



Ancestor Christology: Re-assessing Bénézet Bujo's contribution to African theology

Cristologia ancestral: Reavaliando a contribuição de Bénézet Bujo para a Teologia Africana

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Abstract

Attempts at developing a Christology from a uniquely African perspective could be considered as one of the contextual expressions of Christian theological enterprise. Of course, it is clear that within the context of world Christianity, every theology is contextual. This article, which critically explores the Christological ideas of one of the foremost African theologians, Bénézet Bujo, locates the many reflections about Christ within the African context. The article consistently argues for the necessity of African Christology and for a deepened understanding of Bujo's argument in making the person of Christ intelligible within Africa by deploying the traditional African category of ancestorship in this regard. Ancestorship as a Christological paradigm remains contentious as it raises a lot of questions as to its appropriateness in the understanding of Christ for African Christians. Yet, the assessment of the paradigm must go beyond seeking a logical interpretation that ties it to the predominant Christological formulations of the West to seek the meaning of revelation within the African worldview. This article, therefore, appraises the insights of Bujo and highlights the deficiencies of his arguments, while calling for more attention to its ethical and catechetical import.

Keywords: African theology. Christology. Inculturation. Proto-Ancestor Christ. Bénézet Bujo.

Resumo

As tentativas de desenvolver uma cristologia a partir de uma perspectiva exclusivamente africana podem ser consideradas uma das expressões contextuais do empreendimento teológico cristão. É claro que, no contexto do Cristianismo mundial, toda teologia é contextual. Este artigo, explora criticamente as ideias cristológicas de um dos principais teólogos africanos, Bénézet Bujo, situa as muitas reflexões sobre Cristo no contexto africano. O artigo argumenta consistentemente a favor da necessidade da cristologia africana e de uma compreensão aprofundada do argumento de Bujo, para tornar a pessoa de Cristo inteligível na África, empregando a categoria tradicional africana de ancestral. O ancestral como paradigma cristológico permanece controverso, pois levanta muitas questões quanto à sua adequação na compreensão de Cristo para os cristãos africanos. No entanto, a avaliação do paradigma deve ir além da busca de uma interpretação lógica que o vincule às formulações cristológicas predominantes do Ocidente, para buscar o significado da revelação dentro da cosmovisão africana. Este artigo, portanto, avalia as percepções de Bujo e destaca as deficiências de seus argumentos, ao mesmo tempo, chama mais atenção para seu alcance ético e catequético.

Palavras-chave: Teologia africana. Cristologia. Inculturação. Cristo Proto-Ancestral. Bénézet Bujo.

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Introduction

At the very centre of the Christian faith and practice is the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, no “Christian theology would be complete without a serious reflection on Jesus Christ.” (GALVIN, 2011, p. 256). It is therefore unimaginable to do Christian theology without having Christ as the focal point. In every generation, Christians and theologians have responded to the person and influence of Christ from and within the context they find themselves. These responses have resulted in a wide spectrum of Christologies which represent attempts to situate the person and work of Christ within the different cultural contexts where Christianity has found inroads.

One of such attempts is the formulation of an African Christology, which is simply the effort by African theologians to answer the question of the identity of Jesus Christ, using the materials that are hitherto available in the African religious and cultural sphere. In doing this, they ended up generating another set of trajectories as a result of the many ‘symbolic markers’ that were discoverable in the African worldview. This essay addresses one of these Christological trajectories and approaches the question of Christ’s identity from the unique African concept of ancestorship. This study which re-assesses the theological contributions of Bénézet Bujo, a diocesan priest from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and professor emeritus of Moral theology at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, re-constructs the concept of Christ as a Proto-Ancestor, thus uncovering its transcendent (yet immanent) character. In doing this, we shall equally be attentive to both the distinctions and the dissensions that this Christology has generated over time.

1 The Multiplicity of the Person of Christ in Biblical Testimony

The identity of Christ assumes different shades and forms in the Bible, which remains the major source of information about him (KÄRKKÄINEN, 2003, p. 19).¹ One discovers in the Scriptures, not a single overriding description of the person of Christ, but rather panoply of images, pictures and testimonies alluding

¹ It is clear that outside the confines of the Bible, “there is no comprehensive information available regarding Jesus Christ, even though an occasional extra-biblical reference to Christ can be found.” (KÄRKKÄINEN, 2003, p.19).

to his person. This fact is heavily buttressed by the existence of the four accounts of the Gospel with their varied but complementary faces of Christ in the New Testament. The question of 'why four accounts of the Gospel rather than one?' will continue to demand answers. Of course, any attempt at harmonizing the different accounts into one would invariably eviscerate the richness of the four and consequently limit the information accessible to us about the person of Christ. Finnish theologian, Velli-Matti Kärkkäinen argues that these multifarious presentations of Jesus by the different Gospel accounts set the tone for the contemporary methodology in New Testament Christology which emerges when "reading each book as it stands without necessarily trying to pull all the differing materials into a coherent whole" (KÄRKKÄINEN, 2003, p. 20). Consequently, "the specific contribution of each of the Gospels is appreciated on its own terms" such that "there is Christology of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John." (KÄRKKÄINEN, 2003, p. 20).

Modern scholarship, however, is not totally agreed with this method of addressing the person of Jesus from the perspective of the various Gospel accounts. Another school of thought would rather approach the study of Christ from the various Christological trajectories discoverable in the Scriptures, some of which find themselves not limited to any single Gospel account. While some address these trajectories from the different historical stages of the Gospel times, others articulate it from the various titles of Jesus Christ. These titles bear testimony to either Christ's 'esse' (namely, who he is and who people perceive him to be) or his 'agere' (namely, what he does or could do following what he had done)². So, the very works and actions of Christ together with the identities which he projected in the Scriptures, form individual topics for a particular Christology.

² Reginald H. Fuller, in his *Foundations of New Testament Christology* (London: Collins, 1965) proffers a tripartite division among Palestinian Judaism, Hellenistic Judaism, and the Hellenistic Gentile world. Each environment has its corresponding Christological patterns. The first focuses on the past word and work of Christ and his future coming in glory. The second level, Hellenistic Judaism embodies a proclamation of Jesus' present work as exalted Lord and Christ. In this case, there was a developed interest in Jesus' function as a savior rather than in his being and personhood. Meanwhile, in yet another study, Helmut Koester identifies four fundamental Christological trajectories, which he claimed were developed independently of one another, though not mutually exclusive to one another. He identifies these as (a) the idea of Jesus as Son of Man and coming Lord; (b) Jesus as a miracle worker; (c) Jesus as a teacher, an envoy of wisdom, which is otherwise referred to as wisdom Christology; (d) and finally, Jesus as the crucified and the one who was raised from the dead. See Helmut Koester, "The Structure and Criteria of Early Christian Beliefs," in *Trajectories through Early Christianity*, ed. James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971, p. 205-231). Another perspective is the one proposed by James D. G. Dunn in his, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977); see also his *Christology in the Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980). Dunn argues for an acknowledgment of the different faces of Jesus in the New Testament and equally discourages any attempt to construct a unified New Testament Christology.

Beyond the scriptures, but not contrary to it, one could as well deduce other forms of Christology that were a result of the spread of Christianity the world over. The penetration of the Gospel message across tribes and cultures brought about an added content to the *Christ-story*. The reflection on the person and function of Christ has come to assume more forms than before when the scriptures only circulated within a defined cultural territory. More than this cultural perspective is the form of Christology that emanates from historical experiences and ideological trends. In this instance, one could talk of liberation Christology of the South Americans, the Black Christology of the Africans and African-Americans, and even the feminist Christology.³

2 The Case of an African Christology in African Theology

The incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, found a dwelling in the human, took on human nature and lived within human environment. This environment, with its attendant peculiarities and particularities, cultures and customs, became the seedbed of the Gospel message. In accepting the Gospel, the cultural and historical constituents of societies were not shredded but rather elevated as bearers and interpreters of the message of Christ. This accounts for the historical-critical methods of interpreting the Scriptures, the necessity of Church history in theology and the shape of theology down through the ages. In this wise, the missionary effort in bringing Christianity to Africa should not be seen as an attempt to de-Africanize the continent. The cultural and historical binoculars of Africans must not be taken away if the reception of the Christian faith is to be truly deeply rooted in the African context and identity. Hence, there is a great need in Africa today to incarnate and contextualize the Gospel message. Far too often, the church as we know it, with its largely Westernized culture and its global reach has delivered a pre-packaged theology to the rest of the world in its endeavor to spread the good news of Christ. In the words of John Mary Waliggo:

³The Christology of the Black Messiah in the context of racism is championed by James H. Cone in his following works: *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York, 1969); *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Twentieth Anniversary Edition (New York: Maryknoll, 1990); Cone's work is seen as an amplification of Liberation Theology for the Black race. There is, however, the important contributions of Allan A. Boesak, who was critical of Cone's extremism and sought to find a reconciling point for both blacks and whites in Christ. He did this by appealing to an abolition of the artificial differentiation between the historical Jesus and the kerygmatic Jesus, using the doctrine of the reality of Jesus' presence in the world today (*Christus praesens*). See. Allan Boesak, *The Finger of God. Sermons on Faith and Responsibility* (New York: Maryknoll, 1982, p. 41). See also Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM Press, 2001, p. 145).

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? (WALIGGO, 1998, p. 111).

Similarly, J. T. Taylor presents this pitiable argument:

Christ has been presented as the answer to the questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs a westerner would feel, the saviour of the world of the European world-view, 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 be acceptable? (TAYLOR *apud* BAHEMUKA, 1988, p. 6).

Clearly, African Christian theologians are increasingly doing their best and calling for a theological reconstruction within the African context.⁴ This reconstruction has been applied to Christology. Their primary task, it is assumed, is to fashion out in a theologically reasoned manner, the relevance of Christology for modern Africa. These theologians seek to answer within the African context the perennial question that Jesus put to Peter, “Who do you say that I am?” Their effort in doing so has given birth to many Christological trajectories as we shall examine below.

2.1 Christological Trajectories of African Theologians

John Mbiti, one of the leading minds in African studies had initially rejected the existence of African ideas about Christology. For him, “African Christological concepts do not exist.” (MBITI, 1972, p. 51). This position has however been challenged by the Catholic African theologian, Charles Nyamiti (1991). Admitting that the situation has undergone a fundamental change, Nyamiti argues that “there is no doubt that Christology is the subject which has been so developed in today’s African theology.” (NYAMITI, 1991, p. 3). In doing

⁴ For the call for the “reconstruction of theology,” see Jesse N. K. Mugambi, *Christian Theology & Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003); and Mary N. Getui & Emmanuel A. Obeng, eds., *Theology of Reconstruction: Exploratory Essays*, 2nd ed., (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003); Elias K. Bongmba, ed., *Religion and Social Reconstruction in Africa* (London: Routledge, 2018).

this, Nyamiti takes us back to the core of liberation theology and inculturation, namely Christology.

What emerges therefrom, is a whole bunch of indigenous African concepts that found their bearing in the person and works of Jesus Christ. Hence, we have the identification of Jesus as the *Chief*, because he is perceived as a hero, a strong man, a generous and wise fellow, a reconciling mediator, and even as the son or emissary of the chief (God the Father).⁵ Some others have equally addressed Jesus Christ as “the master of initiation.” (KÜSTER, 2001, pp. 61-62). This position is championed originally by Anselme Titianma Sanon and he predicates this, analogically, on the fact that Jesus himself had undergone the processes of initiation in an exemplary manner. He develops a soteriological dimension to this form of Christology, whereby the *Christified initiation* remains vicarious in nature. Yet from a pedagogical viewpoint, Christ leads us through the same process of initiation as an elder brother. And finally, from an aesthetic perspective, the understanding of Christ as the ‘master of initiation’ evokes a symbolic Christology that emerges when we apply the language of symbols. Another trajectory in African Christology is the one that appeals to the character of Christ as a Healer. This idea of Christ as healer is quite evident in the Scriptures, and finds its connection as such, not really with the African worldview (*Weltanschauung*) but mainly with the African situation (*sitz-im-leben*). The question of human suffering and the ravages of diseases in Africa leads to a grassroot Christology that identifies Christ principally as a healer.⁶ This has been the motivating theology for the flourishing Pentecostal and charismatic ecclesial bodies in Africa.

Apart from the aforementioned trajectories, we have a Christology that sees Christ as an Ancestor. The leaders in this school of thought are mainly Charles Nyamiti and Benezet Bujo. Here, the concept of ancestorship, found in the African traditional, cultural and religious settings, is evoked to respond to the

⁵ This concept is borrowed basically from the Bantus. Among the Luba, it remains an ancestral terminology to address God as *Mulopo*, meaning *chief*. Even among Nigerians, one often hears people addressing God as *Baba* or *Igwe*, which are the common titles for the town chiefs among the Yoruba and Igbo respectively.

⁶ In a recent brilliant doctoral dissertation at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven Belgium, Chukwumeka A. Atansi explores the how the grassroot Christologies can function in the social transformation of African. Among the grassroot Christologies that he examined was the notion of ‘Christ the healer’. See, Chukwumeka Anthony Atansi, *Christ, the Image of Social Transformation. Towards a Transformative Christology in the African Context* (Leuven: Unpublished Diss., 2020).

quest for a fitting African Christological concept. Traditionally, Africans are at home with the concept of ancestors, they believe in the existence and influence of the ancestors in their daily lives. Thus, to identify Christ as an ancestor touches a familiar chord in the African religious symphony. Jesus is viewed as the ancestor because he mediates life; he is present among the living; he is “at the same time the eldest”; and finally, is a mediator between God and humanity and also within the human community (KÜSTER, 2001). Nyamiti posits that,

[...] through the incarnation Christ assumed the whole of human history, including the legitimate aspirations of our ancestors. This assumption of the future which the ancestors sought to guarantee is assured because our ancestors’ experiences have been made efficacious in Jesus, crucified and risen. Thus the incarnation enables Christ to be the unique and privileged locus of total encounter with our ancestors and allows them to the locus where we encounter the God of salvation. (NYAMITI, 1991, p. 10).

However, there is no singular, therefore unique understanding of Jesus Christ as the Ancestor among African theologians. There exists a contrast in two notable groups, represented by the scholars we have already mentioned. So, while Charles argues for Christ as the brother-Ancestor, Bujo articulates his views under the concept of Christ as the proto-Ancestor. These divergent positions create tensions in contemporary African theology.⁷ Our attempt in this essay is not re-play the tension that emanates not only by the limitations in the general use of the concept of ancestor in identifying Christ, but equally by the limits imposed by the individual modifications of the concept by the two theologians in question. The focus rather is to examine the Christological path taken by Bujo in his attempt to develop a theological framework with an authentically African root.

2.2 Bujo’s Ancestor-Christology and its Rootedness in the African Religious Worldview

For the majority of African theologians, the conception of ancestor might be the most appropriate way of describing the meaning of Christ. Bujo in his theological reflection maintains that in Africa the spirits of ancestors are always evoked and re-enacted through certain ritualistic practices. This enables the African to recall these spirits and to make his/her conducts to conform to them.

⁷ See: Stan Chu Ilo, *African Christology: A Comparative Study of the Contextual Christologies of Charles Nyamiti and Benezet Bujo and Their Implications for African Theologies* (Canada: Library and Archives, 2006).

This forms the introductory point in the development of Bujo's reflection on the mystery of Christ, whom he considers as the Proto-Ancestor, the unique Ancestor, the source (*fons et origo*) of life, and the highest model of ancestorship.

Quite evidently, the concept of Christ as an ancestor is more appealing rationally to the average African Christian, than the biblical-theological concepts like *Logos* or *Messiah* or *Kyrios*. This is so because it gives room for the African culture to contribute to the understanding of faith in Christ. The typical African who had the preconception that to honour ancestors is implicitly also an act of honour to God, finds it easy to offer Christ the honour that is due him as God-Man. This makes the religious ideological cross-over for the average African, who is either originally a convert from the traditional religion or coming from a society, which not too long ago, had practiced traditional religion. One has to recognize that, in one way or the other, Africa is still 'young' when it comes to the practice of the Christian faith.

Bujo, however, does not pretend to be indifferent to the negative aspects of the pre-Christian traditional religion of Africa and their misconstrued conceptions and practices. That notwithstanding, he believes strongly that an authentically African theology and Christology could possibly be founded on African culture, in the same manner as the early Church's understanding of Christ and his gospel were grounded in the Greek cultural and philosophical understanding. Christ as the Proto-Ancestor, for Bujo, represents all the good and positive elements of the African cult of ancestors and serves importantly as the robust critic of the less edifying elements of the cult. Bujo avers that an appreciation of Christ as the Proto-Ancestor not only brings to realization the ancient African belief in the supremacy of the ancestors but transcends and refines it in the light of biblical revelation. By this, Bujo implies that the African, having perceived the divine in the concept of the ancestors, finds its typical expression in the person of Christ.

If we look back on the historical Jesus of Nazareth, we can see in him, not only one who lived in the African ancestor-ideal in the highest degree, but one who brought that ideal to an altogether new fulfillment. Jesus worked miracles, healing the sick, opening the eyes of the blind, raising the dead to life. In short, he brought life, and life-force, in its fullness. He lived his mission for his fellow-humans in an altogether

matchless way, and furthermore, left to his disciples, as his final commandment, the law of love. (BUJO,1992, p. 79).

The appreciation of the African thought-pattern and belief-systems, as articulately expressed by Bujo, brings to clarity the notion of Christ as a Proto-Ancestor from an African perspective.

3 Appreciating Life as a Divine Gift within Ancestor Christological Understanding

Beyond being a good (*bonum*), a life that is given by God is as well a gift (*donum*). This is a collective fundamental belief among Africans. This belief is founded on a more fundamental understanding of God as the source, creator, giver and sustainer of human life and of all that lives. Thus, the African appreciates life, not in a serrated fashion but he or she embraces the *fac totum* of the different dimensions of life. As such, the physical/biological is not to be divorced from the spiritual, neither should the social be separated from the psychological. The interconnectivity of the branches of life enriches the African vision of it, and considers it therefore as something worth celebrating. Life is something to be honoured and not abhorred. In this understanding, the ancestor represents the fullness of life both of the earthly and the other-earthly. Having had the privilege of both worlds, the ancestor stands as the exemplar of the virtuous kind of life that is expected of every living being.

Ultimately, however, to God alone belongs the fullness and profoundness of life (*profunditas vita*). Since God alone is the creator. God alone is the source of life, strength and growth. Therefore, human life is only a sharing, a participation in God. This sharing is not understood by Africans in terms of an exchange between equals, but rather in the mode of a benefaction from a Benefactor who sits above (the dependant) in the hierarchy of the universe. This hierarchy combines both the visible and invisible world in its gradation, with God (who inhabits the invisible world) at the highest wrung. The founding fathers of the clan, namely the ancestors, are next in this pyramidal hierarchy, followed by the heroes, deceased elders, other dead members of the extended family and so on. This structure represents the entire society as is understood traditionally by most Africans.

For Africans, the visible and the invisible, the living and the dead intermingle constantly. The living are always in communication and communion with the dead. As such, life does not cease at death. Life becomes as it were, a unity; a constant flow of existence; a mystical communion. The preservation of life, both that of individuals and that of the community becomes the prerogative of the living. Safeguarding life is the task of every member of the community and not the exclusive reserve of leaders as we find in the modern conception of the nations. Since this life is a gift, which is made accessible to all, it therefore follows logically that all, who are beneficiaries of this fundamental gift, should be co-responsible co-operators in its prolongation, preservation and protection.

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 diminish life. African society is a real "mystical body," encompassing both dead and living members, in which every member has an obligation to every other. (BUJO, 1992, p. 22).

The portrait of this community is one in which individualism is out of place; where the life of each member is intertwined with another in its collectivity. It must be noted that this community is not without its hierarchical features as the head is represented by the founder-ancestor, who is often venerated as a semi-divine figure. This figure whose overwhelming effect and influence are made manifest in the community is the source of the life force (*èlan vitâl*), which proceeds from him, circulates into all the members of the community and returns back to him. He is thus the centre of the African adulation and honour. And the reasoning here is that the more, He is honoured, the more life in its profuseness is poured and circulated within the community.⁸ This, therefore, implies that the rhythm of life in the community depends on this praeter-natural being, and as such the community avoids anything that would cause a misbalance in their relationship with Him. While the person of Christ transcends what we could say of the founder-ancestor, yet the notion of proto-Ancestor is an attempt to situate the God-human identity of Christ in a way that is conceptually appreciable by the

⁸ Here, one brings to mind the Igbo adage (which certainly has its parallels in other African tribes) of "Ekele e onye akidi, ya agwota ozo" (When you greet someone for preparing and offering a locust-bean porridge, he/she would prepare the dish again).

African mind.

3.1 A Re-examination of the Cult of the Ancestors

The African ancestral cult⁹ is part and parcel of the everydayness of Africans. It is not something that is organized around fixed times or seasons. It re-vibrates in the daily activities of the average traditional African. Ancestral cult, which is a form of relationship is not simply “a product of human conventions but is founded on human spiritual, bodily and societal structures.” (NYAMITI, 2005, p. 69). There is evidence that practice of ancestral cult may not be a practice that is peculiar to Africans. It has somewhat a universal character. Nyamiti citing Mircea Eliade asserts that “the fact that ancestral cult is found in practically all human societies in different times and places confirm this view.” (NYAMITI, 2005, p. 69). However, there may be differences both in the cultural and spiritual values attributed to the ancestral cult and in its mode and practice in different societies globally. Nonetheless, “African has its own specificity.” (BOMKI, 2011, p. 6).

As we know it is the Christian belief that human beings are created in the likeness and image of God (Genesis 1:27) and that they are given the responsibility of stewardship over creation. Given this understanding, the ancestral cult links the entire creation with the Creator, through the creature, and by implication serves as a bridge between the divine and the created. It is a sublime “way of expressing the human desire for the transcendent, this inner desire to be face to face with the creator in the world beyond the grave where can be found ultimate and everlasting happiness.” (BOMKI, 2011, p. 7). One can rightly say that the ancestral cult (veneration) is founded upon both a soteriological and eschatological reasoning. Bujo has this to say in this regard:

Salvation is the concern of both the living and the dead members of the society, for all affect each other and depend upon each other. The dead can only be happy when they live on in the affectionate remembrance of the living; nevertheless, they are stronger than the living, on whom

⁹ There are different ways of expressing this same reality, while several scholars refer to it as the ‘cult of the ancestors’, others refer to it as ‘the worship of ancestors’, or even ‘ancestral veneration’. See: Yusufti Turaki, *Foundations of African Traditional Religion and World-view* (Nairobi: World Alive Publishers, 2006), Meanwhile, there are some voices within African Christianity, which in an effort to inculturate Christianity, are advocating for rituals of libation to the ancestors. See, for example, a report by Noel Bruyns entitled, “Let Africans Honor Ancestors with Blood Libations in Mass, says Bishop,” in *Christianity Today* (April 1, 2000), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/aprilweb-only/46.0a.html> (accessed 23 May 2023).

they exercise a decisive influence, since the living cannot hope even to survive unless they render due honour to their dead and continue faithfully along the track laid down by them (BUJO, 1992, p. 24).

For Africans, salvation has a dual dimension; it is both an earthly and other-earthly phenomenon. It has to do with happiness and harmony experienced on earth, as well as a participation in the ‘other-world’, the abode of the ‘living-dead.’ The belief in Afterlife by Africans is expressed in many ways, during libation, prayers, as well as in the funeral rites for the dead. This Afterlife is a realm where one is welcomed into the state of ancestorhood. This is possible based on certain criteria, including the quality of one’s earthly life, the evidence of male progeny, the funeral rites, and others. Nyamiti outlines some of these elements of African ancestors as including:

(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. (NYAMITI, 2003, p. 82).

Strength and life force are anticipated from those who have passed beyond to the invisible world. In other words, there are some responsibilities that are expected of the ‘dead’ towards the living. For instance, a father who ‘graduates’ into becoming an ancestor is expected to bestow upon his descendants everything that they need for meaning and abundant life. This abundance of life is available to those who look towards their ancestors for guidance and protection. The rituals of libation are therefore ways of remembering and re-enacting the past, and their repetition is a means of guaranteeing the prosperity of the future generations (KÄRKKÄINEN, 2003). Summarily, it should be noted therefore that essentially, oblations, offerings, and sacrifices are traditionally made to the ancestors to ensure their favor and placate their wrath. This is where the common accusation of ancestral worship arises and why the Western missionaries almost universally have condemned participation in ancestral veneration.

However, Pope John Paul II in *Ecclesia in Africa*, writes that there is not an *iota* of doubt that, ancestral veneration is intrinsically linked with “a profound religious sense, a sense of the sacred, of the existence of God the creator is implied

in African belief in ancestral mediation and in God as the great Ancestor of a spiritual world.” (John Paul II, 1995, §42). The ancestral cult is far from being diabolic or pagan as was conceived by the missionaries to Africa. For the misguided missionaries, the cult was designated as idolatry; as sin against the first commandment, “thou shall have no God except me.” (Deuteronomy 5:7).

The relevance of the cult of ancestors is made more profound by the fact that ancestors are regarded as models for the living. Success or failure in one’s life is based on a personal choice: “In freely recalling the life-giving actions and words of the ancestors, a person is choosing life; but in neglecting these things, that person is choosing death.” (BUJO, 1992, p.30). The particular words, actions, and rituals associated with the ancestors have a deep meaning in the life of African people. They constitute a rule of conduct for the living, and they must be repeated continually. Interestingly, these ancestors have the power to bless or curse the community, and as such the relationship of the community and its individual members with them must be carefully maintained (MOYO, 1999).

In so many ways African Bujo and others who follow his line of reasoning find some resonances of the actions of Christ in the proto-Ancestor. For instance, the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper (John 13) has a particular significance in the light of the African conception of Jesus as the proto-Ancestor. The time that Jesus spent with his disciples is likened to the final hour a parent spends with his or her children before death. A dying parent normally gathers the children to give them a blessing and to pronounce the last will. Only those who carry out the terms of the will have life. Jesus believes in a similar way: “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” (John 13:17).

4 The Uniqueness of Christ’s Model of Ancestorship

In his earthly life, Jesus manifested all the qualities and virtues that Africans mostly attribute to their ancestors which is behind the daily invocation of such ancestors. It is indisputable that before the image of Jesus, even the superlative attributes of the African ancestor fades. Positive elements such as hospitality, a sense of family, and care for the elderly, the orphaned, and the

unfortunate were taken up by Jesus and brought to completion. As a proto-Ancestor, Jesus not only fulfilled the expectations of an ideal ancestor but also transcended that idea. No other ancestor is capable of such a deed. Just as Jesus transformed humanity by entering into it, so also his integration into the African concept of ancestorship purifies this traditional status and elevates it to its absolute form. Meanwhile, in Christian theology, Jesus Christ is connected with the imminent rule of God in his kingdom. This internal relation to the kingdom of God distinguishes Jesus from all other ancestors, who appear, in the African understanding as living ‘in-between’ the two worlds.

Contrary to those who might see in this idea a frustrated attempt to force Christ into an existing African cultural mould, Bujo, rather argues that the idea of Jesus as the proto-Ancestor is not a superficial concession to any existing cultural need. It is not a cheap technique of contextualization to make Christ important to Africans. It is inexorably connected to the biblical idea of God’s Word becoming human (cf. John 1:14). God assumed human form and became part of the human world, embracing all that is within it. The implication is “that henceforth God can no longer be the ‘Unchangeable One’; God has taken changeableness [...]. The kenosis, the emptying, happened.” (BUJO, 1992, p. 82). Incarnation is God’s highest self-expression; it is a real meeting point between divinity and humanity. Jesus of Nazareth is not only the total and final revelation of God but also of humankind. Jesus Christ is truly God and truly Man, hence the God-man. The African is also part of humanity, whom the incarnate Saviour did not exclude from benefitting from the universal gift of the Incarnation nor from the salvific impact of his paschal mystery. It is within this perspective that Jesus Christ is the proto-Ancestor of the African.

Jesus, the Christ, identified himself with humankind, so that he constitutes their explanation. From now on, Jesus makes his own all the striving of the ancestors after righteousness and all their history, in such a way that these have now become a meeting-place with God of salvation. 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 these last days God speaks to us through the Son, whom God has established as unique Ancestor, as Proto-Ancestor, from whom all life flows for God’s descendants (cf. Heb1:1-2). (BUJO, 1992, p.83).

The privilege of encountering Christianity makes vivid the categories of profound understanding Christ that are discoverable within the African cultural system. One of these categories is the idea of ancestorship, that Bujo stretches to incorporate its absolute form, namely, proto-Ancestor. Bujo highlights that one of the advantages of speaking of Jesus Christ as the proto-Ancestor is that African anthropocentrism, manifested in ancestor-oriented patterns of thought, is central for incarnating Christianity in Africa. The starting point is Christology from below (*Kristologie von unten*), but not to the exclusion of Christology from above (*Kristologie von oben*). It is crucial that Christianity demonstrates to Africans that being truly Christian and being truly African are not incompatible forms of identity. The possibility of this compatibility is assured only if Jesus Christ is firmly anchored in the thought forms and patterns of African culture, as he is firmly rooted in other cultures.

An authentic African ancestor Christology, as championed by Bujo, also brings to the fore the full Trinitarian explication of a culturally sensitive theology. Jesus' ancestorship should not just be viewed from merely the external qualities of Jesus (KÄRKKÄINEN, 2003). This is necessary if we are to avoid any dichotomy within the person of Jesus, for he is, at once, the eternal Son of God, totally dedicated to, or initiated into (as Africans would prefer to express it), God (BUJO, 1992). This vital union, which produces the interaction between Father and Son, is nothing other than the Holy Spirit, the bond between the Father and the Son. This interpenetrations among the Triune persons is also a matter that is already implied if an authentically African Christology is to be considered a success, for the Trinitarian dimension must never be divorced from any true Christology.

If Jesus Christ is the proto-Ancestor, then the task of 'descendants' is to bring to realization in their lives the memory of Christ's life, passion, death, and resurrection. They are to maintain a constant link to this source of life, protection and blessings. The proto-Ancestor is the goal and criterion of all life. There is equally ethical and social dimensions to this, which are also two areas of Bujo's distinctive theological contribution. As regards political life, for instance, Bujo notes that if Christ as the proto-Ancestor is given priority, vices such as

corruption and abuse of power in African socio-political sphere, could be overcome. Jesus' life and words as the proto-Ancestor attest to a transparent and unimpeachable culture of living and invariably serve as criticism against unethical and oppressive behaviour and attitudes.

Finally, Bujo introduces the cross as the fulfillment and uniqueness of Jesus' model of ancestorship. The cross will always remain a scandal and folly even for Africans. Only the African who has been converted and has embraced the faith in all its truthfulness will see in the crucified Jesus the proto-Ancestor with whom he or she can identify. According to Bujo, Christ's identity as the proto-Ancestor is "only because he passed through death on the cross", and "it is the remembering of this event, and the retelling of it, that is both liberating and challenging." He goes further to insist that this is what "humanizes and purifies the African ethos." (BUJO, 1992, p. 91). Consequently, the high-point in the Christ-event has the special effect of sanitizing the African ideals.

4.1 Facing an Emerging Problem with a Theological Optimism

Much as Bujo's Christological concept of ancestorship remains essentially African, there have been questions as to the universality of the concept of ancestorship within the African continent itself. Is ancestorship a concept that is more acceptable within the region of Black Africans, or the more culturally homogenous region of the sub-Sahara? Some of the objections could be directed specifically to Bujo's proto-ancestorship. However, some of these critiques appear to apply a literalist understanding of the whole issue. Such literalist approaches are reflected in questions like "Why (then) should only Jesus be venerated as Ancestor? Why him alone? Why should other family ancestors make way for Jesus as the only Ancestor worthy of worship?" (BEYERS; MPHAAHLELE, 2009, p. 4). Bujo is not ignorant of these kinds of problems and that explains why he used the highest possible abstraction of the concept, bearing in mind that since Jesus became human, he became the perfect human. In a similar manner, if Jesus is considered an ancestor, he remains the perfect ancestor. This perfect model of ancestorship is the proto-Ancestor, who is at once the first-born of all creation (cf. Romans 8: 29; Colossians 1: 15; Hebrews 2: 10-18) and the progenitor of a new race belonging to God (compare to John 3: 5-8). Here, we are no longer

talking about the biological relationship but a supernatural *cum* eschatological identity.

There is yet another theological concern here namely, whether the ancestor Christological paradigm can really serve to reveal the whole person of Jesus Christ. How do we exploit this concept to capture all the richness of the Traditional Christology within the context of the theology of the Trinity? “How about non-African Christian believers in Jesus Christ?” (OBORJI, 2006, p. 179). To all these, it would be fair to assume that Bujo recognizes the fact that there is nothing like “the Christology”. This explains the different Christological trajectories which represent theological attempts at defining the person of Jesus. Apart from the African Christology, there are other forms, which equally represent attempts to approach the question of Jesus from different cultural backgrounds, be it Asian, Arab, or Western. For a non-African, therefore, to understand the ancestor Christology would require an immersion into an in-depth study of the African worldview. Who says the richness of Christ cannot foster even inter-cultural studies, understanding and appreciation?

Conclusion

It must be acknowledged that the criticism of the ancestor model of Christology does not in any way nullify the already gained ethical and catechetical import of the attempts to interpret the mystery of Christ with a cultural model that most Africans can easily identify. At least, the concept of Christ as a proto-Ancestor, as suggested in the writings of Bujo has proved to be a more acceptable paradigm to interpret Jesus Christ, his salvific functions and his relationship to the Church and humanity, within the African context. In the light of Bujo's invaluable effort, one cannot deny the usefulness and relevance of inculturating Christology in Africa.

Besides, if given the momentum of the process of modernization, urbanization, and universalism of education, the concept of ancestorship be lost in the cultural consciousness of the new generations of Africa, then the ancestor paradigm may have to be re-examined and evaluated by emerging African theologians. This study, however, remains an attempt at ensuring that such an

authentic African brand of Christology does not get swallowed up in the quicksand of emerging cultural and theological interactions.

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