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Jesus Christ: Our Ancestor?

Timothy Palmer

It is becoming increasingly common in African Christian theology to refer to Jesus as our ancestor. A number of prominent African theologians have referred to Jesus in this way. Yet at the grassroots there is still significant resistance to such a concept. This paper intends to look at the gap between the enthusiastic advocates of ancestor Christology and those opposing it.

Recently, during a course taught at the Theological College of Northern Nigeria (TCNN), located in Bukuru, Nigeria, 80 students submitted two-page essays on the usefulness of calling Jesus their ancestor in the context of their own ethnic group. The vast majority of these students rejected the idea of Christ as an ancestor in their culture.

This paper will look first at some representatives of ancestor Christology; then the views of some of the respondents will be examined; the paper will conclude with some theological reflections. The purpose of this article is to examine to what extent the theory of ancestor Christology resonates with the "average" Nigerian Christian.

Advocates of Ancestor Christology

The idea of Christ as our ancestor has been proposed by a number of significant African theologians in the last three decades. These theologians have been both Protestant and Catholic.

John Pobee, a Protestant Ghanaian, was one of the first advocates of ancestor Christology. In 1979 he wrote: "Our approach would be to look on Jesus as the Great and Greatest Ancestor—in Akan language *Nana*. With that will go the power and authority to judge the deeds of men, rewarding the good, punishing the evil." Yet, "he is superior to the other ancestors by virtue of being closest to God and as God."¹

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In the same year, a Catholic theologian, J. Mutiso-Mubinda, wrote an article where he referred to Christ as “our ‘Ancestor’ *par excellence*” because of his work of mediation and because he “passed over” to the Father.²

Benézét Bujo is a Catholic priest from the Democratic Republic of Congo who did some early thinking on the issue. Charles Nyamiti refers to an article published in French in 1981 by Bujo on the subject.³ These views were developed a few years later in his *African Theology in its Social Context*. In this book Bujo suggests that we give Jesus the titles of “Ancestor *Par Excellence*” or “Proto-Ancestor.”⁴ In this book Bujo uses the theology of ancestors as a starting point for christology and ecclesiology. It is a key doctrine in Bujo’s theological system.

In 1983 a Catholic priest from Cameroon, Marc Ntetem, writing originally in German, called Christ “the ancestor *par excellence* As the ancestor is the true master of initiation, so tribal initiation offers us a point of contact which makes clear . . . that Jesus Christ is the ancestor *par excellence*.”⁵

Around the same time, Archbishop Milingo wrote: “Giving Jesus the title of Ancestor is not just giving Him an honorary title. *Jesus fits perfectly into the African understanding of ancestor.*”⁶

In 1984 Charles Nyamiti, a Roman Catholic from East Africa, published an entire book on the subject. In his *Christ as our Ancestor*, Nyamiti distinguishes between two types of ancestors in the African tradition: the common parent ancestorship and the brother ancestorship, which occurs “more rarely.” It is this latter type that Nyamiti ascribes to Jesus.⁷ If Christ is the Brother Ancestor, then God the Father is also our Ancestor, our parent ancestor.⁸ But for Nyamiti, “the Redeemer shines forth as THE Brother-Ancestor *par excellence*, of whom the African ancestors are but faint and poor images.”⁹

In the same year, Kwesi Dickson, a Ghanaian from the Methodist tradition, said: “Christ was the perfect victim; by his death he merits, to use an African image, to be looked upon as Ancestor, the greatest of ancestors, who never ceases to be one of the ‘living-dead,’ because there always will be people alive who *knew* him, whose lives were irreversibly affected by his life and work. . . . The physical cross . . . becomes the symbol of Christ’s being *the ever-living*.”¹⁰

In 1986 a Catholic from the Democratic Republic of Congo wrote the article "Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother," which was later translated from French to English. François Kabasélé wrote: "Christ fits the category of Ancestor because, finally, he is the synthesis of all mediations. . . . For Bantu Christians, Christ performs the role of Ancestor, by the mediation he provides. He is the exemplar, Ancestor, who fulfills in himself the words and deeds of the mediation of our Ancestor."¹¹

In 1993 Emmanuel Martey, a Ghanaian Presbyterian, suggests that "Jesus Christ could then be seen by both oppressed African women and men as Liberator and Ancestor. . . . As an ancestor, Christ is still part of the human family. . . . He protects, guards and guides us. It is from Jesus the Christ that we, the whole tribes of God—we *Christians*—have taken our name."¹²

Finally, in 1995, the Ghanaian Protestant theologian, Kwame Bediako summed up his thinking on the issue when he argued 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."¹³

In the last thirty years a number of prominent African theologians have written in favor of Christ as our ancestor. But one should note that the opinions have not been unanimous. We will cite only two examples. In 1968 Harry Sawyerr of Sierra Leone, who was sympathetic to traditional African initiation, said that Christ differs from the ancestors because he now lives.¹⁴ Kofi Appiah-Kubi from Ghana, to take another example, calls Christ the Linguist, Savior, Liberator and Healer, but not ancestor.¹⁵

Nonetheless, since the idea is widespread in academic circles, the question at hand is how this theology resonates at the grassroots. How does the concept of Christ as ancestor resonate with the ordinary African Christian?

A Grassroots Response

In April 2004 I conducted a survey on the issue. The forum was a combined class of 9 Master of Divinity and 71 Bachelor of Divinity students at the Theological College of Northern Nigeria (TCNN). These 80 students were asked to write a two-page essay on whether it is appropriate to speak of Christ as an ancestor in their own culture.

As the results came in, I was struck by the uniqueness of the group of respondents. In this group of 80 students, 42 Nigerian tribes or ethnic groups were represented. The respondents came from a wide spectrum of such ethnic groups stretching from the far northeast of the country down to the southeast and southwest. The majority of respondents came from the wide and diverse Middle Belt of the country, which is significant because this region has a very high number of ethnic groups. But among the group were 8 Igbos and 2 Yorubas plus 6 students from the northeastern state of Borno.

This diverse mix is reflected in the number of Nigerian states represented. Remarkably, 15 of the 36 states of Nigeria were represented. As suggested above, these states were primarily Middle Belt; but there were also 6 Igbo and Yoruba states plus students from Bauchi and Borno states.

Furthermore, it is important that there was a wide range of denominations represented. In all, the students came from 12 significant denominations.

A majority of the students (62) came from the large member denominations of TEKAN (*Tarayyar Ekklesiyoyin Kristi a Nigeria* or the Fellowship of Churches of Christ in Nigeria). These churches are found mostly in the Middle Belt and they are a unique mix, crossing the evangelical-ecumenical divide. The churches represented are: Church of Christ in Nigeria (28), Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (Church of the Brethren, 11), Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria (10), United Methodist Church of Nigeria (6), Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria (5), Evangelical Reformed Church of Christ (1) and Reformed Church of Christ in Nigeria (1).

In addition, there were 8 Anglican respondents, 5 Presbyterian Church of Nigeria ones, 2 Baptists, 2 from the Evangelical Church of West Africa and one Christ Apostolic Church man.

Thus the ecclesiastical spread was wide. Absent, however, from the survey were Roman Catholics and African Independent Churches. The Pentecostal churches had only a single representative.

To a large extent, the respondents reflect "grassroots" Nigerian Protestant Christianity. The term "grassroots" is not a precise term but it suggests a link with the common Nigerian Christian. The respondents are

degree students, who are all completing a first degree in theology. But many of them have strong links with the rural, village churches; others have links with urban churches.

The theological tradition of TEKAN and TCNN represents mainline Nigerian Christianity. TCNN and TEKAN are both ecumenical and evangelical. They are not "fundamentalistic" in the narrow sense of the term; instead, they are evangelical in a broader sense. At TCNN there is an openness to moderate African theology; but there is caution toward extreme forms of contextualization.

Since the respondent group comprises a broad spectrum of ethnic and ecclesiastical traditions within Nigeria, we thought that the results of such a survey would be of wider interest.

Results of the Survey

As one reads the 80 essays on this subject, one is struck by the almost universal rejection of the concept of Christ as an ancestor. Only three students thought that Christ should be considered an ancestor in their culture: 2 of the 26 Plateau State respondents were positive to the concept and 1 of the 9 Igbos was positive. But the other 77 respondents were either strongly negative or at least hesitant in respect to this concept. Statistically, less than 4% of the respondents were favorable to the concept; 96% were negative or cautious.

In the light of such an almost universal rejection of the ancestor Christology, one should enquire as to the grounds adduced. The following are some of the most common reasons given.

As a starting point, one should consider the traditional understanding of ancestor in the traditional societies. For most ethnic groups represented, an ancestor is a man who lived to a ripe old age, who died a natural death and who had children. For many of the respondents, Jesus did not meet these three criteria and therefore he is not qualified to be an ancestor.

A Bura man writes: "Christ lived and died without having biological children, so that disqualifies him as an ancestor in Bura culture. He died at the age of 33 years which to Bura people is a tender age, so that proves that his age is not fit for him to be qualified as an ancestor."

A Taroh student said: "Christ is never an ancestor in Taroh land due to the fact that (i) he died a shameful death . . . ; (ii) had no wife nor children (male) . . . ; (iii) he is never a member of any clan in Taroh land . . . ; (iv) had no compound nor history in Taroh land."

A Jukun woman asserts: "A barren person will never become an ancestor A good ancestor in the Jukun tradition has to give birth to first, second, third and even fourth generations but an ancestor that has no successor up to the third and fourth generation is regarded as a wicked ancestor."

An Igbo man wrote: "Jesus did not give birth to anyone"; an Igbo woman said: "in my culture they have never acclaimed an unmarried man or a childless man an ancestor. So this automatically disqualifies Jesus Christ as an ancestor in my culture"; an Ngwaba man said: "Jesus Christ has no descendants in the manner that African ancestors have"; a Warji person said: "[Jesus] died at a young age and without a wife or child"; a Nupe said: "[an ancestor] must have offspring, a family, a clan or a tribe"; a Kamwe woman maintained that "Jesus has no family and clan"; a Mupun woman saw an "ancestor as one who gave birth to other people"; a Jenjo student claimed that "an ancestor is a man who married with many children, a rich man"; and a Fali person asserted that Jesus "bore no African person (Fali)."

Implied in the above statements is the conviction that there has to be blood relation between Jesus and ourselves for him to be our ancestor. We have to be physically descended from Jesus. He has to be of our tribe and of our clan. But the reality is that Jesus was not African but Jewish. Therefore he cannot be our ancestor.

An Igbo wrote: "he was not born in Abiriba but in Palestine if he is not born in Abiriba, he is not qualified to be an ancestor"; a Yoruba considered "Jesus Christ as a Jew. He was neither of my tribe nor my family"; an Adamawa student said that "Jesus is no ancestor of the Lunguda man for he bore no Lunguda person"; a Warji person said "Jesus was not Warji by tribe but a Jew."

Related to the above is the question whether Jesus is a Saviour for one particular clan or tribe or for the entire world. An ancestor in the traditional culture relates to that culture; but Jesus is the Saviour of the entire world.

A Mwaghavul man said: "Jesus Christ died to save the whole of mankind while the Mwaghavul ancestor represents only his family lineage; hence Jesus cannot be limited to an ancestor." A Kilba man wrote: "Jesus' death is universal, he is not limited to Kilba people. Thus he cannot be their ancestor." A Chamba person testified: "our tribal ancestors are known among the Chambas only. But Christ is for the whole world." A Jukun man said: "Christ's salvation is universal. He does not represent just a family, clan or nation." A Panso man wrote: "For me to say that Christ is an ancestor is equally reducing Christ to my very culture or clan." An Igbo says that "if Christ should be an ancestor in Igbo land, his atoning sacrifice . . . would be only for his tribe or clan and descendants." An Mbula man asserted: Jesus "is not limited to any family ties. He came for the whole world. But as for ancestors even though it is believed they can protect their own lineage, they cannot protect any other lineage."

The last testimony raises the question of the function of ancestors. Do ancestors bring good or evil? Of course this will differ from tribe to tribe. But some respondents saw a qualitative difference between the role of an ancestor and that of Christ. A Kuteb man said that "an ancestor in Kuteb culture is a deceased head father whose major duty is to revenge on behalf of his children while Jesus Christ is a reconciler who reconciles the Kuteb people to God." A Kilba student said that "an ancestor can infect people with sickness while Christ is a healer." A Dera person testified that "the spirit of the ancestor was feared; today the Dera do not have this fear because they believe in Jesus' death which conquered the spirit of death."

The above raises a more ontological question. What is the ultimate status of an ancestor? A large number of respondents insisted that the ancestors are dead, albeit living dead, while Jesus Christ rose and is alive. A Jukun man says that "the longer an ancestor is in a family, the more he fades away But Christ himself is God, hence his kingdom remains forever." A Panso student said that "with time the ancestor will be forgotten but Christ can never be forgotten." An Igbo man wrote: "Christ resurrected bodily and remains living, not as living dead." For a Bura man, "it is obvious that Jesus Christ is not in the world of the dead." A Kamwe man said that "Jesus cannot be compared with dead people because he is alive." An Igbo insisted that "an ancestor is a dead progenitor according to my culture but Christ is not dead, he is alive." For a Warji, Jesus "is not a dead person, because he was risen." A Mwaghavul woman said that "when Jesus resurrected, he was seen by many people. But an ancestor only reveals himself at night and only men know who he is. But in the case of Jesus

Christ, even women testified to his resurrection and lordship." For a Jahr student, "the ancestors are dead and none has ever resurrected." A Mwaghavul man claims that "ancestralship cannot be ascribed to a living being." A Kilba student maintained that "an ancestor has never resurrected physically." An Ndola man said that "ancestors are forefathers who are dead and Christ is God who is living." A Fali man believes that "Jesus is not a living dead but he sat in heaven at the right hand of God." And a Kadung woman claims that "Jesus Christ is not an ancestor because he has been able to conquer death and come back to life."

There is a widespread consensus that Jesus is much stronger than the ancestors. A Ron person said that "ancestors do not have power. . . . They don't really have life to enable them to perform." An Igbo woman wrote that "an ancestor is a deceased human person who is powerless." A Lunguda man said that "ancestors who are mortal cannot be equated with Jesus who is regarded as a living God." A Chamba respondent said that "an ancestor is a human being, not divine as Christ; they die, they need to be saved, they have never resurrected."

Ontologically, Jesus is on a different level than the ancestors. A Taraba student wrote that "in the Munga culture the ancestor stands in the third position in terms of power. We have God, gods or divinities, and the ancestors. Jesus Christ is God." "The Dera see Jesus as the Saviour of mankind who will come and judge the world; they did not see him as an ancestor, whose souls are dangerous to them." A Kulere woman wrote: "Christ is above an ancestor." A Kadung woman asserts that Jesus "ranks above all human ancestors, so he cannot be degraded as an ancestor." A Marghi woman claimed that "Christ is above these and he is above with God, not like the ancestors that still live in this world."

Finally, there was a strong feeling among some respondents that to call Christ an ancestor would be to endorse the cult of the ancestors, which is profoundly wrong. A Plateau woman said that "a candid Christian who is a Kulere should detach himself from ancestral veneration because God and the Mosaic law forbid it." A Chamba man reminded us that "the practice of dead or ancestral things is forbidden" in the Old Testament. A Kamwe man maintains that "the Bible forbids consulting the dead." A Mwaghavul man claims that "the Israelites were warned by Moses not to consult spirits nor to practice divination." Caution should thus be exerted in speaking too freely about Christ as an ancestor.

Theological Evaluation

With a few exceptions, the consensus of this diverse group of respondents is that Christ does not qualify to be our ancestor. Jesus did not die naturally at an old age; he did not have a wife or children; he is not from an African clan or tribe; he is not dead but is living; his power far surpasses that of the ancestors.

The grassroots response that we have considered suggests that in actuality Christ is *not* an "Ancestor par excellence." With all due respect to Archbishop Milingo and François Kabasélé, Jesus does *not* fit "perfectly into the African understanding of ancestor." There are too many fundamental differences between Christ and the ancestor.

A key difference is the fact that the ancestors are dead, but Christ is living. Back in 1968 Harry Sawyerr said: "Unlike the ancestral dead of the Africans, Jesus Christ, once dead, *now lives*."¹⁶

This survey cannot be viewed as final or definitive. Not all of the respondents have a deep knowledge of their traditional religion. Since the responses are "grass-roots," most of them do not have the skills of a trained anthropologist. But the students do hold a deep-seated conviction that for them in their situation Christ cannot be called an ancestor.

In short, there is an incredible gap between the "ivory-tower" scholarship of some of the academic professors and the experience of African students who are close to the "grassroots." The theology of Christ as an ancestor does not resonate with most of these respondents.

Contextualization is good; it is necessary. The Gospel must be related and incarnated in every culture. But care must be taken so that the contextualization is indeed relevant to the needs of the people at the grassroots. I would like to suggest that ancestor Christology causes too much confusion and does not meet the pastoral needs of the average Nigerian Christian.

End Notes

- ¹ John Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), p. 94.
- ² J. Mutiso-Mubinda, "Anthropology and the Paschal Mystery," in *Spearhead*, No. 59 (Eldoret: Gaba, 1979), p. 52; cited by Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1984), pp. 9-11.
- ³ Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as our Ancestor*, pp. 7-11.
- ⁴ Benézét Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, trans. John O'Donohue (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), p. 79.
- ⁵ Marc Ntetem, "Initiation, Traditional and Christian," in *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, rev. ed., ed. J. Parratt (London: SPCK, 1997), p. 102. See response by Tersur Aben, "Ntetem on the Ancestorship of Christ," *TCNN Research Bulletin* 38 (August 2002): 32-38.
- ⁶ E. Milingo, *The World in Between* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), p. 78 (emphasis added); cited by E. Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), p. 85.
- ⁷ Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor*, p. 15-17.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 63-65.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- ¹⁰ Kwesi Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), pp. 197-98.
- ¹¹ François Kabasélé, "Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother," in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Robert Schreiter (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), pp. 123-24.
- ¹² Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), p. 85.
- ¹³ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), p. 217.

¹⁴ Harry Sawyerr, *Creative Evangelism* (London: Lutterworth, 1968), p. 93.

¹⁵ Kofi Appiah-Kubi, "Jesus Christ—Some Christological Aspects from African Perspectives," in *African Dilemma: A Cry for Life* (EATWOT, 1992), pp. 58-73.

¹⁶ Harry Sawyerr, *Creative Evangelism*, p. 93.

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