E-ISSN: 1116 - 2619 P-ISSN: 3026-8524
MPRI-JHLAR | INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES, LITERATURE AND ART RESEARCH
VOL. 12 NO. 6 – APRIL, 2026

ANCESTORS AND THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS: A CHRISTOLOGICAL RECONSTRUCTION OF AFRICAN ANCESTRAL THEOLOGY

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.70382/mejhlar.v12i6.0106

Abstract

Ancestors in Africa are considered as an essential link in a hierarchical chain of powers stretching from this world to the spiritual world. However, there are theological problems created by the widespread negative and destructive Eurocentric approach to the issue of ancestral veneration in Africa. This emerged, perhaps, from the misconception of Ancestors' place in African belief system by the Western missionaries. African ancestral Christian theology therefore, seeks to address some of the problems that misconceptions have caused the African Christian spirituality within the purview of the relationship between African Christians and their ancestors. This paper is an attempt to bring about a synthesis of the Christian belief in Christ as the sole mediator between God and humanity and ancestral veneration in Africa. It also examines the theology of ancestral veneration vis-à-vis the notion of the Church as *Communio Sanctorum* which is a relevant aspect of African Ecclesiology. It has a Christological as well as an Ecclesiological dimension which are contextualized within African ancestral theology. Its objective is to deconstruct the negative dispositions and reconstruct an African ancestral Christian theology that can be incarnated in the African cultural and religious milieu. The method of contextual theology is adopted in the research. Findings show that, the veneration of ancestors in Africa has a close affinity with the intermediary role of Christ and the Saints as well as the beatific vision (heaven) in Christianity. Thus, it serves as preparation for the gospel (*Praeparatio Evangelica*) which indicates the hidden presence of Christ and his gospel in African culture.

Keywords:
Ancestors, Christ, Saints, Veneration, Praeparatio Evangelica, Contextual Theology, Ecclesiology, Inculturation.

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INTRODUCTION

The early foreign Christian missionaries to Africa dictated the tone and manner God is to be worshipped by African Christians, condemning almost everything that is African and non-Western. Indeed, the mission of the West in Africa involved a total distortion of all African values in the process of civilization and evangelization[42]. The index for measuring what is Christian was only determined in Eurocentric terms. Hence, various derogatory terminologies were developed to delineate African cultural and religious experiences from that of Christianity. One of the African indigenous religious experiences that were totally condemned by the missionaries is the reverence and importance given to dead persons, who are called ancestors. Ancestors are deceased persons who had a natural relationship with their earthly relatives and acquire a supernatural or sacred status after death.[43] Ancestral reverence was perceived as devilish and satanic, barbaric, and pagan. These were the conceptions that the early Christian missionaries brought to Africa. However, death within the traditional African cosmology is not thought to end human relationships. It is rather considered as a rite of passage from the earthly life to a radically different world of the spirits, which renders the dead active though invisible. The ancestors remain close as part of the family, maintaining interest in family affairs just as they did before death. Therefore, the importance and place of the African ancestors is indeed an everyday experience which is central to Africans even after conversion to Christianity. Although the early missionaries taught that the veneration of ancestors is incompatible with the Christian faith, many African Christians still hold tenaciously to the traditional piety. They are simply unable to let go of ancestral cults which consist of the sacred rites of reverence and veneration of the ancestors, and extricate themselves from the spiritual web binding them to the ancestors. The problem thus, entails determining the compatibility or otherwise of ancestral veneration in Africa, with Christianity. Hence the relevant research questions include: Is ancestral cult in Africa compatible with Christianity? In what way could ancestral cult in Africa be considered as the seed of the word (*Semina Verbi*) which serves as a preparation for the gospel? In answering these questions, the research aims at developing an African contextual ancestral theology that could contribute to evangelization and the inculturation of the Christian faith in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The methods of contextual theology is adopted in the research to situate ancestral cult in Africa within the framework of Christian theology. Thus, it undertakes a contextual analysis of ancestral cult in Africa vis-à-vis the position of Christ and the saints in

[42] Cf. Chidozie Chukwuokolo, "Afrocentrism or Eurocentrism: The Dilemma of African Development", *Africa Journal Online*, Vol. 6 (2009), 24-39, (24), accessed August 27, 2023, https://docplayer.net/72459828-Afrocentrism-or-eurocentrism-the-dilemma-of-african-development-j-chidozie-chukwuokolo.html DOI:10.4314/og.v6i1.52333.

[43] Cf Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as our Ancestor*, (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984), 15

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Christianity. This helps to determine the similarities and differences and establish their compatibility. The similarity established is thus adopted to foster an African contextual ancestral Christology, and Ecclesiology of the communion of saints, for missiological application in the propagation of the gospel in Africa. Published text including other internet sources were utilized in the research. Its scope is within African ancestral Christian theology from the perspective of Missiology, Christology, and Ecclesiology. However, due to the limited number of pages, the research does not cover every aspect of African ancestral theology but only considers ancestral cult in Africa as preparation for the gospel (*preparation evangelica)* in in African culture. It concentrates primarily on the consideration of Christ as the proto- ancestor, and the ancestors as saints, as well as the missiological application of this understanding in the propagation of the gospel. The thesis statement of the study is therefore the claim that African ancestral cult could serve as *semina verbi* (seed of the word) for the Christian belief in the mediation of Christ, the Communion of Saints and the Beatific Vision. The specific and concrete liturgical actions which could be carried out by African Christians in veneration of their ancestors are not considered in this research since it is conducted in the domain of systematic and not practical theology.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following sub-themes formed the nucleus of the literature review: The ancestors, their veneration and role in African culture, as well as the position of Christ and the saints in Christianity. Itumeleng Mekoa asserts that regardless of whether Africans are converted to, Christianity or any other religion, the main role of the living-dead ancestors is to provide moral guardianship. Expatiating on the relevance of this role, Itumeleng Mekoa asserts that it is the most significant aspect of African life. Furthermore, Itumeleng thinks that the role of the living-dead ancestors includes blessing and protection, communication with the living, curses, and punishment.[44] Steve Edwards, Nomahlubi Makunga, Jabulani Thwala and Buyi Mbele studied the role the ancestors play in the tradition of the Nguni peoples of South Africa. They concluded that the role of the ancestors is that of healing because it is common to believe that the spirits of deceased ancestors are to be blamed for the illness caused by the mistakes made by the living. The ancestors' spirits therefore can either send illness to the living as punishment or healing as a sign of restoration.[45] Steve Edwards, Nomahlubi Makunga, Jabulani Thwala and Buyi

[44] Cf. Mekoa Itumeleng, "The Living-Dead/Ancestors as Guardians of Morality in African Traditional Religious Thought", *Global Journal of Archaeology & Anthropology*, 10 No.5 (October, 2019), 0099-00104, (0099) accessed August 17, 2023,https://juniperpublishers.com/gjaa/GJAA.MS.ID.555799.php
[45] Cf. Steve Edwards, et al, "The Role of the Ancestors in Healing", *Indilinga African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems,* 8 No.1 (November, 2009), 1-11, (3) accessed August 21, 2023 https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/EJC61564.

Mbele's postulation that the ancestors are agents of healing[46], also agrees with the Christian notion of the intercessory role of the saints, but never have saints been known to have sent punishment for mistakes made by the living. Samson Mudzudza affirms the role of the ancestors as mediators or intercessors, just as Frederick Bartels maintained that the saints by their intercessory prayer direct the Christians to the heavenly realm. In the same vein, Jabulani A. Nxumalo thinks the African ancestral cult is essentially an indigenous method of mourning, and a gesture of respect for the dead.[47] Hence, it could be considered in relation to Christian funeral rites.

From the review of extant literature above, there is a consensus on the concept of ancestor by scholars as an ancestor is seen as a forefather, elder, or forebear, and a parent. However, when this description of an ancestor is contrasted with the Christian notion of sainthood, some conceptual differences exist, namely that saints in Christianity do not necessarily have to be in a genetic relationship with the living who venerate them. Ezenweke and Olupona's conception of an ancestor as a person who lived a very upright life on earth [48] conforms in some respect to the Christian concept of sainthood. Itumeleng Mekoa's assertion that living-dead ancestors provide moral guardianship[49] is also fully in line with the Catholic and some Protestant teaching that the saints serve as moral examples to the living. Just as the saints offer protection and blessings from God, so do African ancestors. However, Itumeleng's opinion that the ancestors can inflict curses and punishment is at variance with the Christian conception of sainthood.

However, the theological notion of ancestors in African contextual theology raises some critical and doctrinal questions which challenge the compatibility of ancestral cult with genuine Christian piety. Therefore, while acknowledging the relevance of African ancestral categories in African contextual Christian theology as elaborated above, Kwame Bediako warns against any practice that may attribute the unique role of Christ in the mediation of salvation to ancestors.[50] Critics of African ancestral theology could perceive the inculturation of African ancestral cult in African Christianity, as an attempt to compromise true Christian piety, especially the biblical affirmation of Christ as the sole mediator between God and humanity (cf. 1Tim. 2:5). The functional differences between ancestors in African Traditional Religion and saints in Christianity is another area of critical and doctrinal concern. In African tradition, ancestors exercise authority over the living,

[46] Cf. Edward, et al, "The Role of the Ancestors", 1-11

[47] Cf. Jabulani A. Nxumalo, "Christ and the Ancestors in the African World," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (September 1980),11-21 (12)

[48] Cf. Elizabeth Onyedinma Ezenweke, "The Cult of Ancestors: A Focal Point for Prayers in African Traditional Communities", *Journal of Religion and Human Relation,* 1 No.1 (2008), 1-13 (4) accessed August 10, 2023, https://www.semanticscholar.org

[49] Cf. Itumeleng, "The Living-Dead/Ancestors", 0099"

[50] Cf. Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 226–230.

they enforce moral norms, and could even punish the living and the entire community for the transgression of sacred norms as articulated above. However, saints in Christianity do not wield such autonomous authority over the earthly Christian and the Christian community. They only play an intercessory role within the frame work of the sovereignty of the triune Godhead.[51] This functional difference raises the question whether the ancestors/saints analogy is theologically valid or mere superficial adaptation.

Conclusively, the earlier studies have focused on the concept of ancestors and the role of ancestors in African traditional religion. They tried to establish a relationship between African ancestral cult and genuine Christian piety in relation to funeral rites and the veneration of saints. They however did not directly consider ancestral cult as seed of the gospel, indicating the hidden presence of Christ the sower, within the theological framework of *praeparatio evenaglica.* They also did not develop an ancestral Christian theology that is both Christological and ecclesiological, thereby creating a deficit in this perspective. Therefore, while appraising the contribution made by the earlier studies, this paper attempts to fill the gap in knowledge by focusing on both the Christological and ecclesiological dimensions of ancestral Christian theology, through an integration of the Christological concept of Christ as proto-ancestor with the ecclesiological dimension of ancestral cult as indication of *communio Sanctorum* (Communion of Saints); thereby portraying African ancestral cult as seed of the gospel of Christ in African culture.

PRAEPPARATIO EVANGELICA AS THE SEED OF THE GOSPEL IN NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS AND CULTURES

Praeparatio Evangelica: Seeking Christ in Indigenous Cultures

The term *Praeparatio Evangelica,* a Latin expression which means preparation for the gospel is originally traced to the apologetic work of Eusebius written in the early fourth century AD to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity over paganism. It however now generally refers to a doctrine of the early Church which means preparing the gospel for cultures that have not heard of Christ. "Early Christians claimed that once they were interpreted in a fully Christian context, God had already sown in the older cultures ideas and themes that would come to fruition."[52] *Praeparatio Evangelica* has also been referred to by a variety of names such as *preparation for the gospel* or *gospel preparation*, *pre-evangelism* or *pre-evangelization*, *preparation of/from religions, redemptive analogies*, *the revelation of the eternal state*, and *general revelation*.[53] Timothy Tennent, is one of the most outspoken proponents and exponents of *Praeparatio Evangelica.* According to him,

[51] Cf. Bénézet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic* (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 112–115.

[52] Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 122.
[53] Cf. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom 124, 125*

"*Praeparatio Evangelica* is the term used to describe God's work in people's pre-Christian heart that prepares them to hear and respond to the gospel message."[54] For him, *Praeparatio Evangelica* acts as a "bridge for other religions to receive the Christian gospel"[55]. When Christ is finally proclaimed, some ideas and truth assertions found in other religions act as a shadow and anticipation of what is to come." [56] He insists that the truth claims in non-Christian religions and culture are providential dispositions that serve as guides to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, attributing their existence to God.[57] In the same vein, Philip Jenkins asserts that, "if cultures are fully interpreted in a fully Christian context, God had already sown in the older cultures ideas and themes that would come to fruition and serve as actual preparation for the gospel of Christ."[58] One could therefore logically infer that, God created the world in such a way that seeds for the eventual redemption plan were sewn into the fabric and design of creation. The purpose of these seeds or preparations is to enable missionaries to advance more pertinent explanations in their proclamation of the gospel.[59] According to The Second Vatican Council, in its Declaration on the Relation of the Catholic Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*), a hidden power which some refer to as a Supreme Being is perceived among all peoples of the world (cf. *Nostra Aetate,* No. 2.). This portrays the universality and ubiquity of God, the Father, and Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son. Thus, it is coherent and plausible to argue that *Praeparation Evangelica* as the seed of the gospel also portrays the hidden presence of Christ among non- Christian peoples, cultures and religions.

Calvin Shenk claims that *Praeparatio Evangelica* attests that other human religions and cultures contain some "goodness and truth placed there by Christ and that these things should not be rejected. They serve a constructive and positive purpose for the gospel of Christ.[60] He also makes the astute observation that some aspects of other religions and cultures are a preparation for the gospel of Christ, while other aspects are judged by the gospel. There are bridges and steppingstones, but there are also things that contradict the gospel.[61] Hence, despite the usefulness of other cultures as preparation for the gospel, Calvin Shenk's findings also serve as a cautionary tale that not all things can be used in contextualization, and not all things are useful for the proclamation of the gospel. If taken too far, missionaries might start supporting contextualization strategies where

[54] Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church is Influencing the Way We Think About and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 282.
[55] Tennent, *Theology in the Context*, 44
[56] Tennent, *Theology in the Context*, 130
[57] Cf. Tennent, *Theology in the Context*, 159,184
[58] Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 122.
[59] Cf. Tennent, *Theology in the Context*, 159,184
[60]Cf. Calvin E. Shenk, *Who Do You Say That I Am?: Christians Encounter Other Religions* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1997), 48
[61] Cf. Shenk, *Who Do You Say That I Am,* 179

the other religions are the focus.[62] It is therefore crucial to note that theologians should never assert that the Christian faith is completely identical with a non-Christian religion. Even though they may support the use of some truth claims, some non-Christian religious actions will act as negative catalysts, wholly or in part, helping Christians to understand certain things they should not practice or believe.[63]

***Praeparatio Evangelica* is a Veritable Means of Inculturation and Contextual Theology**

In recognition of the conflicts that can exist between cultures and the Christian faith, various studies and discourses have been done, while many more are ongoing, as part of the efforts to provide resolution to such conflicts. Within the Catholic Church, there are efforts at inculturation. The process of inculturation may be defined "as the Church's efforts to make the message of Christ penetrate a given sociocultural milieu, calling on the latter to grow according to all its particular values, as long as these are compatible with the gospel."[64] Also the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World", *Gaudium Et Spes,* gives the guidelines and the modalities on how the Church can interact with the various cultures of the world (cf. *Gaudium Et Spes,* Nos. 53, 58, 62). The theme of inculturation is also a key element in the "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church", *Lumen Gentium,* (cf. *Lumen Gentium,* No. 13) and the "Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church", *Ad Gentes,* (cf. *Ad Gentes*, Nos. 10, 11, 15, 22) which emphasize the positive relationship between the Gospel and whatever that is good in the religious practices and cultures of diverse people.[65] While the term inculturation is more prominent within the Catholic Church, the Protestants, especially those associated with the World Council of Churches; prefer to use the term "contextual theology".[66] In a nutshell, inculturation and contextual theology represent the attempt to situate the gospel message and the Christian faith within the concrete life situation and experience of a people. The day-to-day experience of the people thus, provides the unique and particular fundamentals with which the universal message of the gospel is made concrete in a particular local context. *Praeparatio Evangelica* plays a significant role in this endeavour by indicating and pointing out the seed of the gospel already present in the traditional culture, philosophy, and religion with which the gospel message could be inculturated and contextualized.

Praeparatio Evangelica is what Alfonso Nebreda called pre-evangelization, or a stage of preparation for the kerygma that takes man as he (sic) is and where he is, makes dialogue possible and awakens man's sense of God thereby opening the heart to the gospel

[62] Cf. Harley Talman and John Jay Travis, *Understanding Insider Movements: Disciples of Jesus within Diverse Religious Communities* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2016), 289
[63] Cf. Shenk, *Who Do You Say That I Am*, 150, 154.
[64] The Holy See, "International Theological Commission Faith and Inculturation (1988)", accessed January 19, 2023, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/html
[65] Cf. Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 23.
[66] Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002). 26–27

message.[67] It might manifest as attraction, revelation, enlightenment, or witness. He asserts that, it is a necessary condition for the faithful transmission of the divine message because God planned to convey his word in human words and culture.[68] Todd Miles believes that non-Christian philosophies and religions have some insight into the nature of God and his redemptive purposes.[69] This is what Shenk calls "redemptive analogies" that exist in other worldviews. These analogies and insights must be reoriented toward Christ.[70] Thus, *Praeparatio Evangelica* points to the non-Christian cultural, religious, and philosophical rudiments by means of which the Christian faith could be contextualized and inculturated. Daniel Strange's contribution to this conversation is very innovative. He contends that Christians have access to the "remnant revelation" that still exists in other major world religions. This residual revelation is an addition to both general and special revelation, and it is made up of 'commonalities' and 'continuities' that exist in other religious traditions.[71] Poetically, Strange succinctly expresses his point of view, saying:
we might say that non-Christian religions are not glorious, but God can be glorified through them; they are not true, but God can teach us truth through them; they are not good, but God can bring good through them; and they are not salvific, but God can use them in salvation.[72]

Praeparatio Evangelica as a Veritable Means of Evangelization

Praeparatio Evangelica as the seed of the gospel could serve as a very effective means of evangelization and conversion to Christianity. It offers a contact point between the people and the gospel message which serves as a point of departure in the propagation of the Christian faith. Bearing in mind that Christ is present among all peoples of the world, as indicated by *Praeparatio Evangelica,* Robert Schreiter argues that evangelization should concentrate on leading people to find and discover Christ who is ready present among them.[73] Evangelization could be regarded in this sense as an effort to reveal the hidden presence of Christ among the people being evangelized and lead them to recognise and follow him.[74] The effort of Apostle Paul in the evangelization of the Athenians (cf. Acts 17:16-33) gives a biblical testimony to the effectiveness of *Praeparatio Evangelica* as a veritable means of evangelization. Instead of condemning and totally rejecting the culture

[67] Cf. Alfonso M. Nebreda, "Pre-Evangelization in the Form of Dialogue," In Jan Kerkhofs (ed.), *Modern Mission Dialogue: Theory and Practice*, (New York: Newman Press, 1969), 128-139
[68]Cf. Nebreda, "Pre-Evangelization in the Form of Dialogue" 139
[69] Cf. Todd L. Miles, *A God of Many Understandings: The Gospel and a Theology of Religions* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 338; Shenk, *Who Do You Say That I Am*, 153.
[70] Cf. Miles, *A God of Many Understandings*, 340.
[71] Cf. Daniel Strange, *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock: A Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 120.
[72] Strange, *Their Rock Is Not Like Our Rock*, 307
[73] Cf. Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies,* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 39.
[74] Cf. Roger Schroeder SVD, "Mission as Proclamation and Dialogue", in James H. Kroeger (ed): *The Gift of Mission, Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow,* (New York: Orbis Press, 2013), 125 -138 (125)

of the Athenians, Paul made effort to transform it into Christ-centered way of life.[75] He identified the omnipotent God in what the Athenians worshiped as unknown god.[76] Consequently, he started the proclamation of the gospel to them by means of non-Christian ideas which serve as *Praeparatio Evangelica*.[77] This approach which recognizes and respects the seed of the gospel in in non- Christian cultures and religions preserves the cultural integrity of the people being evangelized.[78] The early foreign missionaries to Africa did not adopt this approach. Hence, they condemn ancestral cult as pagan and barbaric instead of seeing the pious act as *Praeparatio Evangelica* that could be utilized in the propagation of the gospel.

CHRISTIANITY AND ANCESTRAL CULT IN AFRICAN CULTURE

Christ as the Proto-Ancestor in African Ancestral Christology

Traditional Africans as exemplified by the Etsako people of Edo state, Nigeria, venerate the progenitors of their various clans/community as proto-ancestors. The proto-ancestor is the primary ancestor of the clan/community who is venerated as the first father and founder of the clan/community. For the Tanzanian Catholic Theologian Charles Nyamiti, God is the progenitor of the community through Christ.[79] This claim of Nyamiti identifies Christ as the progenitor of the Christian community by the power of God, the Father. Christ is the head of the Church and the progenitor of the Christian community. These qualify him to be regarded as the proto-ancestor of all Christians. Hence "ancestor" is, an appropriate title for Christ in African contextual Christology.[80] The notion of Christ as the proto-ancestor of all Christians demonstrates the Christological dimension of African ancestral theology. According to Stinton, ancestors can bless, guard, and provide guidance. Ancestors provide direction for the tribe's leadership to ensure the smooth operation of the society. Ancestors serve as God's representatives, pleading with him for assistance and mercy[81]. Being very powerful, ancestors are expected to provide for the society in which they once lived.[82] They are thought to be an integral part of the community even after death. Similarly, Christ has transitioned from the earthly life into

[75] Cf. Timothy E. Byerley, *The Great Commission, Models of Evangelization in American Catholicism,* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 2

[76] Cf. Thomas Söding, *Ein Gott für Alle: Der Aufbruch zur Weltmission in der Apostlegeschichte,* (Freiburg: Herder, 2020), 224-225

[77]Cf. Joseph Osei- Bonsu, *The Inculturation of Christianity in Africa, Antecedents and Guidelines from the New Testament and the Early Church,* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2005), 30

[78] Cf. Anto Karokaran, *Mission: An Alternative Model*, (Bengaluru: Dharmaram Publications, 2017), 111

[79] Cf. Charles Nyamit, *African Tradition and the Chrisitan God,* (Edoret: Gaba Publications, 1977), 46

[80] Cf. Richard Fotland, "The Christology of Kwame Bediako", *Journal of African Christian Thought* 8, no. 1 (2005), 36–49 (37)

[81] Cf. David Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christologies* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, ,2004), 134

[82] Cf. Kenneth Nürnberger, *The living dead and the living God* (Pietermaritzburg, Cluster Publications, 2007), 30

the world of the spirits, but still has authority over all creation. He continues to exist in and have an impact on the world. Africans look to the ancestors to teach them the proper way to live, and the dos and don'ts of life just as Christians look unto Christ (cf. Heb.12:2). According to Küster, "Just as the ancestors watch over and continually strengthen the life of their descendants, so does Christ continually nourish the life of the believers."[83] The above analysis demonstrates that the veneration of ancestors in African culture could serve as the seed of the Christian gospel in African culture ultimately pointing to the adoration of Christ as the mediator between God and humanity (cf. 1Tim. 2:5). However, the plurality and multiplicity of proto-ancestors across clans/tribes/communities in Africa raises a critical question that challenges the validity and accuracy of the notion of Christ as Proto-ancestor in African Christology. Could it not blur the Christian biblical and doctrinal understanding of Christ as the sole and universal mediator between God and humanity (cf. 1Tim. 2:5). How could the Christian notion of one Christ be reconciled with the African notion of many proto-ancestors? This is an open question for further theological investigation.

Ancestral Cult as an indication of *Communio Sanctorum* (The Communion of the Saints)

"In Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Oriental Orthodox, and Lutheran doctrine, all of their faithful deceased in Heaven are considered to be saints"[84]. John Coleman wrote that saints across various cultures and religions are considered as: exemplary model, extraordinary teacher, wonder worker or source of benevolent power, intercessor, etc.[85] Sarpong noted that Christians honour their Saints in a variety of ways, including by holding feast days, and putting up their statues.[86] The imitation of their virtuous life is another way to revere the saints but the most popular method is to pray through them. However, any prayer that is addressed to them is an intercessional prayer, in which the living ask the saints to pray to God on their behalf.[87]

According to Roman Catholic doctrine, there is only one Church, made up of both the living and the blessed. This is referred to as *Communio Sanctorum* (the communion of saints). As a result, the Blessed in Heaven offer God the pleadings and requests of their earthly brothers and sisters. They actively care about the pilgrims who are still alive and assist them with their material and spiritual needs.[88] For Africans, the living, the dead, and

[83] Volker Küster, *The many faces of Jesus Christ*, (London: SCM Press, 1999), 120
[84] Kenneth Woodward, *Making Saints*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 16.
[85] Cf. John Coleman, "Conclusion: After sainthood", in Hawley, John Stratton (ed.) *Saints and Virtues* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 214–217.
[86] Cf. Peter Kwasi Sarpong, *Peoples Differ: An Approach to Inculturation in Evangelisation* (Legon-Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2002), 30
[87] Cf. Peter Kwasi Sarpong, *Archbishop Sarpong Explains Key Christian Topics*, (Accra: SNAM Press, 2016), 31
[88] Cf. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 35

the unborn make up one family. The Catholic doctrine of "the communion of saints," which includes the Church Suffering (the dead), the Church Militant (the living), and the Church Triumphant (the saints), is therefore like this concept. Thus, the Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa,* by John Paul II states that the veneration of ancestors is a preparation for the belief in the Communion of the Saints (*Ecclesia in Africa,* No. 43). It could therefore serve as the seed of the gospel of Christ which serves as an indication of the Communion of Saints in African culture.

For John Taylor, determining the relationship with the ancestors in terms of the Communion of Saints should be a more prevalent strategy.[89] It has been proposed that this Christian doctrine can be revived, revised, and given new prominence from within the African context. African theologians must realize that the ancient church's confession that, "I believe... in the communion of saints" is the recognition and Christian expression of Africa's concept of community, which includes the dead. Western churches tend to overlook this Afrocentric doctrine. For this reason, John Taylor asked, "Is it not time for the Church to learn to give the Communion of Saints the centrality which the soul of Africa craves?"[90] However, the view of Edward Fashole-Luke raises the question whether this holy company includes all ancestors or only confessing Christians by defining the Communion of Saints as "a spiritual fellowship which is based upon union with God in Christ through baptism."[91] For him, "we cannot simply say that the African ancestors can be embraced within the framework of the universal Church and included in the Communion of Saints."[92] This position seems deliberately ambiguous. In any case, the Christians can remember with confidence that the death of Christ is for the whole world and no one either living or dead is outside the scope of the merits of Christ's death.

The best way to describe the Communion of Saints is through intercession. No one suggests that Christians should pray to the dead (as in the traditional cult) because Christians do not believe that the "living-dead" can bless but that they could mediate blessing from God. The question is whether it is possible for the connection to one's ancestors, which is so fundamental to African personhood, to be completely erased by death. Can it not be assumed that one's parents will pray for their children after they pass away, just as they did while they were alive? Fashole-Luke writes: "The fellowship in prayer which unites the whole body of Christ is a legitimate consequence of the intercession of the departed who are with Christ."[93] What about making a prayer request on behalf of ancestors, particularly those who weren't Christians? Does one pray for them in hopes of

[89] Cf. John Taylor, *Primal Vision* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 166.

[90] Taylor, *Primal Vision,* 167.

[91] Edward Fashole-Luke "Veneration and Communion of Saints," in M. E. Glasswell and Edward Fashole-Luke (ed.), *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World*, (London: SPCK, 1974), 215-220 (215)

[92] Fashole-Luke, "Veneration and Communion of Saints," 216).

[93]Fashole-Luke, "Veneration and Communion of Saints," 219).

getting a result? On this, Nxumalo speaks for many African theologians when he insists that such intercession is a Christian duty because obligations to one's elders are not altered by death.[94] Similarly, Harry Sawyerr asserts that some ancestors may be saved as a result of this intercession because intercessory prayer is a two-way conversation and a strong connection that binds us to our ancestors.[95] Fashole-Luke is sure of the same effect and adds that Christians must "recover the practice of the ancient North African Church and pray in faith for the departed, both Christian and non-Christian. This will provide the Africans with that link with their dead which they so much desire."[96] The understanding of ancestors in the perspective of the Communion of Saints, which perceives the ancestors in the perspective of the heavenly saints, and their communion with the earthly Christians as one undivided body of Christ, emphasizes the ecclesiological dimension of African ancestral Christian theology.

The Ancestral World as the Beatific Vision

Africans believe that the dead enter a spiritual state of existence after death.[97] The Senegalese poet Birago Diop's poem about the continued existence of the ancestors vividly captures this general African belief. He says: "Those who are dead are not gone [...] the dead are not dead."[98] For Asare Opoku the dead are believed to be anywhere at any time; they still exist, but in a different way. They live in the ancestral world which is a spiritual permanent place of bliss for all who lived a good life on earth. Thus, the ancestors are held in high esteem and revered as triumphant heroes who have attained the prize of life.[99] The participation in eternal bliss with God makes the ancestors capable to act as intermediaries between God and humanity.[100] The ultimate goal of the African people on earth is to have a share in the ancestral world after death just as the Christians strive to attain the beatific vision in heaven. Hence the ancestral world in African culture could also be considered as *Praeparatio Evangelical* that indicates the Christian heaven and eternal life after death.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study demonstrate that the veneration of the ancestors in Africa could serve as *Preparatio Evangelica,* indicating the presence of Christ and his gospel in three major ways:

[94] Cf. Nxumalo, "Christ and the Ancestors", 20
[95] Cf. Harry Sawyerr, *Creative Evangelism: Towards a New Christian Encounter with Africa* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1968), 95, 137.
[96]Fashole-Luke, "Veneration and Communion of Saints," 219.
[97]Cf. Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEP International Private Limited. 1978), 35.
[98] Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 36
[99] Cf. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 35
[100]Cf. Emefie Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions* (Onitsha: IMICO Publishers, 1987), 147

i. The veneration of the progenitor of a clan could serve as *Preparatio Evengelica* for the adoration of Christ the mediator between God and humanity as the proto-ancestor of all Christians in African contextual theology.
ii. The honour of the deceased family heads and members, as well as the recognition of their continuous membership of the family, could serve as *Preparatio Evagelica* for the belief in the Communion of Saints.
iii. The notion of the ancestral world as a blissful permanent place of rest after a good life on earth, could serve a *preparatio Evangelica* for the beatific vision (heaven).

Recommendations

This study makes the following recommendations:

i. that African Christians should be encouraged to honour and venerates their dead ancestors in a Christian manner.
ii. that the names of African ancestors should be adopted as baptismal names by African Christians.
iii. that the solemnity of Christ the king should be contextualized and inculturated as a Christian feast in honour of Christ the proto-ancestor.
iv. that the solemnity of all saints should be contextualized and inculturated as a Christian feast in honour of the deceased family members.

CONCLUSION

This study examined Ancestral Christian Theology in Africa and asserts that a proper contextualization of this theology is crucial for the propagation of the gospel. Jesu Christ could be regarded as the preeminent proto-ancestor of all Christians, as it is through a common Christian ancestral heritage of faith that the universal Church takes root in a particular locality. The veneration of the ancestors by Africans is also a traditional way of honouring the saints who enjoy the beatific vision with Christ. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the term "saint" used by the Roman Catholic Church and other Christian denominations for exemplary deceased members is comparable to the term "Ancestor" as used by Africans[101]. Therefore, when Christians refer to their deceased family members as saints and Africans refer to theirs as ancestors, this study argues, that they are not conveying two entirely different ideas. Both terms refer to individuals who were once members of their various religious communities and still have some sort of influence over the living even after death. Hence, ancestral cult in Africa should not be condemned and totally rejected in Christianity. It should rather be considered as *Preparatio Evangelica*

[101] Cf. Anthony Kofi Anomah and Peter Addai-Mensah, "An African Christian Perspective on the Veneration of the Saints or the Ancestors" *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion* 45, (2019), 11-16

indicating the seed of the gospel in African culture which could be refined and purified for the evangelization of the people.

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