will deny its credibility because it draws on the pre-Christian past. Actually, for theology to be African in itself is a problem. Of course, we acknowledge the outstanding early African theologians such as Clement, Origen, Athanasius, Cyprian and Augustine of Hippo. Yet the dominant perception is that Africa's place is at the bottom of the pile, and in contemporary cultural discourse, Africanness continues to be understood as primitive, tribal, backward, and to epitomise poverty and dependence. Thus, Africanness continues to be a cause of consternation in our culture.

Yet, the question remains alive and unanswered among White antagonists' of African theology: what would it mean for a White man to be saved by a Black Messiah? The claim that the centre of gravity of Christianity has shifted is in effect a claim that God has become 'Black'.

## **Conclusion**

Any study of African ancestral beliefs cannot fail to demonstrate that they are vital to the life of Africans; they are an integral part of their lives. As African Christians continue to explore their faith and journey through the twenty-first century, there will be the need for new communal possibilities-If the church is true to the gospel and makes a conscious effort to engage with the ancestors as a vital part of African culture, it will not uproot African culture but rather will help to make Africans better human beings and therefore better Africans.

Yet, as Setiloane (1979) has rightly observed regarding African Christian theology, the way forward into communal possibilities begins with Christology and cannot be separated from ecclesiology and ethics. Moreover, African theology is only one particular project of one particular social position in the world, but its claim to universal significance continues to be disturbing for some. However, the church must continue the task of reflecting theologically on Africa's experiences, and the ancestors are a vital part of African reality with all its complications. For such reflection has implications for the Christian identity not only of Africans but of non-Africans as well, in an era when the centre of gravity of Christianity has shifted to the South.

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