INTRODUCTION

Modern Africa has been racked by ethnic conflict. As D. W. Waruta wrote in 1992, “One of the burning moral issues in contemporary African societies is that of tribalism. From Monrovia to Maputo, Dakar to Durban and Cape to Cairo, Africans have been killing each other in the name of protecting ethnic interests…”¹ Let the following record suffice to summarize the recent past.

From 1967-1993 Nigeria was engaged in a civil war largely between the largest three ethnic groups: Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo which resulted in over 1,000,000 deaths. Even now, the struggle over the oil-rich Niger River Delta is tinged with ethnic overtones. Throughout much of the second half of the twentieth century ethnic Eritreans were engaged in a protracted struggle for independence from Ethiopia, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths and displaced persons on each side of the boarder. In the 1970’s, Uganda, with its several kingdoms, each ethnically based and struggling for power in that nation, was “united” under despotic rulers who included the infamous Idi Amin under whose dictatorship it is estimated that 300,000 to 500,000 persons died. From 1989 to 1996, Liberia descended into ethnically related Civil War costing approximately 150,000

¹ D. W. Waruta, “Tribalism as a Moral Problem in Contemporary Africa”, in Moral Issues in African Christianity: A Challenge for African Christianity, ed. J.N.K. Mugambi and A. Nasimiyu-Wasike (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 1999), 119. Despite the stigma associated with the use of the words “tribe” and “tribalism”, the authors have consented to their use for at least three reasons: (1) African scholars like the one quoted here freely use the terms; (2) “Tribe” is the ‘lingua franca’ of most of the people across Africa for how they refer to their own ethnicity; and (3) We hope by the use of the term “tribalism” that ethnocentrism (wherever it is found) is seen as the evil that it is.
lives and creating 1,000,000 displaced persons and refugees. In 1994, the world watched as over 800,000 persons, one tenth of the total population of Rwanda, was killed in an ethnic genocide pitting majority Hutus against minority Tutsis. From then to 1999 the same conflict between these two tribes in neighboring, Burundi, resulted in an additional 250,000 deaths. Over 1.3 million mostly Hutu refugees spilled over into neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC, formerly Zaire), fleeing the conflict in Rwanda and Burundi. This contributed to the political instability in the DRC, where largely ethnic-based rebel groups have constantly been in conflict with the central government. From the many years of civil war in that country, death estimates range as high as 3.3 million persons. In Sudan, two decades of civil war between mostly Arab northerners and mostly black southerners witnessed 1.5 million persons killed and millions displaced. The same ethnic dynamics are at work even now in the Darfur region of Sudan, causing hundreds of thousands of deaths and even more refugees into neighboring Chad. Rival clans have been a major factor of the descent of Somalia into chaos with its massive refugee populations in neighboring countries. One website calculated the 30 bloodiest wars of the twentieth century—ten of them were on the continent of Africa.²

If the evidence from 2008 and 2009 is any indication, it does not appear things are getting better. In January of 2008, concerns over the Kenyan presidential election results morphed into ethnic violence which caused over 1,000 deaths and over 300,000 internally displaced persons. As recently as May of 2008, xenophobic reactions of South Africans

---

against other nationalities living among them resulted in loss of life and displaced persons to which the government had to react swiftly in order to avert further conflict. And once again, in November of 2008 in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, violence erupted between the government forces of President Kabila and the Tutsi-led rebel forces, sending thousands of persons fleeing from the violence.

These examples do not even include the many incidences of conflict where ethnicity has played a lesser role in countries such as Sierra Leone, Ghana, Cameroon, Guinea Bissau, Burkina Faso, etc.

Neither do they include countries like Zimbabwe and South Africa where white minorities and black majorities have struggled for control of land, wealth, and political influence. Indeed, the history of modern Africa cannot be told without reference to a powerful white tribe coming from the global North with its colonizing, its “divide and conquer” method of pitting one tribe against another, its establishment of often arbitrary national boundaries through the middle of one ethnic community thereby placing parts of the ethnic community in different countries and in other contexts grouping ethnic rivals together in one nation. To be sure, European colonialism greatly exacerbated ethnic animosity across Africa. In fact, many of the conflicts mentioned above have direct roots in immediate colonial pasts.³

It would, of course, be a gross over-simplification to lay all the blame for these conflicts at the feet of tribalism. Certainly there have been many factors contributing to the wars that have raged across the African continent in the second half of the twentieth century. However, ethnic rivalry has been a major factor in all of them.

³ Waruta, 123-26.
These statistics of loss of life and displaced persons don’t tell the full story of how ethnocentrism affects the daily lives of Africans. In many parts of Africa, people are hired on the basis of tribe, politicians campaign by raising tribal fears, choosing government ministers is a delicate balancing act in finding agreeable ethnic representation, marriage partners are restricted to those of “one’s own community”, housing in major urban areas is unofficially segregated according to ethnicity. Ethnic instability has been a major factor in the retarded economic development of many African countries.

All of this “bad news” regarding ethnocentrism is made worse by the fact that sub-Saharan Africa has supposedly now been “Christianized”. In all of the countries mentioned above, save Nigeria, Sudan, and Somalia, the populations overwhelmingly identify themselves as Christian. How is it that such large majorities which claim to be Christian cannot do more to stop this kind of tribalism? Even worse, how is it that people who claim to be Christian engage in such ethnic atrocities and injustices, themselves? Does Christianity in Africa have a word to say about African ethnocentrism? Perhaps more pertinent to the study at hand, are the words that African theologians are currently saying contributing to or counteracting African ethnocentrism?

That African theologians need to “speak out” and be heard is abundantly clear. There is a great need in Africa today, as in most parts of the Global South, for Christian theologians to contextualize the Gospel message. Far too often, the Western church with its global reach has delivered a pre-packaged theology (a.k.a. Western theology) to the rest of the church in its endeavor to take Christ to the nations. In the words of John Mary Waliggo,
…the Christian missionaries who came to evangelize Africa in the nineteenth century presented a limited and defective Christology. They came with ready-made questions and answers. They came with Christology developed in Europe throughout the centuries. It was a highly conditioned Christology, made to respond to specific situations and peoples. They did not pause for a moment to ask: What is Jesus Christ for you Africans? What do your African religions and cultures say about the Jesus Christ of faith?4

This is seconded by J. T. Taylor,

Christ has been presented as the answer to the questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs of a westerner would feel, the saviour of the world of the European worldview, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would He look like? If He came into the world of African cosmology to redeem man as Africans understand Him, would He be recognizable to the rest of the Church universal? And if Africa offered Him the praises and petitions of her total uninhibited humanity, would they acceptable?5

African Christian theologians are increasingly “finding their voice” and calling for the “Reconstruction of Theology” in the African context.6 This reconstruction has applied to Christology. These theologians seek to explicate the relevance of Christology for modern Africa. They are seeking to answer within the African context the perennial question that Jesus put to Peter, “Who do you say that I am?” Among the many answers is one that has found expression among several African theologians: Christ as Ancestor. 

It is claimed that since ancestral veneration and mediation are such a great part of most African traditional worldviews that to interpret the significance of Jesus in terms of the

concept of “ancestor” would help Africans to more deeply appreciate and appropriate the person and work of Christ.

The purpose of this paper is to review this vision of Christology (Christ as Ancestor) and assess whether it offers a sufficient critique of African ethnocentrism/tribalism. This will be accomplished, first, by outlining the African worldview, noting especially the communal and familial nature of traditional African society; secondly by describing the important role that the ancestors (both living and dead) play in society according to that worldview. It will then introduce African Christian Theology with particular attention to the work of modern African theologians who are contextualizing Jesus as Ancestor. Finally, it will critique that Christological image in light of the nature and prevalence of ethnic conflict in Africa today.

THE AFRICAN COMMUNAL WORLDVIEW

Africans are often noted for viewing the world not from the perspective of their own individuality, but from the perspective of their respective communities. Mbiti’s famous statement speaks to this reality, “I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am.” The individual does not exist except in the life of the concrete community. Without the community, the individual has no life and no meaning. Writing about the Bantu peoples of Africa but which may just as well apply to all of Black Africa, Placide Tempels writes,

The Bantu cannot conceive of . . . the human person as an independent being standing on his own. Every human person, every individual is as it were one link in a chain of vital forces: a living link both exercising and receiving influence, a link that establishes the bond with previous

---

generations and with the forces that support his own existence. The individual is necessarily an individual adhering to the clan.\(^8\)

This communal worldview influences all moral decision-making for the African. According to Bujo,

Every member of the community, down to the least significant, shares the responsibility for strengthening the force of the tribe or clan and of each of its members. The morality of an act is determined by its life-giving potential: good acts are those which contribute to the community’s vital force, whereas bad acts, however apparently insignificant, are those which tend to diminish life.\(^9\)

This strong emphasis on community has been and rightfully should be applauded as a necessary corrective to excessive Western individualism. Indeed, Western individualism, even subtly packaged in Christian missionary evangelism, has been destructive of the fabric of African society.

It is essential to note that this emphasis on community does not end with death. Physical death is not the end of human existence. While the body may cease to exist the spirit will continue to live and may have communion with those who remain in physical existence. The cult of the ancestors in the African context is the extension of community to the members of the community who have physically died. However, it important to be reminded that even though the community encompasses those who are dead, it is still limited only to members of the community in which one is part. If one does not belong to the community, he or she is considered an outsider and cannot participate fully in the life of the community.


UNDERSTANDING ANCESTORS IN THE AFRICAN WORLDVIEW

The ancestors and other spiritual beings figure very prominently in the traditional African worldview. Mbiti notes, “The spiritual world of African peoples is very densely populated with spiritual beings, spirits and the living-dead….To understand their religious ethos and philosophical perceptions it is essential to consider their concepts of the spiritual world in addition to concepts of God.”\(^{10}\) Jean-Marc Ela agrees,

In many traditional societies, the cult of the dead is perhaps that aspect of culture to which the African is most attached—the heritage clung to above all else. Indeed, the cult of the ancestors is so widespread throughout Africa that it is impossible to avoid the questions this practice raises for Christian life and reflection.\(^{11}\)

In this section, we will seek to answer: Who are the ancestors? What is their role? Where do they stay? What is their relationship to the living etc.? Our answers to these questions will help us to show the inadequacy of this model to critique African ethnocentrism.

Describing the place of the ancestors in traditional African life is difficult for at least two reasons. The first is that the ancestors are understood differently in various African communities. Africa is a diverse continent with thousands of cultural and language groups. Nevertheless, there are enough similarities to allow us to make some cautious generalizations. Secondly, linguistics is also an issue. The English word, “ancestor” simply does not do justice to the African terms that are used to describe those who have gone before us in death and yet who are now still with us and in some ways affecting our lives. Mbiti does not use the term ancestor at all because:

‘Ancestral spirits’ or ‘ancestors’ are misleading terms since they imply only those

\(^{10}\) Mbiti, 74.
\(^{11}\) Quoted in Diane B. Stinton, Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2004), 133.
spirits who were once the ancestors of the living. This is limiting the concept unnecessarily, since there are spirits and living-dead of children, brothers, sisters, barren wives and other members of the family who were not in any way the ‘ancestors’ ...  

Rather he prefers the terms like “spirits” or “living dead”. Nevertheless, because the term “ancestor” has come into common usage among African theologians so much so that it is central to how some are describing the person and work of Christ, and because there is a need to distinguish those spirits who have kinship ties with the living from those which do not, we consent to its usage.

At any rate, Mbiti’s comments move us to consider who are the ancestors? According to him, just because one has died does not make that person an ancestor. To “qualify” as an ancestor one must have been a person of exemplary morality, a good role model to the community, married and have had children who will be the descendants who will remember the deceased.  

One must have sought the well being of the community in one’s earthly life. A selfish person, a social deviant, one who flaunted the traditions of the community, one who remained childless, one whose morals were corrupt and was a bad influence on others—these persons could not become ancestors after their death. Elevation to “ancestor-hood” was dependent on the community of the living remembering the deceased person. Those who were negative influences in the community would be quickly forgotten by the community and pass into the realm of unnamed spirits—the forgotten dead. But those who left an endurably positive legacy would be remembered and their influence on the community would be extended to future generations. These are properly termed, “ancestors”. Thus becoming an ancestor

12 Mbiti, 83-84. 
13 This partially explains why barrenness is such a curse and large families are such a blessing in traditional African culture. It also sheds light on why in some cultures marriages are not truly legitimate until the birth of the first child.
becomes a goal which one aspires to reach. From childhood children are told stories about the ancestors of that particular clan, so that they become mentors in absentia to these young ones. So virtues like courage, generosity are instilled through the heroism of those who have gone before us.

The role of the ancestors in African life is closely tied up with African religion. God in most African religions is seen as so great and powerful that is He is almost unapproachable by ordinary humans. In the same way, if an ordinary member of the community wanted to make a request of an important chief, he would not go himself to make that request but rather would send an intermediary; the ancestors serve as mediators between God and humans. To Mbiti, these are the closest intermediaries that men have with the spirit world. To an African what comes to mind when he/she hears about ancestors is the idea of intermediaries, those who communicate our prayers to God.

Furthermore, the ancestors serve as guardians of morality in the community. If members of the community behave in ways that diminish the life force of the community, the ancestors of those members may cause some kind of calamity or evil to come upon them. On the other hand, if the members behave in a positive manner, the ancestors will be pleased and bless them. This, then, is the reason why both fear and fondness come to mind among traditional-minded Africans when they think of their ancestors. It is noteworthy that the anger or blessing of the ancestor is directed to those who consider this ancestor their ancestor--that is family or clan members.

Eventually these living-dead become known as “its”. At this stage they no longer have personal relationship with the living because no one remembers their names or new

---

14 Mbiti, 67.
15 Ibid., 82.
generations have replaced older generations both among the living and the living-dead. Ancestral spirits can only affect members of their own family, except ancestors of royal families who can affect the whole tribe. Africans care nothing about ancestors of other communities because it is only their ancestors whose actions affect them.

Another issue worth noting concerning ancestors is that their influence does not last forever, it is most felt immediately after death, and it slowly diminishes with the passage of time. That influence is only there when the descendants remember them by name but eventually vanishes as people forget their identity. Instead of referring to them by their names, they are now greeted by the “children” as ‘to all those whom we cannot remember.’ In Shona traditions (a tribe in Zimbabwe) they are referred to as varikumhepo “those who are in the air.” Meaning that they are not just one but many and they are now a community of the living-dead.

Because the ancestors have the power to bless or curse the community, the relationship of the community and its individual members with them must be carefully maintained. Oblations, offerings, and sacrifices are traditionally made to the ancestors to ensure their favor and to placate their wrath. This is where the common accusation of ancestral worship arises and why the western missionaries almost universally condemned participation in ancestral veneration. Actually several scholars refer to it as the “cult of the ancestors” or the worship or veneration of ancestors.

---

16 Mbîti, 79-83.
18 Ibid, 25.
19 First Hand information from the co- author (Gift Mtukwa) of the article.
21 Yusufu Turaki, *Foundations of African Traditional Religion and Worldview.* (Nairobi: World Alive Publishers, 2006), 68. There are some voices within African Christianity which, in an effort to inculturate
Charles Nyamiti summarizes the various elements of African ancestors by saying that:

... the African traditional conception of ancestors is determined by the following elements (i) consanguineous kinship between the ancestor/ancestress with his/her earthly kin; (ii) superhuman sacred status usually acquired through death; (iii) mediation (between the Supreme Being and the ancestor’s earthly kin members; (iv) right or title to regular sacred communication with ancestral terrestrial relatives through prayers and ritual offerings (oblations) in token of love faithfulness, homage and gratitude towards the ancestor; (v) exemplarity, as models of good behavior.22

Richard Gehman lists types of relationship that exist between the living and their ancestors:

(i) As senior elders of the clan, the ancestors function as the guardians of the family traditions and life, (ii) when the living fail to follow the customs of the fathers, it becomes the duty of the ancestors to correct their errors, (iii) As elders, the ancestors serve as the owners of the land fertilizing the earth and causing the food to grow, (iv) The living dead receive requests and offerings from the living, (v) The ancestral spirits may also serve as intermediaries between man and God, (vi) The living dead become a source of comfort to the living, who are always conscious of their presence. (vii) The living dead communicate with the living by revelations, dreams, calamity, ecstasy, and trance, possession, prophecy and divination.

In some cultures the ancestors even have a representative that is a person of their choice who speaks on their behalf. This person is often possessed by the ancestral Spirits, and when that takes place you don’t hear the person but the ancestors. In some communities there is often a bull which is named after this ancestor, the bull often behaves strangely, for example leading the other cows home after a day in the woods. This bull is given special foods; it is not supposed to be punished because it is special.

Among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, when an ancestor comes to possess someone and speak through them, certain conditions must be met. Those who are not of the same totem, the strangers, are not welcome. The ancestor may not come as long as those who don’t belong to that clan are present. They will be asked to vacate the hut where the ancestor is supposed to speak from. Among these people who are not welcome are those married from other communities, and any other person who does not belong to the community in question.

To summarize this section, we have discussed the traditional worldview of Africans with its strong emphasis on community and the essential role that the ancestors play in it. We will reflect on some of these issues in our critique of the model of Christ as Ancestor. We now turn our attention to what key African theologians are saying about conceiving Christ as our African ancestor.

CHRSTOLOGY IN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

Various African theologians have tried to understand Christ from an African perspective. Different models have been used to explain the meaning of Christ. Some of the models include Christ as Liberator, Christ as Healer, Christ as Elder Brother, Christ as Ideal Elder, etc\(^\text{23}\). The one that concerns us for the purpose of this paper is Christ as ancestor. We will look at the Christology of Kwame Bediako, Benezet Bujo, and Charles Nyamiti in order to see how Christ is understood as an African ancestor.

Kwame Bediako

Bediako is a Presbyterian theologian from West Africa particularly Ghana. He is one among many African theologians who understands Christ as an African ancestor. He argues that Christ, by virtue of his incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension into the realm of Spirit power, can rightly be designated, in African terms as Ancestor, indeed Supreme Ancestor because Christ brings life and above all an ancestor is a giver of life to his/her people.  

Realizing the problems associated with the ancestorship of Christ, Bediako concludes that one of the values of an Ancestor Christology is precisely that it helps us clarify the place and significance of natural ancestors. By making room among the “living dead” for the Lord, the Judge of both the living and the dead, it becomes more evident how they relate to him, and He to them. Bediako is categorical that ancestors cannot become rivals of Christ as they still remain human. “Just as there is a clear distinction between God and divinities, so also there exists a qualitative distinction between Christ an Ancestor and natural Ancestors.”

In conclusion Bediako takes the direction that is unique to himself in that instead of seeing natural ancestors as the ones who can help us understand Christ, he sees Christ as one who helps us understand our natural ancestors. That is his contribution to African Christology, Christ is the Supreme Ancestor in his words.

---

26 Ibid, 218.
Benezet Bujo

Benezet Bujo, a Congolese Catholic theologian, in trying to come up with an African Christian Ethic, traces the issue of ancestor and discovers that Jesus can fit that model as Ancestor Par Excellence--that is “Proto-Ancestor”. He says, “We can only arrive at a true understanding of the words, actions, and rituals of the ancestors when we realize that they, the ancestors and elders, have here ‘written down’ their autobiography” Their experiences which are a combination of misfortune and successes constitute an inheritance handed down to their descendants. He concludes by saying that when the latter rehearse this inheritance they are not only relating the lives of their ancestors but confronting their own lives with what these people did or said-they are rewriting the ancient autobiographies on their own account. Hence in appropriating their inheritance, the living turn it into a source of life for the next generation.\(^{27}\) If one rehearses the life of the ancestors, it means he/she has chosen life and by rejecting them one chooses death. The path of the ancestors is known to bring life if one follows it. According to Bujo, Christ fulfills this role with excellence and therefore using the image of ancestor can be an effective way of unpacking the meaning of Christ for Africans.

Bujo goes on to draw some parallels between the end of life for ancestors and Jesus of Nazareth. An ancestor’s final moment with family members is very important. According to Bujo, the episode of the Washing of the Feet, in John chapter 13 is the final hour for Jesus. Jesus’ last will was: serve one another, love one another. To Bujo, only those who carry out the terms of this last will and testament will have life, and only they can transmit life to others.\(^{28}\)

\(^{28}\) Ibid, 73.
Bujo was aware that critics would raise an objection concerning the fact that ancestors were not always good people and how can Jesus be identified with such people. To that objection he had a ready answer, the ancestors whom Bujo is referring to are not bad ancestors whose earthly life cannot serve to build up, or edify the clan, or tribal community. But the ancestors he is talking about are God-fearing ancestors who exercise a good influence on their descendants. When Bujo looks at Jesus of Nazareth he sees one who not only lived the African ancestor ideal in the highest degree but one who brought that ideal to an altogether new fulfillment. Jesus in Bujo’s words brought life, and life-force in its fullness.29

Bujo cautions that the term ancestor should be used analogically, or in an eminent way, since to treat Him otherwise would be to make him only one founding ancestor among many. That is why in Bujo’s words the title Proto-Ancestor is reserved to Jesus alone. This is because Jesus not only realized the authentic ideal of the God-fearing African ancestors, but also infinitely transcended that ideal and brought it to new completion. To him African ancestors are fore runners or images of the Proto-Ancestor, Jesus Christ. To his credit, this serves as a protection against syncretism in Bujo’s thought. His emphasis on Jesus as Proto-Ancestor means that Jesus defines or sets the standard for what a good ancestor is.30

Bujo goes on to say that “let it be said once and for all, the title of Proto Ancestor for Jesus Christ, translated into a corresponding theology and catechesis will have much

29 Ibid, 73-75.
30 Ibid, 73-76. If Jesus totally defines what a good ancestor is, then one wonders what the point of this kind of contextualization is. One wonders is Jesus shaping our understanding of the ancestors or are the ancestors shaping our understanding of Jesus? Bujo would probably answer, both.
more meaning for Africans than titles such as *Logos* (Word) and *Kurios* (Lord).” His argument for saying this is that they derive from a particular culture which Africans inspite perhaps of theological, exegetical and philosophical education that they have received cannot fully understand. To Bujo is it only legitimate to give to Jesus Christ titles more deeply rooted in the culture of the people to whom the message of the gospel is being addressed. His goal being to show the African that being truly Christian and being truly African are not opposed to each other, because to be a true Christian means to be a true human being, since it was Jesus himself who was truly human and who humanized the world.  

Bujo’s summarizes his Christology when he says:

> Above all, Jesus Christ himself becomes the privileged locus for a full understanding of the ancestors. The African now has something to say about the mystery of the Incarnation, for after God has spoken to us at various times and in various places, including our ancestors, in the last days he speaks to us through his Son, whom he has established as unique Ancestor, as Proto-Ancestor, from whom all life flows for his descendants (cf. Heb 1-2). From him derive all those longed-for prerogatives which constitute him as Ancestor. The African ancestors are in this way forerunners, or images, of the Proto-Ancestor, Jesus Christ.  

All other titles used for Christ such as *logos* (“Word”) and *Kyros* (“Lord”) are derived from other cultures different from Africa’s experience and these may not communicate the truths of the Christian faith in a meaningful way to Africans. Bujo want to allow for those titles that are more grounded in the culture of the African people. This he states in the following words:

---

31 Ibid, 77.
32 Ibid, 77-78.
It is important that Christianity show the Africans that being truly Christian and being truly African are not opposed to each other, because to be a true Christian means to be a true human being, since it was Jesus himself who was truly human and who humanized the world. Once however we have established that the legitimate yearnings of the African ancestors are not only taken up in Jesus Christ, but are also transcended in him, can we used the concept of Proto Ancestor as the starting point of a Christology for which the enthusiasm of the African will be more than a passing fashion.  

In conclusion Bujo is unique the way he relate African ancestors to Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is the ideal ancestor, the Proto Ancestor –Ancestor Par Excellence. African ancestorship finds its completion in Jesus of Nazareth. For evangelistic purposes and the development of an African ethic, Bujo says it’s important to call Jesus an Ancestor, since Africans can identify with that. This becomes Bujo contribution to the question of the place of African ancestors within the Christian faith.

**Charles Nyamiti**

Charles Nyamiti from Tanzania is another African Catholic theologian who has attempted to talk about Jesus as an African Ancestor. He does not start with Jesus but with God himself, God the Father is the Ancestor of God the Son and the latter is the Descendant of the Father. In God ancestorship and descendancy are sacred, pneumatological (inseparable from the Holy Spirit), ritual, doxological and Eucharistic properties. It is through these that we fulfill our regular communication with God. Nyamiti goes on to extend the same in his Christology.

The same ancestral characteristics are found in Christ in his relationship to us thanks to his brotherhood with us (kingship), his holiness or sacredness, and

---


exemplarity of Christian behavior, his salvific mediation, and his right to our regular sacred communication with him through prayers and oblation, particularly the Eucharistic sacrifice.\textsuperscript{37}

According to Nyamiti, Christ is not only our elder brother but he is our Ancestor, to be specific, our Brother Ancestor. The basis of that is rooted in the mysteries of the Trinity (God as Father and Son), incarnation (Jesus becomes one of us, the “brother of humanity”) and redemption (Christ protects the family from imminent danger as an ancestor would) says Nyamiti. Christ’s redemptive ministry caused his ancestral status to grow until it reached its climax in his glorification.\textsuperscript{38}

Responding to the question of how this ancestorship is exercised, Nyamiti says it is by Christ’s Divine Spirit. Through the grace of the Holy Spirit Christ has become our Bother Ancestor. Thus in Nyamiti’s words we have two divine Ancestors: that is the Father (our Parent Ancestor) and His Incarnate Son (Our Brother Ancestor). Therefore we become brother and sister descendants of Christ and also son and daughter descendants of God the Father.\textsuperscript{39}

Nyamiti concludes by saying something that in our opinion is very important, that is the uniqueness of this kind of ancestorship. Though he does not have a descriptor to the word ancestor like Supreme for Bediako and Proto for Bujo, he still differentiates this ancestorship from the others. In his words, Nyamiti makes this distinction, “This ancestorship is different from all others because it transcends all clanic, tribal, racial or sexual distinctions. It is a participation in God’s own ancestral kinship and is sacred, pneumatological, doxological, Eucharistic and eschatological.”\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{37} Nyamiti, 83.
\textsuperscript{38} Nyamiti, 83.
\textsuperscript{39} Nyamiti, 84.
\textsuperscript{40} Nyamiti, 84.
Conclusion to this section

We have tried to capture the direction of thought that African Theologians have taken in their Christology. The ones we have investigated, Bediako, Bujo and Nyamiti, though they have unique ways of saying Christ is an African Ancestor, yet their message is the same mainly Christ has to be understood as African Ancestor to make sense to Africans.

At the heart of what these theologians are suggesting is the question asked by John S. Pobee (a Christian Theologian from Ghana) “why should an Akan relate to Jesus of Nazareth, who does not belong to his clan, family, tribe or nation?” Both Pobee and Bujo echo the same sentiments concerning the cultural connotations in the traditional titles used for Jesus (e.g., Christ, Lord, Messiah). To them the language used is alien to current African language and thought forms. Bujo advocates for titles for Christ which are more deeply rooted in the culture of the people to whom the gospel message is being addressed. In Bujo’s words when this is done, “the result will be incarnating Christianity in Africa, this way Christianity will show the Africans that being truly Christian and being truly African are not opposed to each other because to be a true Christian means to be a true human being since it was Jesus himself who was truly human and who humanized the world.” When Christ is known as an ancestor He ceases to be a stranger, He becomes one with Africans.

Bediako suggests that Christ is our Supreme Ancestor who helps us to understand our natural ancestors. When we look at Christ we can’t fail to see parallels between Him

---

42 Pobee, 81-82
44 Bujo, 84
and our ancestors—parallels such as Example, Mediator, Protector, Unifyer. This way Christ is not a stranger to us because we have our ancestors to compare him with. On the other hand Bujo suggests that Christ is our Proto Ancestor that is Ancestor Par Excellence. Bujo’s assessment is that Christological language is always cultural, just as the current titles for Christ came from another culture, African needs to formulate its own titles such as Proto Ancestor. This becomes a way of introducing Christ to an African mind. Nyamiti adds to the discussion by introducing Parent Ancestor for God and Brother Ancestor for Christ, according to him we are related to the Godhead because we are their descendants. So in a way we are related to Christ because we have the same parent God the Father.

The question then is, “Is this way of talking about Christ sufficient enough to critique tribalism in Africa? Does this model cause hindrance to Christian unity among different tribal communities?” These and other questions will be answered in the next section.

**CRITIQUE OF “CHRIST AS ANCESTOR” IMAGE**

Let us begin our critique of the image of Christ as Ancestor by noting this is, indeed, a controversial way to conceive of the person and work of Christ. Diane Stinton, in an extensive field research project conducted among both Protestants and Catholics in three African countries, found that African Christians, both clergy and laity were sharply divided over the legitimacy of this image of Christ. In general, while many, especially Catholics and those theologically trained may have an appreciation for imaging Christ as an ancestor, most clergy and laity seem to be reluctant to actually use the image of Jesus

---

as Ancestor. By and large this is still an image that is floating around in academic circles but has not filtered down to the “real world” of ministry in the local church and personal devotion.

The main reasons this image remains controversial are: (1) There is a danger that conceiving of Christ as an Ancestor may actually encourage people to think of their ancestors as intermediaries, while the scriptures clearly teach that we have just one mediator between God and humanity: Jesus Christ; 47 (2) Africans may be encouraged to actually worship the ancestors and place them in a position that only God should hold by offering to them sacrifices and oblations; (3) It seems to make Jesus out to be just another human being rather than God-incarnate; 48 (4) The scriptures clearly condemn necromancy (consulting the dead) 49 and that is precisely what happens in much of ATR regarding the ancestors.

However significant and weighty the above reasons for rejecting the image of Christ as ancestor are, in this paper, our focus has not been on any of them. Our focus has been exclusively on the question of whether the image of Christ as Ancestor, if it were to become commonly employed in the churches of Africa, would contribute to or diminish the kind of ethnocentrism and tribalism that were mentioned at the beginning of this article.

In addressing this, it should first of all be acknowledged that the very African theologians who have put this image before us are not oblivious to the dangers associated

46 Ibid, 148.
47 See 1 Tim. 2:5.
48 Stinton, 156-7.
49 See for example, Lev. 19:31; 20:6; 20:27; Deut. 18:10-13; 2 Kings 21:6; 23:24; 1 Chr.10:13; 2 Chr.33:6; Isa 8:19; 19:3; 1 Sam. 28:3-25.
with this kind of inculturation or contextualization. Indeed, they are very much aware that inculturation taken too far can easily lead to syncretism. They have fought valiantly to couch their Christologies in ways that protect them from incorporating unchristian practices into the church. Bujo is a good example at this point. In the following quote he even notes that his understanding of ancestorship transcends ethnic and tribal boundaries.

At the same time, Jesus corrects and completes the traditional morality. The moral perspective is no longer limited to my clan, my elders, my friends, but extends to the whole human race, in loving service of the Father. The morality of the disciple who accepts Jesus as Model and Proto-Ancestor is a personal re-enactment of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. . . . It is this new perspective which must be henceforth the constitutive principle of African Christian ethics. The history of the Crucified One must be subversive for the customs and practices of both traditional and modern Africa. From the standpoint of tradition, the remembering of Jesus is a challenge to conscience, urging the elimination from life of those mistakes which might be labeled ‘the specific errors of African group life’. The integration of the memory of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus is leaven which, when necessary, precisely in the name of a wider humanizing of Africa, causes certain venerable clan traditions to be abandoned.50

He goes on to mention as examples of the traditions that need to be abandoned in light of the Crucified Christ’s transformation of African culture the harsh attitudes toward childlessness and the evils of corruption and African political power-grabbing. This is very admirable, but is it adequate? Does it adequately safeguard the image of Jesus as ancestor from being seen as supporting an ethnocentric outlook?

In the final analysis we will not know for sure until this image filters down to the common people and is utilized in local ministry and devotion. But we can do some elementary “deconstruction” of the image of Jesus as ancestor to see if it will likely tend toward ethnocentrism or not.

---

In such a deconstructive analysis, we take note of how closely tied the ancestors are to particular ethnic communities. African ancestors are almost by definition, ethnocentric in nature. Physical or genealogical descent is a strict requirement for being an ancestor. The whole idea of community in the African context, at the headwaters of which are the ancestors, is based on the extended family, clan and tribe. Stinton writes in this vein, “One vital component here is that they [the ancestors] continue the ties of kinship beyond death, linking together family and clan members in the visible and invisible worlds. Thus kinship lies at the very heart of ancestral concepts.”51 Tanzanian scholar, Laurenti Magesa, adds, “Kinship is what in large measure constitutes life itself and its mystique. And kinship is most intensely and most meaningfully realized and expressed in and by the ancestor relationship.” This being the case, one must seriously question whether the concept of the ancestor can ever be dissociated from a tribal mentality. Indeed, it is our suspicion that no matter how many qualifications we attach to it, such as “proto-“, “par excel lance”, or “Supreme”, the term “ancestor” will always carry with it a residue of ethnocentricity.

Furthermore, the moral obligation the individual has toward the community in the African context is an obligation which by nature is ethnocentric. The quote given earlier from Bujo earlier is worth repeating here:

Every member of the community, down to the least significant, shares the responsibility for strengthening the force of the tribe or clan and of each of its members. The morality of an act is determined by its life-giving potential: good acts are those which contribute to the community’s vital force, whereas bad acts, however apparently insignificant, are those which tend to diminish life. African society is a real ‘mystical body’, encompassing both dead and living members, in which every member has

51 Stinton, 135.
an obligation to every other. The head of this mystical body is the founder-ancestor.\textsuperscript{52}

On this basis it is easy to understand the moral confusion in the minds of many Africans related to the issue of tribalism and nepotism when they have been taught that what is right is what is beneficial to one’s own community. It is not difficult to find in this quote justification for why people are hired on the basis of their tribe rather than their qualifications; or as in the case of the Kenyan post-election violence of 2007-08, why people were chased from land they had purchased decades ago simply because that land is part of the “ancestral home land” of another ethnic community. They were not viewed as being a part of that community even though they had lived there for years.

The very use of the phrase “ancestral home land” connotes an ethnocentrism that is alien to Christianity which follows a Jesus who claimed to have “no place to lay his head”. In many African societies, it is very important when a person dies to lay their body to rest in their ancestral homeland. They may have lived their whole life in the big city far away but no expense will be spared to return them to their ancestral home so that their spirits can take their place with the rest of the family’s ancestors. Again, Christianity knows no such tradition. We are taught that we are strangers and pilgrims here in this world. Can a Jesus who is conceived as an ancestor be buried in a borrowed tomb? Can such a Jesus really expect a politician to cast a vote that he knows will not be in the best interest of his own ethnic community, but is in the national interest?

Indeed, the veneration of ancestors of Africa is very much tied to land. In this regard there is more affinity of African traditional culture with the Old Testament “tribes” of Israel each being allocated a piece of land and through the year of Jubilee

\textsuperscript{52} Bujo, \textit{African Theology}, 22.
never being able to be permanently alienated from it. However, Christianity is markedly
different from the religion of the Old Testament on this issue. Christianity never was tied
to the land of Palestine or any land for that matter. Christianity, in its earliest stages, had
to overcome the prevailing ethnocentrism of Judaism. The Book of Acts and the Letters
of Paul tell the story of a faith that began in some people’s minds as little more than a
splintered sect of an particular ethnic group in Judea but which transcended that and
became a multicultural, universal religion.

As many African scholars have noted, there is no separation between the sacred
and secular in African life. Religion is not compartmentalized to one day a week or
specific times of the day. All of life is religious. Culture, religion and ethnic identity are
indistinguishable and the traditional African lives her religion 24/7. As such, African
traditional religions (ATR’s) are religions of specific ethnic communities. There is little
“evangelistic” or “missionary” mindedness among ATR adherents because there is no
need to “convert” someone because if you are born a Maasai, you cannot convert to
become a Kalenjin. Mbiti writes,

[African] Traditional religions are not universal: they are tribal or national. Each religion is bound and limited to the people among whom it has evolved. . . . Traditional religions have no missionaries to propagate them; and one individual does not preach his religion to another. Similarly, there is no conversion from one traditional religion to another. . . . Therefore, a person has to be born in a particular society in order to assimilate the religious system of the society to which he belongs. An outsider cannot enter or appreciate fully the religion of another society. Those few Europeans who claim to have been ‘converted’ to African religions—and I know some who make such fantastic claims!—do not know what they are saying.53

As we noted Mbiti saying earlier, ancestral veneration is an essential part of
African traditional religious devotion. If African religions are tribal as Mbiti says,

53 Mbiti, 4.
and ancestral veneration is tied up with these religions, can we truly conceive of Jesus as an ancestor who transcends that tribal loyalty and outlook and commands us to do the same? Can a Jesus who is conceived as my ancestor truly command me to “Go and make disciples of all nations (Greek: ethnos)” and expect me to do it?

The liability of this image toward ethnocentrism is seen in some of the interviews done in Stinton’s research. Stinton asked her respondents if they felt that the image of ancestor was appropriate to apply to Christ. Some of them rejected this image because Jesus was not their biological or physical ancestor. One nearly ninety-year old Ugandan woman stated that she had never heard of Jesus as ancestor before that interview, and she argued that Jesus would not fit into that category “because he is not of my tribe. The ancestors of Buganda must have been the Baganda—only.”

Likewise, a Protestant clergywoman testified that “an ancestor in the context of the African is your kith and kin, mother, father, grandfather, great grandfather,” and that any attempts to construe Jesus as kindred to Africans are simply “academic gymnastics”. A Catholic Archbishop interviewed also expressed concerns over the image, stressing that “ancestor is very restrictive” because it is an “ethnocentric concept.” He explained, “You don’t have the ancestors of the Asantes, you have the ancestors for the clans. My father is my ancestor; he’s not your ancestor. And so before you adopt Jesus as an ancestor, you must be able to first of all convince the whole world that Christians are one family.” While he admitted this could possibly be done using the concept of the African extended family as a model for the church, he also cautioned as follows:

54 Stinton, 154.
It can be very good and it can be very dangerous, in the sense that the African family is characterized by love, sharing, sensitivity to one another, sharing problems, joint ownership of property, and so on. These are all excellent things. But, at the same time, the African family excludes other families. It’s very ethnocentric. And what is happening in the African world, in Rwanda, in Burundi, is all an enlargement of the idea of the African family. The person who is outside my family is not as important as those in my family. I can band together with my own family members against another person from another family. When somebody from my family has done something, no matter how obnoxious, I support him or her, you see? So whereas the concept of family can be used beautifully as for the church, in some respects it can be very dangerous.\textsuperscript{55}

This is precisely the fear that we have regarding this conception of Jesus. If we think of Jesus as our ancestor, will it only make Rwanda and Darfur more likely to happen again?

The quote immediately above leads us to note that several other attempts to contextualize Jesus for Africa may suffer from the same inherent weakness regarding ethnocentrism: Ideal Elder, Elder Brother, and Chief; conceiving the church as an African family or clan. All of these “contextualize” very well in Africa and have many positive aspects about them but the problem is the context itself. The context of Africa is one that emphasizes family, kinship ties and community but these very ideals have weaknesses, not just strengths. And the weaknesses are that they can lend themselves to an idolatrous defense of “my people, my family, my clan, my tribe.” So, the danger here may not be so much from the images of Christ as Ancestor, but from the nature of the African context itself. It is probably possible to develop a Christology based on the image of Christ as a Proto-Ancestor or Supreme Ancestor and affirm that this understanding of ancestorship transcends and thoroughly re-defines traditional ancestorship so that the concept is “entirely sanctified”. But our concern is with how that

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
sanitized understanding of ancestorship will be “heard” by African ears and minds in the African context.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have attempted to show (1) that modern Africa suffers significantly from patterns of ethnocentrism in terms of loss of life, destruction of property, and underdevelopment; (2) that the traditional African worldview is very communal in nature; (3) that ancestral veneration stands as a pillar of that communal worldview; (4) that several African theologians have attempted to develop a contextualized or inculturated Christology utilizing the ancestor-image; (5) that there is just cause to be concerned that a Christology based on the image of Christ as ancestor will have an inherent susceptibility toward ethnocentrism and will be able to generate a commanding rejection of tribalism in its many forms.

We acknowledge the tremendous need for contextualization and inculturation of the Gospel so that it “connects” with Africans in their various settings. We applaud the efforts of African scholars such as Bediako, Bujo and Nyamiti who have been bold enough to develop Christologies specifically for the African context. We affirm that there is much of value in the specific attempt to understand Jesus as a Supreme Ancestor, Proto-Ancestor, or Brother Ancestor. Indeed, there are many parallels between the person and work of Christ and the person and work of the ancestor. We further acknowledge that there is some modest Biblical support for an image of Jesus as our ancestor (Jesus as our Brother and First-born over all Creation, etc.) and the related conception of the church as an African extended family or clan (Family of God, children
of God, etc.). In addition we admire the attempts of these theologians to develop their images of Christ as ancestor in such a way that Christ transforms the ancestor concept and purges the unchristian aspects from it. Still further, we admit that this dilemma of when does contextualization morph into syncretism is not unique to African Christian theology. It is an issue the church must struggle with wherever it seeks to take root and grow.

Nevertheless, we find that the image of Christ as Ancestor has an inherent weakness with regard to ethnocentrism. It can very easily put up a “blind eye” toward the kind of tribalism that has racked Africa in recent decades. What Africa desperately needs in a theology is not one which reinforces tribalism and clanism, but one which challenges them. What Africa desperately needs is not a Jesus formed in our (African) image, but us to be shaped in Jesus’ image. What Africa desperately needs in a Christology is not one which makes Christ out to be the property of a particular ethnic community but the Lord of All. We believe these African theologians recognize these needs. But we question whether the means (Jesus as ancestor) will accomplish the end (Jesus as Lord of All). We close with the words of J. M. Waliggo who while not adamantly opposing the image of Christ as ancestor, cautioned that “the model of ancestor may not change much in society. It may make us re-own our culture within Christianity, but may not touch very much the injustices that have been done to us and which we are doing to each other.”

56 This is precisely our concern with the image of Jesus as our ancestor.

56 Quoted from an interview in Stinton, 157.