

An Akan Christian Appraisal of Ancestor Christology

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Abstract: The contextualization of the Christian faith is indispensable to the planting, development and survival of the Christian religion in any given environment. In the African context, attempts to contextualize Christianity have led to the formulation of African Functional Christologies aimed at making Christianity more meaningful to the African audience. One of such Christologies is Ancestor Christology which designates Christ as Ancestor, superior to all African ancestors. Though very appealing to the African audience, Ancestor Christology has serious pitfalls which challenge its legitimacy as an authentic Christian Christological model. Different scholars have critiqued Ancestor Christology from different African cultural perspectives and have expressed concerns about its overall contribution to the orthodoxy of African Christian theology. Renewed interest in the subject in recent times has prompted this paper which appraises the ancestor-Christological model from an Akan Christian perspective. The paper is a literature-based research that gathered data from such scholarly sources as books, journal articles, and dissertation/theses. After analyzing the Akan concept of ancestorship, the paper then surveys the works of selected Ancestor Christologists to give an overview of the doctrine in question. Ancestor Christology is, then, evaluated through an Akan Christian lens, noting its strengths and weaknesses. The paper found that even though Ancestor Christology may facilitate the African Christian understanding of Christ's care for the existential needs of the Akan/African, it has the tendency of encouraging ancestor worship, reducing Christ to a human being with no divine nature, and negating the resurrection, thereby nullifying the key foundations of the Christian faith. Yet, this does not necessarily mean the concept of Ancestor Christology should be rejected outright. African scholars may brainstorm to know how best this Christological model may be improved. The paper recommended, among others, that ontological and functional Christologies must always be treated together rather than in isolation.

Keywords: *Akan, Ancestor Christology, Christ, Functional Christologies*

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Citation: Boaheng, I. (2023). An Akan Christian Appraisal of Ancestor Christology. *Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Journal (SHE Journal)*, 4(2), 283– 300.



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INTRODUCTION

The (re)introduction of Christianity into African was pioneered by Western and North-American missionaries whose hermeneutical, theological, liturgical and pastoral traditions gave no room for the African culture. The African culture was derogatorily treated as pagan and incompatible with Christianity. With this approach, missionary Christianity not only failed to address African existential realities but also made the Christian religion foreign to Africans. This led to the quest for an African-brewed Christianity, a sort of Christianity that would find a meeting point between the Christian message and the African socio-cultural worldview. The emergence of African Initiated Churches was the fruit of this quest. These churches attempted to establish a link between the biblical worldview and the African worldview and used the gospel to address African existential challenges.

In the scholarly circles, serious attempts toward the contextualization of the Christian faith for the African audience began in the late 1950s and early 1960s, with African theologians like Charles Nyamiti, Francois Kabasele and John S. Mbiti working toward the provision of an African-sensitive theological, pastoral, and hermeneutical framework for the church in Africa. Attempts were made to address Africa's social, political, economic, spiritual, and psychological challenges from a Christological perspective. The result of this attempt to resolve the problem of alienation that characterized the kind of Christology imported into Africa by Western missionaries was the formulation of different dimensions of African Functional Christology with such designations as "Christ the Ancestor," "Christ the Elder brother," "Christ the Elder," "Christ the healer," "Christ the Liberator," and "Christ the Chief," among others (Goergen 2001; Nwaogwugwu 2011). These designations were meant to formulate a de-alienating Christology that would enable Africans to realize

and "utilize their full potential in their own context" (Mutongu 2009, p.66).

For some time now, Ancestor Christology has been critiqued from different angles regarding its authenticity as an authentic Christian doctrine and its overall impact on African Christianity. Scholarly interest in the debate about the appropriateness of this Christological model keeps rising every now and then. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the debate by appraising this popular Christology from an Akan Christian perspective.

With this brief introduction, the paper proceeds to examine the Akan concept of ancestorship. This will serve as a framework for assessing the appropriateness or otherwise of the metaphorization of Christ as "Ancestor."

The ancestor in Akan ontology

Belief in the spirit of the deceased and in their influence on the lives of the living is common in all Akan societies. For the Akan, death is the beginning of a new life in the world of the dead. Death leads to one's birth into the realm of the dead (Bono-Twi: *Asamando*). In other words, death closes the door of the physical realm and opens the door of the new world. Death is, therefore, considered as a journey from the world of the living to the world of the dead to live as an ancestor. Even though death is a necessary condition for ancestorship, not every dead person automatically becomes an ancestor. Certain conditions must be fulfilled before one may qualify to be an ancestor. The following sections examine some of these qualifications.

1. Lineage

From the Akan perspective, ancestorship is based on lineage. There should be a natural relationship between the dead and the living before an ancestral relationship can be claimed. Therefore, the ancestors of one family may not be the ancestors of another family if the two families do not relate by blood. Children usually consider their dead parents and grandparents are their

ancestors. But since the African family goes beyond children, parents and grandparents, the ancestral link must include all ancestors connected to one's family. The Akan believe that in the ancestral world the spirit of the dead live in groups just as the living community organizes itself according to lineages and clans (Sarpong 1974). Just as the living clans always increase through birth, so the ancestral clans also increase as more of their descendants die.

2. Adulthood

Adulthood is another qualification for ancestorhood in the Akan community (Sarpong 1974). For the Akan, adulthood is not only determined by age but also by such factors as marital status and leadership experience. Dead children, boys and girls do not qualify as ancestors. An unmarried 60-year old man is considered "young" while a 19-year old married man is considered "an adult." The Akan desire to procreate and expand their families. Bachelorhood or spinsterhood disqualifies someone from becoming an ancestor because these people have not contributed to the expansion of the society. Such persons are considered useless and unworthy to have their names kept in the family register.

An unmarried young man who is installed as a chief or made a leader in the community becomes an "adult" by virtue of his leadership position. It is in this sense that young traditional priests or young ministers of the gospel are considered as "adults" in the Akan context. Usually, the young man who becomes a chief is made to marry or is considered married because of the permanent attachment of women/wives to traditional stools (Sarpong 1974).

3. Natural death

Natural death at a ripe age is another requirement for ancestorship (Salm & Falola 2002). Tragic death or death through unclean diseases disqualifies one from becoming an ancestor. These

include death through drowning, car or plane accident, death through suicide, being shot accidentally, and death through such sicknesses as leprosy, epilepsy, dropsy, madness, and smallpox, among others (Sarpong 1974; Salm & Falola 2002). Such deaths are referred to as *atɔfo-wuo* (violent, sudden or bad death). It is believed that such deaths are experienced by evil people as a form of punishment for their evil deeds.

Contracting the above-mentioned diseases also makes one religiously unclean. A chief who suffers from such diseases is usually destooled to protect the stool from spiritual contamination. It is also considered a wicked thing to commit suicide; therefore, the one who commits suicide is a bad example for the community and so cannot become an ancestor (Sarpong 1974). Usually, the funeral rites of people who experience bad death are not as elaborate and honorary as those of people who die naturally (Sarpong 1974). The only tragic death that does not disqualify one from ancestorship is death in war (Sarpong 1974). The one who dies in war is honored for defending the society with his/her last blood. Such death, therefore, gives the dead reputation (and qualifies the person as an ancestor) rather than defaming him/her. Bravery is, therefore, a mark of the status of ancestorhood.

4. Exemplarity

One has to live an exemplary life by tribal standards to qualify as an ancestor (Sarpong 1974; Salm & Falola 2002). This requirement is absent in the South African Bantu society where every deceased person automatically becomes an ancestor (Wanamaker 1997). In the Akan setting, no one would like to mention the names of wicked persons in libations and prayers, and so, no one would like to keep the evil person's name in family memory by considering him/her as an ancestor.

Sarpong (1974, p. 35) defines a good person as one “who does not cause unnecessary troubles, or abuse his [or her] elders, juniors or equals, especially in public.” A good person is law abiding, not wrathful or quarrelsome; a good person advocates for peace, unity and communal development (Sarpong 1974). A potential ancestor must be hardworking, kind, loving, hospitable, gentle, generous, merciful and trustworthy. A bully, a talkative, a gossip, an alcoholic, and an excessively extravagant person are all categorized as evil persons. Laziness, gluttony, cowardice, irresponsible behavior and womanizing also make one unworthy of emulation. Such a person’s “ghost” is considered bad and incapable of blessing the living. In the case of a chief, prosperity, peace, fertility and longevity must be the hallmark of his reign to be considered as a good leader whose name needs to be kept in the society’s memory by raising him to the status of an ancestor. From the foregoing discourse, it can be concluded that the Akan concept of ancestorship teaches and encourages people to live morally upright lives.

Related to the Akan concept of ancestorship is the belief in reincarnation as the means of giving everybody the chance to become an ancestor if previous attempts fail. The next section explains further.

Reincarnation

The Akan believe in the reincarnation of the soul (Sarpong 1974). From the Latin words *re* (“again”) and *incanare* (“to enter into the body”), the English word “reincarnation” refers to the belief that the soul, upon death of the body, may come back and live in another body. One may consider the phrase *akɔ-asane-aba* (“having gone and come back”) as the Akan expression of reincarnation. The belief in reincarnation implies that souls which fail to qualify as ancestors—for example, due to dying unnaturally or prematurely (while doing good deeds

for the benefit of his/her family)—are given another chance to live on earth again and to work toward becoming ancestors after death (Majeed 2015). Sarpong (1974, p.39) notes that “If they again fail to fulfill the conditions necessary for entry into the other world [ancestral world], they will have to be born again.”

In the case of a good person, the rebirth is meant to help his/her descendant or to change a course of his/her society (Ephraim-Donkor 2008). People identified to have reincarnated for the betterment of their families are received very well. In their next earthly life, these souls must try to reach fulfill their God-given mandate and also attain ancestorship, else they may not have another chance. In this sense, reincarnation is intended to ensure the continuation of some manifestations of goodness shown in the past and the completion of life (on earth) as divinely ordained.

In the case of an evil person, it is believed that the evil person is not worthy to stay in the upper kingdom (ancestral world) and so must come back into the world to correct his/her bad life (Quarcoopome 1987). In this regard, reincarnation is meant for evil persons to come back and right their wrongs. Sometimes such a soul returns as a blind, lame or deformed person after it has repented and asked for pardon (Quarcoopome 1987).

The Akan belief in reincarnation is highlighted by some human names. For example, the Akan name Ababio (“she/he has come back”), like the Yoruba Babatunde, is given to a child who is believed to be a forebear who has returned to the family. Akan sayings such as “It is those who go to the land of the dead who return to be born,” “If people don’t go, others don’t come” and “Nobody gives birth to another person’s ancestor” are rooted in the belief in the reincarnation of the soul (Ofori 2014, p.14). When a child is born, it is believed that the child has not fully relinquished

the other world and so does not fully belong to this world (Sarpong 1974). For this reason, the funeral of a child is not as elaborate as that of an adult. The parents of a dead child are prohibited from showing external signs of grief; they may be requested to wear white clothing to signify joy, happiness and victory. Thus, a child always lives in two worlds—the spiritual world and the physical world. There is a tension of holding the belief that the ancestor may reincarnate on the one hand and continues to live permanently in the ancestral world on the other hand (Opoku 1978). Therefore, one may consider the Akan concept of *ako-asane-aba* as “partial reincarnation.”

Ancestors perform many functions in the lives of their living relatives. In the next section, some of these functions are outlined.

Functions of the ancestor in Akan socio-religious context

1. Ancestors as guardians of the social and moral order

The ancestors are responsible for looking after family matters, property, customs, morals, and activities (Opoku 1978; Mbiti 1980; Quarcoopome 1987; Bujo 1998). Ancestors serve as the foundation for morality and social harmony by enforcing taboos and customs that control people’s behavior. They represent the continuity of the social structure and the appropriate distribution of the power and rights they had and passed down over time from the “First Grand Ancestor” of the lineage or society. The “First Grand Ancestor” refers to the person who founded a given lineage or a given society. When one commits an offense, it is believed that the offense is committed against the ancestors, the deities, and ultimately against God, the Creator and Defender of the social and moral institutions. It is in the light of this role of ancestors that Mbiti (1980, p.82) consider them as “the invisible police of the families and communities.”

The Akan and other Africans consider the ancestors as supernatural beings with more power, knowledge and authority than their living lineage (Beyers & Mphahlele 2009). The ancestors derive their powers from God, but once they get it, they use it independently of him. They have interest in the lives of the living relatives; they preside over family meeting and use their power to punish people for wrong doing and reward them for good deeds (Sarpong 1974; Opoku 1978; Quarcoopome 1987). Thus, even though they are no longer mortal, ancestors still serve as the spiritual, social and moral overseers of the families they left behind on earth (Quarcoopome 1987). The living may refer matters affecting the society to the ancestors for judgment or sanction, thus making them superintending spirits who gives approval to matters of societal interest. One may look up to the ancestors to avenge his/her case, saying, “*nananom ne wo nni*” (“May the ancestors deal with you”). The ancestors are believed to have adequate knowledge about all things that transpire and so can judge accurately. The fear that one can be punished by the ancestors for wrong doing makes people behave well in the society.

In addition, the veneration of ancestors places the final source of legal power and right, or jurisdiction in the domain of the ancestors so that it becomes unassailable to obey them. The veneration of ancestors may be expressed in the following ways: Pouring the first few drops of a drink or dropping a few pieces of food on the ground in acknowledgement of the presence of the ancestors and as a way of inviting them to join in the meal (Salm & Falola 2002). In most Akan societies, ancestors have sacred stools preserved to honor them and to keep their history in the memory of the society/family. These stools, believed to possess the ancestors, are kept in special rooms or houses under the watch of special

people designated and trained for that purpose (Salm & Falola 2002). Ancestor veneration makes people desire to become ancestors one day. The desire for people to have stools preserved in their names after death motivates them to lead good lives. Since ancestors were virtuous people, emulating them leads to maintaining law and order. The role of the ancestors in maintaining social and moral order is, however, more effective in traditional small scale societies where many people still hold on to African traditional beliefs.

2. Ancestor as Mediators

Ancestors are not of divine nature. For the Akan and some other Africans, ancestors serve as mediator between God and their lineages (Wanamaker 1996). This belief is absent in the traditional South African Bantu. A brief explanation of the South African Bantu traditional concept of God is offered below to help the reader to appreciate the difference in belief system in different parts of the African continent. Traditionally, this Bantu group has no belief in a personal deity who created the heavens and the earth. Before the Christian era, the Sotho-Tswana high deity, *Modimo*, was conceived as an impersonal, intangible and invisible, creative force. *Modimo* referred to “energy that is ever active, initiating action, and maintaining interaction” (Setiloane as cited in Wanamaker 1996, p.290). Therefore, prior to the introduction of a personal and relational God by Christianity, the ancestors of the Sotho-Tswana community had no intermediary role attributed to them “because there was no personal God with whom to mediate” (Wanamaker 1996, p.290). This means that for some African groups (including the Sotho-Tswana community), the oft-repeated assertion that ancestors are next to the Supreme Being in power and serve as meditators in his relationship with humanity is alien to the indigenous religious worldview (Hammond-Tooke cited in Wanamaker 1996). For such

communities, before the Christian era, ancestors were simply considered as all-powerful spiritual beings that played vital roles in the lives of their living relatives.

The mediatorial role of Akan ancestors is rooted in the Akan hierarchical political structure. In the Akan context, one cannot go to the chief directly; he/she has to pass through a linguist (Bono-Twi: *kyeame*). Similarly, at the family level, children do not normally approach their fathers directly; they approach their fathers through their mothers. In the same vein, God cannot be approached directly; there is the need to pass through an intermediary before reaching God. However, God is holy and perfect and so no human qualifies to mediate his relationship with humankind. That is the reason why there is no shrine, shrines, images, temples, feast days or priests dedicated to God. Against the backdrop of this belief, the Akan approach God through spiritual entities like lower divinities, nature spirits and ancestors. The ancestors are more closely related the living, making them better mediators of the God-human relationship.

3. Ancestors as givers and sustainers of life

The Akan believe that their ancestors give and sustain life. This belief is underlined by one’s pronouncements as he/she gives the last drink to a dying person: “Receive this water and drink, and do not permit any evil to come whence you are setting out, and permit all women of this household to bear children” (Ofori 2014, p.32). The expression “permit all women of this household to bear children” means the ancestors are capable of giving life/fertility to their barren descendants. The living, occasionally seek guidance from their ancestors on personal matters and wellbeing. Before people start cultivating their land, for example, they pour libation and pray for the blessings of the ancestors and also

promise to take good care of the land. Ancestors may appear in dreams/visions and offer solution to their descendants' problem or to reveal hidden treasures to them. The ancestors may also prevent calamity from befalling their descendants.

The ancestors are involved in the Akan daily life. The ancestors sometimes visit their living relatives, though no one sees them physically. The living is expected to acknowledge the existence of the ancestors, show concern for them and seek the favor. During funerals, festivals, marriage and other traditional gatherings the family head or the traditional priest pours libation to invoke the presence of the ancestors. They are called upon in times of danger and so one may shout "*me maame samane ee, gye me oo!*" ("My mother's 'ghost' save me!") when faced with a danger.

Having outlined the Akan worldview about ancestors, the paper now continues to examine the views of key proponents of Ancestor Christology.

Brief Survey of African Ancestor Christologies

Methodologically, Charles Nyamiti identified two broad approaches for Christological inculturation in Africa. The first approach, used by John S. Mbiti and Appiah-Kubi starts with Christological teachings from the Bible and then links a biblically-discovered Christological theme to the African context (Nyamiti 1989). For example, one may read about the love of Christ for the church in Ephesians 5:25 and the search for a corresponding teaching from the African socio-cultural perspective.

The second approach, the more frequently employed strategy, either explores Christology from the general "perspective of the African worldview" or start with a particular theme derived from the African culture and links it up with biblical Christology (Nyamiti 1989, p.18). Scholars using this approach—including Charles Nyamiti, John S. Pobee,

Kwame Bediako and Francois Kabasele—starts with African cultural beliefs and practices and confront them with biblical teachings about Christ. These approaches are intended to make African Christians feel at home in Christ and have Christological confidence by linking the functions of Christ with those of Africans (Wanamaker 1997).

Different African scholars have used different ancestor-designations for Christ. For example, John S. Pobee (1979, p.94) calls him "our Great and Greatest Ancestor", Lwasa "the Universal Ancestor", Charles Nyamiti "our Brother Ancestor", thus distinguishing him from God the Father, "our Parent Ancestor" (Nyamiti 1984, p.8), Bujo (1982, p. 77) "Proto-Ancestor", that is, "Ancestor par excellence", and Francis Kabasele (1991, p.121) "Ancestor and Elder Brother."

Ancestor Christology aims at achieving two main things, namely, inculturation and praxis (Moloney 1987). The first focuses on how Christianity can be adopted to an African cultural background while the second deals with how Christianity can be made meaningful and relevant to African realities. Ancestor Christology locates the meeting point between Christianity and the African socio-cultural context in the death of Christ (Mokhoathi 2018). The death of Christ is crucial in Ancestor Christology because one can only attain ancestorship after death (Nyamiti 1984).

With the brief background, the paper proceeds to consider a few scholarly voices on Ancestor Christology.

John S. Pobee's Ancestor Christology

Pobee was one of the first advocates of Ancestor Christology. In 1979 Pobee (p.94) 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." In the Akan context, "*Nana*" may refer to a

grandparent, an ancestor or a traditional ruler. Pobe's reference to Christ as "Nana" is meant to underline Christ's status as an ancestor. Referring to Christ as our Great and Greatest Ancestor, Pobe expresses a legal view Christ's activities and describes him as one who has authority to judge everyone, reward the righteous and punish wrongdoers. He further states that since Christ is God-man, he is superior to all human ancestors and all spiritual beings.

Pobe (1979, p.98) gives the practical significance of this ancestral Christology saying, "To say Christ is *Nana* (Akan for ancestor) is to let his standards reign superior to personal orientation, in the structures of society, in the economic process, and in political forces. It means, in practical terms, personal and social justice and recreation." Pobe's point is that just as human ancestors are people who lived exemplary lives and are therefore worthy of emulation, so Christ's exemplary life makes his life, ministry and teachings the standards that must be maintained in the society and in every human affair. The exemplary life of Christ has practical implications for the church including speaking for the voiceless, solidarizing with the marginalized and the poor, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick, freeing the captive, and releasing the oppressed.

Charles Nyamiti's Ancestor Christology

For Nyamiti, the Christological point of departure is that of the beliefs and practices in African traditional communities. He opines that God the Father can be considered metaphorically as the Ancestor of the *Logos* who is the descendant of the Father. God becomes the Father and the Ancestor of the believer through Christ and Christ becomes the believers' Ancestor, through his incarnation, life, ministry, death and resurrection. Nyamiti compares the ancestral relationship between Christ and

believers with the ancestral relationship between a deceased African and his/her siblings. He traces Christ ancestorship to his Adamite origin, arguing that Christ ancestral relation with his disciples is primarily based on our common originality (Nyamiti 1984). Jesus' "common divine sonship with [believers]" (Nyamiti 1984, p.16) forms a key basis of Nyamiti's Christological model. Christ's common kinship with believers is established on the basis of the believer's faith in Christ. In addition, the headship of Christ in the church and his creative activities make him a brother to believers (Nyamiti 1984). The role of the human ancestors as founders of clans and families compares well with Jesus' role as the creator of humankind. The believer must see Jesus as an Elder Brother and the church as the extended family.

As indicated earlier, Akan ancestors are supernatural beings and as beings supernatural, they mediate the God-human relationship. Similarly, Nyamiti considers Christ's supernatural status as that which enables him or endows him with his supernatural qualities and abilities to mediate the divine-human relation. Nyamiti and other African Ancestor-Christologists reason that since Christ is the only mediator for the God-human relationship (1 Tim. 2: 5) and the only way to the Father (John 14:6), he must be modelled as the Ancestor.

Nyamiti (1984, p.8) further argues that "Christ's ancestorship has not been fully effectuated" because his salvific activity will only reach its fulfilment when Christ comes again in glory and power for the world to receive the fullness of the fruits of his resurrection. Thus, Nyamiti links the maturity of Christ's ancestorship with the *Parousia*. Therefore, the Mass is fundamentally a real ancestor ceremony, and the tabernacle is the Christian shrine where Christ the Ancestor is present and communicate with believers (Nyamiti 1984). For Nyamiti (1984),

Christ's divine-human nature and his redemptive function makes him our Brother and Sister par excellence. God, then, is human ancestral Father because of human relationship with the Son, who is their sibling. Christ is the believer's Brother-Ancestor.

Based on core African beliefs about the link between the divine and the human, Nyamiti (1984) dives into the Trinitarian relationship to argue for an ancestral kingship between God the Father (as the Ancestor of the Son) and God the Son (as the offspring of the Father). The Father and the Son reciprocally give the Spirit to each other through their mutual communication. He argues that the incarnation and the redemptive activity of Christ that climaxed in the pascal mystery are extensions of the Trinitarian ancestral communication to "Jesus and through him, to the rest of God's creation" (Mutongu 2009, p.98). He also considers Christ ancestral function as achieved currently through the work of the Holy Spirit in the world. As Christ ancestorship gradually grows, till it is fully mature at the *Parousia*, he can communicate to Africans in all ages. This approach, according to Nyamiti, is better suited for Africans than any other approach.

Benezet Bujo's Ancestor Christology

Bujo, like other African ancestor-Christologists, constructs his Christology using African cultural phenomena. He refers to Christ as Christ is "Proto Ancestor", the Unique Ancestor, the source of life (John 11:25) and the highest model of ancestors. According to Bujo's model, Christ assumes the entirety of human history, including the legitimate aspirations of all human ancestors through his incarnation. The desire of human ancestors to have a guaranteed future was made efficacious in Jesus through his crucifixion and resurrection. Therefore, through the incarnation, Christ assumes a central position in God's salvific mission. This means that,

"Jesus Christ is the ultimate embodiment of all the virtues of the ancestors. The realization of salvation for which they yearn" (Bujo 1982, p.81). Bujo considers Christ as an ancestor because he is the best role model. Christ's life did not only epitomize the ideal of the African God-fearing ancestor, but also transcended that ideal and gave it a new completion and paradigm. Bujo's Ancestor Christology also highlights Christ role as the first born of all creation, predating all creation and holding all creation together in himself (Col. 1:15ff.).

As Proto Ancestor, Christ is the one who not only has life but is life and imparts spiritual life onto others. Paul makes this point when he distinguishes between the First Adam, of earthly origin and the Last Adam, a life-giving Spirit of heavenly origin (cf. 1 Cor. 15:45). For Bujo (1982), the life-giving ministry of Christ is more meaningful and relevant to Africans than the concept of *Logos* and *Kurios*. Bujo's view about Christ enables the African anthropocentrism to function as the foundation of incarnating Christianity requires a Christology from below. This view resonates with the African view that God lives above in heaven. Designating Jesus as the Proto-Ancestor makes him the superior model that every African has to emulate.

Bujo argues further that Christ's life and ministry was geared toward the inauguration of his kingdom; his death and resurrection brought about the new creation that extends to all people, even those who died before him of which African ancestors who preceded Christ are a part. Thus, the African ancestors are "forerunners" of the Proto-Ancestor. The institution of the Eucharist was meant to give a vivid picture of this new creation. In the African primal religion, life originates from God and is transmitted through the ancestors to their offspring who keep on prolonging the vital force of the society. Similarly, God uses the Eucharist as means of bestowing life on those who partake in it

(John 4:54-57). Thus, as the human ancestor who transmits life, Christ is the only one who has and bestows true and eternal life.

Is Ancestor Christology orthodox, theologically and culturally sound? The next section addresses this question.

A theological appraisal of Ancestor Christology

This section appraises the concept of Ancestor Christology from an Akan Christian perspective to determine its suitability or otherwise for the Akan Christian community.

1. Reincarnation, ancestral beliefs and the Christian faith

The question of the compatibility of the belief in ancestors with the Christian gospel is the main issue considered in this sub-section. Sarpong (1974) opines that the belief in ancestors is comparable to the Christian belief in the existence of saints who once lived as faithful Christians and whose spirits now live in heaven enjoying eternal bliss with God. At baptism, the names of these saints are given to the baptized. The Bono-Twi saying, "*samanpa ne beto no abadini*" (it is a good ancestor that children are named after) echoes this Christian practice.

Also, the veneration of Christian saints and the reverence given to Akan ancestors are considered as parallel practices in different religious contexts. Sarpong (1974, p.33), therefore, argues that "When Christians call their dead saints and refer to those of pagans as ancestors, they are not expressing different ideas" because both words, "saints" and ancestors", refer to "people who once belonged to their religious group, are now dead, and are supposed to be in a position of influence over the living." Just as one must die before becoming a saint, so one must die to become an ancestor. There is no living ancestor and there can be no such person. Similarly, the term "saint" refers

to the members of the church triumphant, believers who have died.

Arguing for the compatibility between ancestral beliefs and the Christian faith, Mogoba (cited in Wanamaker 1996, p.290), the Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, once declared that "ancestor-beliefs are not in conflict with the Christian beliefs. They can make easy [sic] for African Christians to accept the good news of Jesus Christ who died and was raised from the dead." For example, the concept of ancestors, living family members and the yet-to-be-born members of the Akan extended family serves as a good foundation for developing the concept of the universal church (comprising church triumphant, church militant and church expectant) in the Akan society.

While the above arguments sound good, the research believes that they are not convincing. The following points may be raised to establish the incompatibility between the belief in ancestors and reincarnation, and the Christian faith. First, the Akan have no concept of heaven and hell as Christianity teaches. Through reincarnation, everyone will at a point in time become an ancestor and live blissfully in the ancestral realm. The concept of reincarnation contradicts the biblical idea that a person lives and dies once, and afterward, faces judgment (Heb. 9:27). From the biblical perspective, a person cannot be offered another chance to live again and "work" toward his/her salvation whether or not the person was living a good life and died prematurely. One has to do all he/she is required to do on earth to be saved in the one-time earthly existence. The belief in ancestorship and reincarnation, therefore, militates against the urgency of the Christian gospel.

Secondly, Akan/African ancestral beliefs and practices involve spiritism—that is, communication with the spirit of the dead by means of

mediums— which the Bible prohibits. All contacts with the realm of the dead are explicitly forbidden by the Bible (Lev. 19:26-31; Duet. 18:10-11; Job 7:7-10; Isa. 8:18- 20; Luke 16:19-31). Clearly the Bible has a negative view about necromancy or attempts to communicate with the dead. From the biblical perspective death permanently severs one's relationship with the living. The Christian saints are in the presence of God and cannot be called back to the earth.

The case of Saul consulting Samuel's spirit (1 Sam. 28) needs to be examined at this point because people sometimes justify their contact with ancestors based on this incident. This event is interpreted variously as a psychological illusion, satanic impersonation, or a deliberate deception by the witch of Endor (Bae & van der Merwe 2008). Bae and van der Merwe (2008), after a thorough analysis of the varied interpretation and the text in its context, conclude that one should be careful not to interpret the text in a way that contradicts the overall teachings of the Bible about consulting the spirit of the dead. They believe that if Samuel really appeared to Saul, then the event "should be seen as an exceptional manifestation of God's power in which God chose to rouse Samuel for His divine purpose" (Bae & van der Merwe 2008, p.1314). It is important to note that it was the woman, not Saul, who "saw" Samuel. The woman showed her lack of control over the event when she got alarmed in the process (Bae & van der Merwe 2008). She recognized and acknowledged Samuel as a messenger of God. Bae and van der Merwe (2008) further state that the woman was used by God as an instrument to convey a message to Saul. The whole point is that what was "seen" by the woman was made possible by the special working of God who permitted what happened for his purpose. One should not consider this text as teaching that the dead have relationship with the living.

Thirdly, there is a sense in which one may consider the Akan as worshipping their ancestors, contrary to the biblical prohibitions against idolatry. According to Sarpong (1974) Ghanaians (including the Akan) do not worship their ancestor; rather, they venerate, honor and respect them. For Sarpong (1974) invoking the ancestors to come to one's aid, inviting them to bear witness to the truth of one's statement, entrusting one's activities into their care, pouring libation to them, offering them food and drinks, and praising them through dirges do not constitute worship. Like Sarpong, Idowu (1973, p.186) also rejects the idea that Africans worship their ancestors and argues that the cults of the ancestors are simply meant to facilitate "communion and communication between those who are living on earth and those who have gone to live in the spirit world of the ancestors." Similarly, Kenyatta (1978), writing about the Gikuyu, the Maasai and the Wakamba communities of Kenya, maintains that the living fellowship with the ancestors but do not worship them. Kenyatta (1978, p.268) concludes "the relation between [the] living and the dead, established in the manner described can hardly be called a worship or prayer but only communion between [the] living and [the] dead."

Contrary to the above position, the author is of the opinion that certain aspects of the ancestral practices amount to worship. For example, in some Akan/African societies, certain prayers or sacrifices are offered directly to the ancestors, as opposed to offering them to God through the ancestors. For example, before an Akan corpse is put in the coffin, the family head pours libation, saying, "As you depart, let your family experience, peace, longevity, and good health. May we get much money for your funeral rites. Take away sicknesses from us." This prayer also highlights the Akan belief that ancestors can be a source of protection against sicknesses. The Akan dirge below also

underlines that the Akan offer prayers to their ancestors: “Bestow your blessings upon us, and protect us.” “Send us money; we need money to defray your expenses.” “Repay all who caused you harm, and are responsible for your death.” “Go and prepare a place for us” (Ephraim-Donkor 2008, p.133). The last part of the dirge—that is “Go and prepare a place for us”—is reminiscent of Jesus’s words about the place he has in his father’s house for his disciples (John 14:3a). In these prayers, the object addressed (the ancestor) is an object of faith and the one considered as being capable of granting the request of the worshipper. Kalu (2000, p.54) highlights the religious aspect of the ancestral cult when he says “...the reality of the dead—among-the-living attracts so much religious devotion that in many African societies the ancestors occupy more devotional attention than God/Supreme Being.” In addition to competing with God for attention during prayers, in many Akan/African societies, the ancestors are feared/revered more than God.

Consequently, instead of trusting God to bless one’s industry, one puts his/her trust in the benevolence of his/her ancestors to become successful in life. Thus, whether it is referred to as “ancestral worship” or “ancestral veneration” certain practices associated with ancestral beliefs have remote connections with idolatry (Bae & van der Merwe 2008). God is and must be the only and ultimate source of blessing, though he may bless his people through others. Given the foregoing, one can agree with Bae and van der Merwe (2008) that he request for blessings from the ancestors and/or the use of the ancestors as means of ensuring good fortune and avoiding misfortune in life is not biblical. The researcher sees nothing wrong with honoring or respecting the department members of the society. However, from the analysis made so far, it seems clear that the ancestors are not merely venerated or honored but

sometimes worshiped. Ancestral worship is a misdirected worship: One’s worship becomes misdirected when it is offered to any other being than God.

Fourthly, the concept of ancestorship is based on work-based salvation (theology) which contradicts the biblical teaching that salvation is based on God’s grace, rather than human merit (Eph. 2:8-9). It is believed that when one dies and gets to the world of the dead, the person is made to give account of his/her earthly life to the ancestors who may or may not admit the posthumous abstract being before them into ancestorhood (Ephraim-Donkor 2008). The posthumous abstract being may be granted ancestral status if he/she is found to have done more good deeds than evil ones (Ephraim-Donkor 2008). The person is denied membership into ancestorhood if he/she did more evil than good. This idea clearly points to the belief that “salvation” is merit-based, rather than grace-based. From the Christian perspective, the final destination of a person depends on his/her own faith in Christ during his/her earthly existence. The dead cannot change their fate in anyway.

Fifthly, the ancestor cult is unbiblical because it undermines Jesus’s status as the only true mediator between God and humanity. In the Old Testament, God appointed priests to mediate his relationship with human beings. These mediators were imperfect in many ways and only foreshadowed the perfect Mediator, Jesus came at the appointed time to establish the New Covenant by his blood (Matt. 26:26-27). In the post-resurrection era, there is only one Mediator, Christ (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 9:15). It is, therefore, inappropriate to maintain that ancestors still mediate the God-human relationship.

The limited scope of this work will not allow further examination of the issue. From the foregoing, one may conclude that the Akan belief and practices about ancestors can easily lead

to syncretism and idolatry. In the next section, the paper considers the strengths of Ancestor Christology.

2. Strengths of Ancestor Christology
Ancestors Christology has some strengths, a few of which are outlined briefly below. First, it establishes a parallel role between Jesus and the ancestors in terms of the establishment of human community (Agyarko 2009). Ancestors are founders of human communities, and Jesus is the founder of the ecclesia, the community of believers. However, since the communities founded by the ancestors are local communities while the new community founded by Jesus is universal, Jesus occupies a higher ancestral status than any human ancestor.

Secondly, Jesus fits the ancestor designation because he, like human ancestors, plays key roles in the life of the community (Agyarko 2009). Earlier, it was noted that human ancestors serve as guide and guardians for their families; they protect their families and provide for their lives. Similarly, Jesus, being an ancestor guides, guards, protects and provides for members of the community he founded—that is, the church.

Thirdly, Ancestor Christology gives a strong link between the impacts of both the ancestors and Jesus on public morality (Agyarko 2009). The effect of ancestors on Akan public morality has been discussed earlier. The belief that ancestors can punish people for their evil deeds and bless others for their good deeds shapes people's behavior. The influence of Jesus on the morality of the community of believers is not in doubt. Agyarko (2009, p.97) paraphrases Sarpong as arguing that "viewing Jesus as the custodian of African societal norms and values, will give a purified meaning to the African cultural practices." In other words, Ancestor Christology can serve as an effective way of purifying the African culture of non-biblical features.

Fourthly, the role model function of Christ makes his designation as an ancestor meaningful to the Akan whose ancestors are their role models (Agyarko 2009). The most important desire of the Akan is to pass through the various stages in life, lead a good life and finally attain a divinized state of the ancestor after death. Agyarko (2009, p.97) rightly argues that "the ideal nature of the ancestors would be a framework within which one could also articulate the ideal nature of Jesus Christ." Christ's life epitomizes the fullness of human life. His life is the standard of his followers and so these followers' key aim is to be Christ-like.

Fifthly, Ancestor Christology is a very effective way of dealing with the foreignness of Western-brewed Christianity in Akan/Africa because it draws on the hearts of African primal spirituality (Agyarko 2009). In the African community people can easily identify with their ancestors. The ancestors are not foreigners; they are among their descendants. Presenting Jesus as an ancestor facilitates the Akan understanding of Jesus's relationship to his people. Thus, Ancestor Christology "promotes Christian spirituality within the African context" (Agyarko 2009, p.97).

Sixthly, Christianity will be more credible, relevant, meaningful, acceptable and respected in Akan/Africa if Ancestor Christology is promoted (Agyarko 2009). The reason is that the veneration of the ancestor will be transferred to Christ, who will then be considered as the all-in-all. People's devotion to Christ will increase as they transfer their trust in their ancestors to him.

Having highlighted the relevance of Ancestor Christology the next section outlines some limitations of this Christological approach.

3. Limitations of Ancestor Christology

First of all, Ancestor Christology considers Christ as part of the living community. As creator he is involved in human daily activities; yet, he is not part of the living community. Christ is not like an Akan ancestor whose body is in the grave; he resurrected after his death. Writing from the Akan perspective, Dankwa III (1990, p.33) rightly points out that, "though Christ stayed physically with us, the difference [between Christ and the ancestors] is that his body never saw corruption in the grave so unlike the ancestor, his spirit is not part of the living community in the sense that we consider our ancestors whose bodies saw corruption in the grave." Christ resurrected and his body and spirit ascended to heaven (no longer being part of the living community), unlike human ancestors whose bodies have corrupted in their graves and now existing as disembodied spirits living in the realm of the dead.

Even though Bediako (1991) argues that Jesus may be considered as an ancestor based on his humanity, death on the cross and resurrection on the third day after death, the fact remains that Christ the ancestor is the "dead" Christ who remains in the grave, and not the resurrected Christ. Similarly, Pobee's use of the ancestor-metaphor to emphasize Jesus's judicial role also limits Jesus to the grave because there is nothing like a resurrected ancestor in the Akan worldview. Ancestor Christology, then, simply "confines Christ within the state of death and deliberately excludes his victory over death" (Mokhoathi 2018, p.12). In doing so, Ancestor Christology contradicts Christ's resurrection, ascension and session at the right hand of God and consequently, limits him to time and space. There can be no Christianity without the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:14-17; Rom. 10:9); yet, the doctrine of the resurrection has no place in African primal religious tradition (as noted

earlier). Therefore, the ancestor view of the Savior can hardly make meaning to the Akan/African Christian. This is one of the key challenges that Ancestor Christologists would have to address in order not to annul the very essence of Christianity.

Secondly, the overemphasis of Jesus' humanity by ancestor Christologists tends to reduce his divinity which is also a key component for his nature as a savior (Agyarko 2009). Nyamiti, for instance, reasonably traces Jesus' ancestry to his relationship with Adam which makes him a human being. He argues that Jesus qualifies to be regarded as an ancestor because of his clanic relationship from Adam. His Brother-Ancestor perception about Christ has the tendency of overstressing the humanity of Christ at the expense of his divinity. The fact is that believers' paternal relationship with God the Father is different from Christ's relationship with him as Son. Christ is the only begotten Son, his sonship being unique and incomparable with the believer's relationship with God. Christ has eternally existed with the Father, and became flesh to dwell among us (John 1:1, 14) to save us. He was begotten, not made; all things well created through him and he is consubstantial with the Father. Human beings are part of Christ's creation and can in no way be compared to Christ in terms of their relationship with God. Ancestor Christology obviously overemphasizes the humanity of Christ.

An ancestor cannot be God-human and so Ancestor Christology must necessarily ignore the divinity of Christ. This affects Christ's saving works. The atonement is meaningless if Christ had only a human nature, without a divine nature. One agrees with Beyers and Mphahlele (2009) that the portrayal of Jesus as an Akan/African ancestor downplays the significance of Jesus' life and atoning work as presented in the Bible. Ancestors were not sinless people in their earthly lives and some of them,

by Christian standard, might be in hell. Jesus was fully human but without sin; and yet, he was fully divine as well. One could imagine how misleading it is to equate Jesus to an ancestor who probably is hell-bound.

Thirdly, Bujo's contention that ancestorship is more meaningful in Africa than the concept of *Logos* is based on comparison of two things which belongs to different categories. The concept of *logos*, may be equated to reason and for this reason, it refers to the ontology of Christ as espoused by Karl Barth's Christology (Mutongu 2009). The ontological perspective of Christ (which the concept of the *Logos* points to) is in a different category than the ancestorhood of Christ which is functional, dealing with the functions of Christ rather his being/nature.

In addition, Ancestor Christology has the tendency of endorsing ancestral worship (as hinted earlier). It will make people feel comfortable accepting such practices as pouring libation to the ancestors, making sacrifices to them and making them an object of faith. Ancestor Christology may lead people to think that there are many ancestors who deserve worship even though there is only one (the superior ancestor) who has the power to provide for human needs (Beyers and Mphahlele 2009).

Finally, the ancestor designation of Christ is alien to the Akan and some other African societies because Christ does not fulfill most of the conditions needed to become an ancestor. His exemplary life and mediatorial role (for example) are not enough to qualify him as an ancestor. There are other equally important factors. For example, Christ died young (at the age of 33 years) without children and so cannot be considered as an Akan ancestor in the strict sense of the word. Palmer's (2008) study of the responses of 80 students at the Theological College of Northern Nigeria about the appropriateness of designating Christ as an ancestor highlights that the ancestor-view of

Christ does not agree with the traditional Nigerian worldview as well. He quotes a Bura man as asserting that, "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" (as cited in Palmer 2008, p.69). Also, the nature Jesus' physical death disqualifies him to become an Akan ancestor. Earlier the point was made that one has to die a natural death after living for a long time (usually not less than 70 years). In the case of Jesus, he was accused of many charges and crucified, crucifixion being a kind of death that nobody desired to die in the Greco-Roman world. One of Palmer's student from Taroh sums it up: "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" (as cited in Palmer 2008, p.70). The above points which disqualify Jesus as an ancestor in the Akan (Ghanaian) and Nigerian contexts also apply to many other African societies. Since Christ does not fulfill most of the basic requirements for attaining ancestorship, one does not have to "impose" the ancestor-title on him simply because they want to give a contextual expression to the Christian doctrine of Christology in the African setting. More so, Akan/Africa ancestors are not God incarnate; they are simply the product of their community. The ancestors depend on the rituals performed by their living descendants for happiness, but Jesus does not depend on the church for fulfilment and happiness; he rather makes the church happy.

There is the need to deal with the limitations of the Ancestor Christological model so that it does not end up creating more problems than intended to solve.

CONCLUSION

Giving an African contextual expression to Christianity is indispensable for ensuring the survival of the Christian faith in the African society. Contextualization is necessary and so the gospel must incarnate in every culture. Therefore, the author supports the theological usage of inculturation for preparing grounds for the propagation of the gospel to Africans. However, the contextualization of Christianity must not in any way undermine the core aspects of the gospel.

Our consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of the ancestor-imagery of Christ has shown the need to re-examine the ancestor-metaphorization of Christ in the Akan/African context mainly because this Christological model is unable to communicate the full essence of the full humanity and full divinity of Christ, both of which are non-negotiable attributes to qualify Christ as Savior. Ancestor Christology, while attempting to make Christianity meaningful and relevant to Africans, may end up turning Christ into a local champion as opposed to universal Lord because some people may not identify with him as their legitimate relative.

Part of the solution to the challenges associated with Ancestor Christology lies in treating ontological Christology—the study of the nature/being of Jesus Christ—and functional Christology—the study of the works of Jesus Christ—together as complements, rather than treating them in isolation. Ontological and functional dimension of Christology are intertwined, the works of Christ is rooted in his being and the being of Christ necessitates his works. There is also the need to guard against henotheistic tendencies. Without checks and balances the Akan may consider all ancestors as worthy of worship, though Christ deserves the greatest worship. This view is wrong because only God deserves worship.

Furthermore, a holistic treatment of Ancestor Christology needs to answer the question of whether or not the Christian needs to hold the traditional belief in ancestors and if yes, how this belief must be held in order not to lead to syncretism. It must be noted also that the belief in ancestors is declining in many contemporary societies due to the influence of Christianity, urbanization, modernization and globalization. People are embracing the urban culture and relegating the African traditional culture. African theologians should be informed by this situation so that theological formulations for the continent can be more meaningful and impactful.

To conclude, one must admit that the Ancestor Christology, like other Christological models (whether from the West, from Africa or elsewhere), cannot adequately express the depth of Christ's richness. No Christological model is perfect. One has to be sincere about the limitations of a particular model and find ways to deal with them. One also has to weigh the weaknesses and strengths and their overall effective on Christianity to determine whether to keep it, modify it or reject it. Given the foregoing, the author concludes that the acceptability or otherwise of Ancestor Christology depends largely on how the challenges associated with this model are dealt with and the overall impact of this model on the qualitative and the quantitative growth of the African church. To this end, African scholars are charged to continue brainstorming to know how best this Christological model may be improved.

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