IS THE INTERPRETATION OF CHRIST AS THE "ANCESTOR OF THE CHURCH" COMPATIBLE WITH THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE? A STUDY OF THE CHRISTOLOGY AND ECCLESIOLOGY OF CHARLES NYAMITI

By

Livingstone Akijar

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my wife **Lilian Akijar** whose encouragement, support, and understanding made it possible for me to be away from her during the entire period of study at the University of Natal.

DECLARATION

This thesis (unless where specifically stated) is my original work. It has not been submitted to any other university for assessment or for any other purpose. I therefore submit it for the first time at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, as a partial fulfilment for the Master of Theology Degree in African Christianity

..... signed

LIVINGSTONE AKIJAR

University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg - South Africa

July, 2000

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ABSTRACT

This study tests the legitimacy of Charles Nyamiti's integration of the traditional Christian doctrines with the African (Bantu) thought-patterns in the construction of an African Christian theology. This study centres on Nyamiti's christology and ecclesiology in African Christian theology which is constructed on the basis of perceived parallelism which exists between the role and authority of the traditional African (Bantu) ancestors and that of the person of Christ and his role in the Church.

The traditional Christian doctrine (classical dogmatics) is the foundational framework of any theology. The traditional Christian doctrine teaches that God was incarnate in the person of Christ. Thus, the traditional Christian doctrine depicts Christ as both human and divine and the two natures are united together and are inseparable. Those who believe and have faith in Christ and his teachings are united together with him. Against this background, the study discusses the Bantu existential world-view which includes the role of ancestors in the community. Here, the concept of interrelatedness of hierarchy of dynamistic powers in the society are also discussed. Nyamiti tries to bring these two world-views together and suggests that they are compatible. The study ends by offering a theological evaluation and reflection on Nyamiti's construct.

The study has argued that Nyamiti picks up some of the elements found in the nature and function of Christ according to the explanation given in the traditional Christian doctrine and then parallels them to that of the role of the traditional Bantu ancestors to formulate his christology and ecclesiology. The study has concluded that although Nyamiti's theological construct aims at illuminating the Christian faith among the peoples of Africa who count on the authority of the traditional ancestors, it founders in a flood of methodological problems which detract from the conclusivity of his construct.

CHAPTER ONE

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The task of this chapter

This thesis examines the issue of ancestor christology and ecclesiology in African Christian theology. Many Christian theologians in Africa have attempted to articulate a theology that fits the cosmology of the people of Africa so that Christianity will not be seen as a 'foreign religion' in their eyes. One among these African theologians, Charles Nyamiti, has offered an ancestor christology and ecclesiology as his contribution to this discussion.

This introductory chapter maps out the framework of this paper by first stating the problem discussed in the study, explaining the motivation and limitation of the study. A description of chapters, a brief biography of Nyamiti, and the methodological approach of the study is also offered in this introductory chapter.

1.2 The problem

The main problem of this study is the question: Is Nyamiti's application of the African traditional concept of ancestor in christology and ecclesiology theologically appropriate? Below are the sub-problems arising from the main: What is the criterion to be applied to see whether Nyamiti's formulation is appropriate? What is the concept of Bantu traditional religion? How does Nyamiti apply the Bantu concept of ancestor to Christ and the Church? How

appropriate is Nyamiti's application of the concept of the authority of the ancestor to Christ?

1.2.1 The background of the problem

The construction and reconstruction of theology is an on-going process within Christian theology. The quest for appropriate christologies and ecclesiologies to suit peoples' worldviews is one of the most important concerns today in African Christianity. One of the most critical concerns for theologians is the continued practice of ancestor veneration among African Christians, as many practice dual-allegiance Christianity. B. Malinowiski (1961:36) points out that,

> ...ancestor worship is not completely dead in the Christian section of the community. The experts would say that it survives in the collective unconscious of the Christianised African. Under stress of emotional crises the indigenous belief becomes stronger than the foreign creed.

The need for a relevant theology is urgent because the Church is growing faster than compatible African theologies are developing. Kwame Bediako has also repeatedly stated in his lectures at the School of Theology, University of Natal that the centre of Christian gravity has shifted from the West to Africa. African theologians have thus come to be entrusted with the task of fitting the articulations and teachings of the Christian faith into the African context.

Among the many African Christian theologians who have pushed forward this theological discourse is Charles Nyamiti. In one of his works "African Ancestral Veneration and its Relevance to the African Churches" in the *Journal of African Christian Studies* (1993:17-18) Nyamiti writes "...what I propose to do is to offer a brief presentation as to how the Christian mysteries could be interpreted from the African ancestral view point for the purpose of African systematic theology."

Although Nyamiti proposes to create a systematic theology within African Christianity from the ancestral point of view, his work has not resolved the relation between African traditional religion and Christianity, including the problem of ancestor veneration among theologians in Africa. For instance, Klaus Nürnberger and Buti Tlhagale in *Challenge* No. 4 Oct/Nov.1995 had a heated debate on the relationship between the Church in Africa and ancestor veneration (1995:4-6). Although not all people of Africa venerate ancestors, they (ancestors) are an important dimension of African primal religions, particularly those of the Bantu of Central, Eastern and Southern Africa.

In this thesis Nyamiti's theology will be examined with particular reference to the application of his christology and ecclesiology to the framework of ancestral authority. It is believed that such a presentation of theology illuminates the redemptive mission of the Gospel to Africans. In recent works such as that of Schreiter *Faces of Jesus Christ in Africa* (1991) and John Parrat's *Reinventing Christianity: African theology today* (1995), theologians have given numerous suggestions to better the interpretations of the mission of Christ in Africa by way of using people's worldviews to interpret Christianity. As a result, a number of christologies and ecclesiologies have been constructed in African Christianity. Some have suggested that Christ be interpreted to Africans as 'the chief', some as the 'Master of initiation', and others as the 'ancestor'. This latter group includes Nyamiti who himself says that Christ is our "brother-ancestor".

1.3 Motivation

I was inspired to approach this topic for my Master's research as a result of the seminars on "the making of a redemptive community" presented by Professor Neville Richardson and also Professor Tinyiko Sam Maluluke's course "African theologies in the 21st century". Prof. Richardson was a particular influence through his emphasis on critical analysis of issues dealing with faith and the community. Professor Maluleke in turn led me to examine pre-existing African

theological literature with an "open mind". As a result of such questioning I was driven to investigate whether it is possible for Christ's role in the Church in Africa to be understood from the concept of the traditional African ancestor.

Having an African cultural background where the authority of ancestors is generally respected, yet a young Christian venturing to do theology from an African perspective, it is of great importance for me to take note of the existing works on African Christian Theology, with specific reference to the theology of Nyamiti which is based on the perceived parallelism found between the role of Christ in the Church and that of the authority of African traditional ancestors. Nyamiti's theological construct raises many questions, however. Are African religious beliefs and practices compatible with traditional Christian doctrines (christology and ecclesiology)? How do African religious beliefs and practices relate to Christ and the Church? Would the application of traditional ancestor terminology to Christ shed more light on the salvific mission of God through Christ within the ancestor venerating communities? This dissertation seeks to answer the above raised questions.

1.4 Limitations of the study

The study of the christology and ecclesiology of Nyamiti is indeed a broad topic that this thesis does not seek to exhaust in its entirety at an M.Th level. Therefore, our study of Nyamiti's christology and ecclesiology will primarily be based on the parallelism that Nyamiti draws between Christ's nature and role in the Church and that of the traditional Bantu ancestors.

1.5 Description of chapters

This thesis consists of six chapters. Chapter **One** serves as an introduction to the study. It focuses on: problem statement, background to the study, motivation of

the study, methodology and chapter description. By so doing I intend to lay the foundation of this thesis.

Chapter **Two** addresses the question of christology and ecclesiology from the traditional Christian doctrine viewpoint. This chapter addresses christology and ecclesiology from the traditional Christian doctrine viewpoint so that it may be applied to the evaluation of Nyamiti's theological construct. Here, christology and ecclesiology are presented, without denominational bias, within classical dogmatics. The traditional Christian doctrine postulates Christ in two natures (human and divine), that God became human in Christ so as to redeem human beings from the sin that it earned through its revolt in the Garden of Eden. Those who believe in and follow his teachings are collectively known as the "Church". From this perspective, the Church members are postulated as forming the Body of Christ (Rom. 12:12; Cor. 10:16; 12:12). The traditional Christian doctrine on christology and ecclesiology are central factors to the development of ancestor christology and ecclesiology in Nyamiti's proposal.

Chapter **Three** examines the concept of Bantu worldview (traditional religion). The existential experience of the Bantu-speaking peoples of Central, Eastern and Southern Africa with regard to their cosmology is carefully investigated. In this chapter, a careful sampling of Bantu-speaking communities has been done in order to bring forward the dynamics of peoples' beliefs and practices. The issue of the Supreme Being, dynamistic powers, and the role of ancestors are very strong in Bantu thought-patterns. Therefore, these factors are seriously explored among different Bantu-speaking communities. The rationale behind this chapter lies in the aspect that although the Supreme Being is recognized as the source of life and all dynamistic powers, the Bantu-speaking communities rely heavily on ancestor veneration. Religious practice of ancestor veneration is centred around the family, thus ensuring familial cohesiveness. These practices also maintain societal hierarchies of power structuring relations within and between families, clans, tribes and nations.

The dynamics of the relationships between the living and the dead among the Bantu-speaking communities in their traditional religion is central in view of the fact that ancestors are believed to remain in close contact with their living kin. This aspect will be examined in an expository manner, as it is the basis (launching pad) upon which Nyamiti launches his own African Christian theology (christology and ecclesiology) based on the role and authority of the African (Bantu) traditional ancestors.

Our question on how Nyamiti applies the Bantu worldview (concept of ancestor) on the person of Christ and the Church is tackled in chapter **Four**. In this chapter, Nyamiti's theological construct based on the role and authority of the ancestors is examined. Here, a depiction of Nyamiti's ancestor-based theology in its three major aspects, namely his christology, his ecclesiology and the ethical implications is made. Also, the parallels between the traditional Christian doctrines and that of the role and authority of the traditional ancestors in Nyamiti's ancestor christology and ecclesiology are discussed in this chapter.

The issue of how appropriate is Nyamiti's application of the concept of the role and authority of the Bantu traditional ancestor to Christ is the crux of chapter **Five**. Here, the study offers a critical theological evaluation of Nyamiti's ancestor christology and ecclesiology. The strength and the weakness of Nyamiti's theological construct is critically examined with the aid of the findings in chapters two, three, and four of our study. Finally, chapter **Six** gives the summary and conclusion of the study.

1.6 Brief Biography of Charles Nyamiti

Charles Nyamiti was born to a Roman Catholic family on the 9th of December, 1931 at Ndala, near the town of Tabora in western Tanzania. While no information was found as to the date of his enrolment in school, it is known that he finished his secondary education in 1956 and thereafter entered the seminary

at St. Paul Kipalapala in Tabora. He was ordained as a priest in 1962 in the archdiocese of Tabora and later continued his theological studies in Belgium at the University of Louvain. There, Nyamiti submitted first his licentiate thesis in 1966 and then his doctoral dissertation in 1969 (Vahakangas 1997:1).

After attaining the status of doctor of theology, Nyamiti went on to study ethnology at the University of Vienna, where he completed his doctoral studies in 1975. While in Austria he also studied music composition at the Vienna School of Music (Vahakangas 1997:1).

Upon returning to Tanzania, Nyamiti was appointed lecturer at St. Paul Kipalapala Seminary, where he lectured on dogmatic theology until 1984. At St. Paul Kipalapala his vision of an African Christian Theology began to take root, as demonstrated by his private collection of works entitled *Essays on African Theology*. As a result of his work he was called to lecture on dogmatic theology at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa in Nairobi, Kenya (Vahakangas1997:1-2).

Nyamiti's writings on African Christian Theology are found in both his published and unpublished material. His published work include *Christ as our Ancestor: Christology From an African Perspective* (1984), *African ancestral veneration and its relevance to the African Churches* (1993), *The Church as Christ's Ancestral Mediation: An Essay on African Ecclesiology* (1990), *Ancestor-Based Ecclesiology and Ministry* (1991), *Some Moral Implications of African Ancestral Christology* (1992), and *African Christologies Today* (1995), to name but a few. Nyamiti has been characterised by other theologians as an African theologian who has concentrated on the question of ancestors in relation to his christological as well as ecclesiological articulation of the Christian faith for the sake of enculturation (Vahakangas 1997:2-5).

1.7 Methodology

This research applied various methodologies commonly employed in the social sciences. I have worked primarily within judgement (assessment) framework as well as phenomenological point of view. Due to the theoretical nature of this dissertation, most of the information has been obtained from literary sources, that is both the works of the author in question and other relevant literatures whether in books or journals. The Bible was also consulted. Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are taken from the Revised Standard Version (RSV).

This research also included to some extent interviews with theologians, with special focus on the members of staff of the School of Theology at the University of Natal. These discussions with theologians were undertaken to augment the literary sources consulted, and to allow Christian scholars to express their opinions concerning the theological construct of Nyamiti and should not be mistaken as a form of "field work" to obtain primary data.

CHAPTER TWO

2.0 THE TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

2.1 The task of this chapter

This chapter will give a brief outline of the Christian doctrine with specific reference to the Christian understanding of God and the doctrinal explanation of Christ in relation to his nature, death and resurrection. We will thus come to an understanding of the Church in relation to Christ.

The discussion aims to shed light on the position of Nyamiti's African christology and ecclesiology and thus allow a critical evaluation of it. Nyamiti has proposed a christology and an ecclesiology based on belief in the authority of ancestors which he considers related in one way or another to the Christian doctrine.

2.2 The conception of God

The gospel of John 1:13 testifies that no human being has ever seen God. Therefore, from a Christian perspective, God is "invisible and intangible" (Koehler 1958:20). The Scriptures witness only the acts of God through which he makes himself known to the world, and as such:

> The Christian accepts the truth of the existence of God by faith. But this faith is not a blind faith, but a faith that is based on evidence, and the evidence is found primarily in Scripture as the inspired Word of God, and secondarily in God's revelation in nature. Scripture proof on this point does not come to us in the form of an explicit declaration, but much less in the form of a logical argument (Berkhof 1939:21).

Thus, as Christians do not see God, the conviction is that he is known from and through "His works" (Koehler 1958:20). Yet what are God's works? As testified in the creation story of the book of Genesis, God created the world and all that fills it, both visible and invisible. Above all, the gospels testify that God became man and dwelt among humanity in the person of Jesus the Christ. From the theological viewpoint, this act of God unveiling himself to the world is known as revelation, here understood as the act of "... unveiling something hidden, so that it may be seen and known for what it is" (Milne 1982:19). God therefore through this act revealed Himself to the world. This is clearly spelt out in the Bible where God reveals himself in Scriptures and instructs his people to know him and trust in his Word (Berkhof 1939:36; Milne 1982:19-20). This is the basis of the Christian understanding of what God is, but is not a full description of his totality.

We have seen that the Christian God has revealed himself to humanity through what is witnessed by Scripture, that God created the universe and what it fills it seen and unseen, and in Jesus Christ he dwelt among people. Therefore, in a nutshell, Christian faith is "... a faith based on the claim that God has come to us and disclosed himself" (Milne 1982:19) in the person of Jesus Christ. Also to be noted is that in Christian dogmatics we are under no necessity of beginning with the doctrine of the person of Christ without presuppositions.

2.3 Christology

The term "christology" is derived from the name of our Lord, "Christ". According to O'Collins (1995:1), Christology is the systematic reflection "on the person, being and doing of Jesus of Nazareth". O'Collins (1995:1) further states that in order to clarify insights relating to Jesus Christ, Christology "investigates his person and being (who and what he was/is) and work (what he did/does). Was/is he both human and divine?". Christology has also been defined by John Macquarrie (1990:3) as "... the study which has for its subject-matter Jesus Christ, his person and work, or to put it in a slightly different way, he who was

(or is), and what he did (or does)." Macquarrie's definition makes clear that christology's basic interest is in studying Jesus Christ in a comprehensive manner.

In the sections that proceed below, we will concentrate on Christ's "being" and to a certain extent, his works, as the former is the main focus of this study, even as Christ's being is fundamentally inseparable from his mission.

2.3.1 The humanity of Christ

Human nature is the set of characteristics that a man or woman must retain in order to be plausibly regarded as human, i.e., possession of a material body, composed of flesh and blood, containing a soul, to name but few of its prescriptions. According to this principle, Christ was/is a real human being because he had a body consisting of flesh and blood and bones (Luke 24:39; Heb. 2:14). From this, Kraus (1987:58) asserts that to look at Christ's nature from the human perspective is an attempt to approach christology 'from below'. Through Jesus of history God revealed himself to mankind. Although Christ was God incarnate, Jesus did not think of himself as God; yet this does not mean that God's emptying of himself and becoming "flesh" in Christ makes him equal to our sinful human nature.

Kraus (1987:69-70) further states that when Christ's human nature is under discussion, it should always be noted that God empathizes with humanity. He (God) wants to help mankind out of the bondage of sin. While emphatically stressing the human nature of Christ, Cairns (1979:80-81) attests that:

> At the very heart of the Christian faith is the human figure of Christ Jesus, at once the revelation of God himself and the embodied ideal of what every one who follows him seeks to be. Without the full humanity of Christ there is in fact no gospel, for there could have been no cross, and it is precisely through the cross of Christ that the grace of God is brought home to men.

> Thus the more we study the personality of Christ as a man, 'bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh' from infancy to manhood, growing from stage to stage out of ignorance into knowledge of God and of man, capable of bodily fatigue and hunger, of grief and indignation, depressed and exultation of spirit, of hesitation between differing courses of action, and realize that he was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin, the more does it become clear that he was something greater.

According to historical accounts, Christ was an ordinary human being whose history can be traced. George W. Forell (1975:162) maintains that "Jesus Christ was human, just as truly a human being as any one of us". He further states that as any other individual living in a particular locality and time Christ was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary and was born during the time when Quirinius was governing Syria. His body increased in stature, passing through the ordinary processes of development from infancy to manhood and was identified in the Jewish community as a son of Mary and Joseph, who later died in the time that Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea (Forell 1975:162-163).

From the biblical perspective (Rom. 9:5), Christ had human ancestors, demonstrating his truly human nature (Koehler 1958:85). He was predicted in the Old Testament as the seed of Abraham; the Son of David (Jer. 23:5; Matt. 21:9); Rom. 1:2-4; Gal. 4:4-5). While scriptural texts usually explain these two natures of Christ together as one (human and divine), Berkhof (1939:318) argues that the human nature of Christ should not be obscured by an emphasis on his deity. Based on a survey of Scriptural verses, for example, Berkhof (1939:318) denotes those places where the Bible openly and vividly portrays Christ's humanity:

> Jesus called Himself man, and is so called by others, John 8:40; Acts 2:22; Rom. 5:15; 1Cor. 15:21. The most common self-designation of Jesus, "the Son of Man," whatever connotation it may have, certainly also indicates the veritable humanity of Jesus. Moreover, it is said that the Lord came or was manifested in the flesh, John 1:14; 1Tim. 3:16; 1John 4:2.

> In this passages the term "flesh" denotes human nature. The Bible clearly indicates that Jesus possessed the essential elements of human nature, that is, a material body and a rational soul, Matt. 26:26,28,38; Luke 23:46; 24:39; John 11:33; Heb. 2:14. There are also passages which show that Jesus was subject to ordinary laws of human development, and to human wants and sufferings, Luke 2:40,52; Heb. 2:10,18; 5:8. It is brought out in detail that the normal experiences of man's life were His, Matt. 4:2; 8:24; 9:36; Mk. 3:5; Lk. 22:44; John 4:6; 11:35; 12:27; 19:28,30; Heb.5:7.

These quotation make clear that through incarnation, God in "flesh" undergoes the experience of what it means to be human through the experiences of his only begotten Son Jesus Christ, even including the pain of death on the cross. By virtue of being truly one of us, as a human being, "Christ can communicate very concretely and show us how to live, act, suffer ... in short, show us what a human life before God should really be" (O'Collins1995:231). Not only does Christ concretely communicate and show us how to live and act, but he also convinces us the God loves and understands us as the Scriptures themselves testify.

Viewing Christ from the perspective of his gender, his maleness in particular places him concretely in the world of the genuinely human. O'Collins (1995:231) attests that:

> ... the specific quality of human existence also entails being limited in gender that is to say, being either male or female. Neither here nor elsewhere can anyone be a human being in general, exhibiting merely universal characteristics. Both women and men completely express human nature and both are made in the image and likeness of God. Yet being human means being specific: male or female, Jew or gentile, of the first century or of the thirteenth, and so forth. To deny such specific characteristics of Jesus as his maleness and his Jewishness would be tantamount to denying his genuine humanity.

Not far from O'Collins' position, Pittenger (1970:116-117) also argues that Christ

was truly human in his manhood:

> The manhood of Jesus was in one sense of the phrase ordinary manhood. We do not find evidence in the gospels of some special area of his manhood where Jesus was entirely different from other men. He is not shown as possessing some peculiar channel of communication with God nor powers which are not available to men-however exalted may have been his vocation and however highly developed were his human capacities. In every way, so far as anything is reliable in the gospel narratives, he experienced life as ordinary men experience it. Certainly the stories about him show him as remarkable, but even in those sections which quite clearly have been written up to emphasize his intimate relationship with God and his performance of mighty works there is no effort to portray him as other than a man.

Berkhof (1939:319) argues that it was necessary for God to assume human physicality so as to redeem humans from sin, as his redemptive purpose could only be achieved through the suffering of both the soul and body of the man Jesus Christ. Emphatically, Berkhof (1939:319) writes:

> It was necessary that Christ should assume human nature, not only with all its essential properties, but also with all infirmities to which it is liable after the fall, and should thus descend to the depths of degradation to which man had fallen, Heb. 2:17,18. At the same time, He had to be sinless man, for a man who was himself a sinner and who had forfeited his own life, certainly could not atone for others, Heb. 7:26. Only such a truly human Mediator, who had experimental knowledge of the woes of mankind and rose superior to all temptations, could enter sympathetically into all the experiences, the trials, and the temptations of man, Heb. 2:17,18; 4:15-5:2; Phil. 2:5-8; Heb. 12:2-4; 1Pet. 2:21.

Forell (1975:162-163) stresses that Christ was not a mythological figure. He was real. He argues that God became man in Christ of history in order to bring to an end the gap which humanity had created by revolting against God. This translation of God to humankind was a sign of God's love for humankind. God wanted to show humankind his love by dwelling among them.

To conclude, a few peculiarities of Christ's human nature must be noted. The gospel of John testifies regarding Christ that "and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Through the miraculous operation of the Holy Spirit Mary conceived and gave birth to Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:35) and the Word became "flesh" and dwelt among us. Although he was born of a woman, Christ was sinless unlike all other humans who are sinners through being born in the natural way, as the result of procreation between woman and man.

Through virtue of being a human, as all humans eventually die either from disease or old age, Christ's death on the cross was also necessarily voluntary, undertaken in order to redeem humanity from sin (Koehler 1958:86-87). Finally, it cannot be denied that Christ was truly a human being who lived and interacted in his community, just as any other, in spite of the fact that He was God incarnate.

1.3.2 The deity of Christ

The expression "divine nature" of Christ according to Carl E. Braaten (1984:536) implies that "...whatever it is that makes God God and not something else is really present in the person of Jesus Christ". Here, the only reliable source that can aide us in our quest to understand the divine nature of Christ are the Scriptures.

Examining both the gospels in their totality and specific sections such as the gospel of John chapter 1:1-14, the overriding theme that emerges is the portrayal of Christ's divine nature. Basing his argument on the view of Christ's deity in John's gospel, James Montgomery Boice (1986:271) affirms that the first verses of John's gospel depict the deity of Christ. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made

that was made (John 1:1-3). To summarize John 1:1-14 in relation to our topic, we may state that Christ: (1) was in intimate relations with God; (2) was God; (3) was the creator of all things; (4) in him was life; (5) therefore he is the light.

Biblical passages such as, Mark 2:1-12; Luke 20:40-44; Mark 13:35-37 and John 5:17,18,19-27 are testimonies to Christ's own consciousness of his divine nature (Berkhof 1939:317-318), as Christ Himself claimed to be divine in several occasions, either directly or indirectly. For instance, when he spoke to the Pharisees, he told them that the kingdom of God was in their midst (Luke 17:21), implying his own presence. In Mark 2:1-12, Christ directly declared himself to be God by forgiving sins. According to Jewish thought-patterns, it was only God who had the authority to forgive sins and not a human being such as Christ. Boice (1986:273) argues that when Christ forgave people their sins, Christ knew that he was doing something which only God performs.

Still more directly, Christ emphasizes his deity, noting the union that he enjoys with the Father in the Trinity in stating that "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). Christ also said that to know him was to know God (John 8:19); to see him was to see God (John 12:45); to believe in him was to believe in God (John 14:1); to receive him is to receive God (Mark 9:37); to hate him is to hate God (John 15:23); and, finally, that to honour him is to honour God (John 5:23) (Boice 1986:274).

These "I am" statements are remarkable considering the fact that Christ was a Jew, and so knew very well that such utterances were only due to God. When God had revealed himself to Moses to deliver the Jews from their slavery in Egypt, for example, Moses asked God what to say when asked who had sent him to the Jewish people. God instructed Moses to tell them that "I AM has sent me to you" (Exodus 3:13-14). Here, the "I am" title clearly means God. We can therefore state that Christ intentionally used the "I am" title to assert his own divinity, as when he said: "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35), "I am the light of

the world" (John 8:12; 9:5), "I am the door" (John 10:7), "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25), "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6) and "truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:57-58). Christ's self identification as God so offended and angered the Jewish belief that they sought to kill him for his words (Boice 1986:274-275).

It is also argued that the miracles which Christ performed were the manifestation of God's reign in the world through him (Christ). Pobee (1979:87), for instance, states that his acts of wielding power to heal and save humanity as found in the gospels were signs of God's power within Christ.

Paul, who was once an antichrist yet later became a prominent Christian theologian, expounds clearly on the matter of Christ's deity. In his letter to the Philippians 2:5-11, Paul states that Christ laid aside his former glory in order to become man and die for us, to reclaim it through the resurrection. Paul argues further that although he took the form of man he was God and is to be worshipped as God by humanity (Hodge 1960:385-386). Paul's explanation of Christ's divinity clearly points out that God so loved the world that he gave his only son as a ransom for humanity. Through Christ's resurrection, the whole of humanity is redeemed from the power of darkness and exalted; glory, power and authority are invested upon them.

In the letter to Hebrews 1:1-3, Christ is declared to be the brightness of God who is his father and expresses the image of his substance. Through Christ the world was made, thus Christ existed before the world was created and he upholds all things by the word of his power. In Hebrews 13:8, Christ is uniquely explained as being the same yesterday, today and for evermore, a form in which only God can exist.

2.3.3 The unity of the two natures

How can we unify our conceptions of the humanity and the divinity in the person of Christ? This was most probably one of the first questions that the early Church Fathers sought to answer. During the first four centuries, the Church was rocked with confusion, especially among theologians, over the person of Christ. For instance, Arius theologized that "Christ was more that human, but less than divine. Like man, he was created though superangelic being, a kind of demigod" (Cairns 1979:84). The confusion in understanding the person of Christ resulted in christological controversies. It was only when the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D) met to discuss the christological issue that the Church was able to solidify its views on the person and nature of Christ. Following the Nicene resolution on the nature of Christ, Cairns (1979:83) attests:

> By the Nicene Creed, as is well known, the church of the fourth century declared its faith that Jesus Christ was 'the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God. Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, Being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

The christological statement formulated at the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D) was later updated at the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.), which cemented the Christian point of view through confession to the nature of Christ as both human and divine (O'Collins 1995:185-201). With this lasting solution, the question of whether Christ was/is both human and divine is no longer disputable in the Church today. Berkhof (1939:316) testifies that in the confession of Chalcedon, both Roman Catholics and Protestants with one voice agree on the person and nature of Christ.

It is important to see how this Chalcedon creed presents Christ's nature. John P. Galvin (1991) presents the Chalcedon creed which depicts Christ's completeness

in two natures as follows:

> Following the holy Fathers, we all with one voice teach that it should be confessed that our Lord Jesus Christ is one and the same Son, the Same perfect in Godhead, the Same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man, the Same (consisting) of a rational soul and a body; *homoousios* with the Father as to his Godhead, and the Same *homoousios* with us as to his manhood; in all things like unto us, sin only excepted; begotten of the Father before ages to his Godhead, and in the last days, the Same, for us and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin *Theotokos* as to his manhood;
>
> One and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only begotten, made known in two natures (which exist) without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the differences of the natures having been in no wise taken away by reason of the union, but rather the properties of each being preserved, and (both) concurring into one Person (*prosopon*) and one *hypostasis*-not parted or divided into two persons (*prosopa*), but one and the same Son and Only-begotten, the divine Logos, the Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from of old (have spoken) concerning him, and as the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and as the Symbol of the Fathers has delivered to us (1991:269-270)

In view of the above christological confession, we may say by analogy that as the union of the soul and body constitutes a man/woman in one person, so the union of the Son of God and human nature constitutes one person in Christ. Or, in Charles Hodge's (1960:391) words, "... as in man the personality is in the soul and not in the body, so the personality of Christ is in the divine nature". Arguing on the same line on the issue of Christ's hypostatic union, Gritsch and Jenson 1976:93) attest that "God the Son and a man are one hypostasis in Christ ... that when we identify the one we identify the other". Moreover, the Scriptures themselves testify that Christ's two natures (humanity and divinity) were united in one person (John 1:14, Rom. 8:3, Gal. 4:4, 1 John 4:2-3). His human characteristics, in fact, for the context in which his goals and reasons for his deeds and suffering can be understood, in other words that God became "flesh" so as to redeem humanity from sin.

Yet the Chalcedon creed also asserts that the simultaneity of human nature and the divine nature in Christ in no way predicates a mixture of the two. Neither is Christ a little bit of both, so as to be almost and not quite either God or man. The viewpoint thus revealed in the Chalcedon creed concerning Christ can be summarized in Charles Hodge's (1960:391-392) words as follows:

> (1.) That in his person two natures, the divine and the human, are inseparably united; and the word nature in this connection means substance. (2.) That this two natures or substances are not mixed or confounded so as to form a third, which is neither the one nor the other. Each nature retains all its own properties unchanged; so that in Christ there is a finite will or energy, and an infinite will. (3.) That no property of the divine nature is transferred to the divine. Humanity in Christ is not deified, nor is the divinity reduced to the limitations of humanity. (4.) The union of the natures is not mere contact or occupancy of the same portion of space. It is not indwelling, or a simple control of the divine nature over the operations of the human, but personal union; such a union that its result is that Christ is one person with two distinct natures forever; at once God forever.

In conclusion, the son of God is both God and man, and exists as one person forever. This is the central mystery of Godliness, even as God manifest in the flesh is the distinguishing doctrine of the Christian religion.

2.4 The significance of Christ's death and resurrection

After surveying the two natures of Christ, we can turn to an examination of the meaning and significance of his death and resurrection from a Christian viewpoint. In order to understand the significance of Christ's death, however, we must first understand how the term 'death' is understood in relation to Christ, especially as according to Paul in the New Testament. John Burnaby (1959:93) argues that death:

> ...can mean the end of our natural life on earth, and it can mean the spiritual death which is the "mind of the flesh", the

> attempt to live without God; but it can also and often refer to the death of Christ which as a "death unto sin" must be shared by Christians, but which is nothing less than any entry into the true life.

When the first humans, Adam and Eve, were separated from the love of God due to their sin, as explained in the Scriptures, the consequence was death (Gen. 2:17; 3:19; Rom. 5:12; 6:23; James 1:15); thus separation from God itself is sin. As a result, all humanity sinned against God by willfully separating from the love of God, yet God did not want humanity to suffer. Instead he sent his only son as a ransom for humanity's redemption. Christ's death on the cross was therefore an act of reconciling humanity to God. As Pannenberg (1994:412) writes, "as God's act for the reconciliation of the world, this event is oriented to our entering into reconciliation that is thus opened up for us". In this sense, Hodge (1960:615) explains that Christ's death and resurrection as understood among Christians is a thing which has never come to a disputation. Christ, although in himself perfectly divine, bore our sins and he was made sin. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Cor. 5:21).

One consequence of Christ's humiliation and death on the cross is the belief among the Lutheran adherents that "Christ went into the underworld to reveal and consummate His victory over Satan and the powers of darkness, and to pronounce their sentence of condemnation" (Berkhorf 1939:342). Therefore, Satan no longer has power or authority over humanity, especially those who believe in the Word. Yet this does not mean that Christians will not die, as they must instead suffer the physical death with the conviction that death has lost its sting (1 Cor. 15:55-57). To Christians, death has become not a punishment but a deliverance (2 Tim. 4:18), a change for the better (Phil. 1:23). With Christ's triumph over the power of death, Christians are also able to overcome their natural fear over the consequence of sin, death (Heb. 2:14).

Christ's resurrection from the dead, according to the Christian doctrine, is a central tenet of belief; as Paul attests, "if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (2 Cor. 15:14). Elsewhere Paul argues that "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (2 Cor. 15:17). Paul's theological standpoint on the resurrection is the fundamental truth of the gospel, and leads to the affirmation that "Christianity is based on the gospel of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth" (Braaten 1984:551). Boice (1986:341) writes that "...the resurrection proved that Jesus Christ is who he claimed to be and that he accomplished what he claimed to have come to earth to accomplish". God became "flesh" in order to redeem humanity from the power of darkness, or the devil:

> He is the Son of God, equal with the Father, God manifest in the flesh; the *Salvator Hominun*; the Messiah predicted by the prophets; the prophet, priest, and king of his people; his sacrifice has been accepted as a satisfaction to divine justice, and his blood as a ransom for many (Hodge 1960:627).

The resurrection of our Lord Christ dampened doubts that were held even by some of his disciples about his teachings (Matt. 28:17). Thomas, for example, who had doubted his resurrection, ended by confessing Christ to be his Lord and God. This confession has continued within the Church to the present time, with the belief that the Spirit of God bears witness to the truth of the resurrected Lord. We can argue further that Christ's resurrection established his deity. As stated, Thomas' confession when Christ showed him the wounds he sustained on the cross and made him touch them, declares Christ to be God. The gospel of John also testifies that when Christ lived he made a number of claims, for instance that he was son of God in a special way (John 5:18), that he came from God and he will go back to God when the time comes. He also stated that he would die and be raised from the dead on the third day (Boice 1986:342-343), as the Easter event testifies.

As Christ's resurrection establishes his deity, we turn to examine it's significance of resurrection from the point of view of justification. Christ Himself distinctively proclaimed that he would atone for the sins of mankind, "... the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). As Boice (1986:344) states that "...the resurrection of Jesus establishes the doctrine that all who believe in Christ are justified from all sin", it can be argued that Christ was put to death because of our transgressions and we are justified through his resurrection.

Faith in Christ's resurrection is sufficient for Christians to believe that there is life beyond death. In the gospel of John, Christ says to his disciples that "... and when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (John 14:3). In my interpretation of this verse, Christ is telling his disciples that when they die, he will raise them from the dead and they will join him in his father's kingdom. After his resurrection Christ promised his followers that because he lives, they will as well (John 14:19). Thus Christians are assured of life after death. Berkhof (1939:671) rightly points out that death among Christians is not the end of life to the believer, but the beginning of a perfect life, a life of fellowship with God in God's kingdom as promised by Christ. If God had not raised Christ from the dead, however, there could be no theological discourse of the promises linked to resurrection. Hodge (1960:627) writes:

> If Christ did not rise, the whole scheme of redemption is a failure, and all the predictions and anticipations of its glorious results for time and eternity, for men and for angels of every rank and order, are proved to be chimeras. "But now is Christ risen from the dead and became the first-fruits of them that slept." ... The kingdom of darkness has been overthrown. Satan has fallen like lightening from heaven; and the triumph of truth over error, of good over evil, of happiness over misery, is forever secured.

2.5 An understanding of the Church

After reflecting on the significance of the death and resurrection of our Lord, we are able to survey his on-going mission within the Church, the connection between the Church and christology. The term "Church" has its roots in the Greek word *ekklesia* which means an "assembly". In the Christian Church this assembly of people gathers "to profess their faith in Christ, and by their lives to manifest his Spirit and do his will" (Cairns 1979:133). With the aid of Scriptural verses, Koehler (1958:236) understands the term "Church" as:

> All those whom the Holy Ghost through the Gospel has "called out of darkness into His marvelous light," constitute that "chosen generation, royal priesthood, holy nation, people for God's own possession" (1 Pet. 2:9), which is called the Church. ... In John 10:14-16. 26-28 Jesus speaks of the believers as His flock, and this flock constitutes the Church. In John 11:52 He tells us that the scattered children of God shall be gathered, and this gathering is the Church. Paul speaks of "the household of faith", (Gal. 6:10), and calls the Church "His (Christ's) body" (Eph. 1:23), for which Christ gave Himself that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word (Eph. 5:25-27). All this shows that the many individual persons, who have by faith entered into close and intimate relation with Christ, constitute one body, and this body is the Church.

In general we can thus state that the "Church" is a people who have responded to the call of faith to believe and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as their saviour. Therefore, those responding to the Lord's call become God's chosen children.

The concept of "elected race" (1 Pet. 2: 9-10, cf. Deut. 5:15), which the Old Testament uses to describe the Israelites as the people of God, is also used in the New Testament to designate the Church as the 'new redeemed Israel', the Church of the Spirit. It is, as such, universal; it transcends the boundaries of race, language, and colour (Gal. 3:28; cf. Col. 3:11); there is from henceforth but "one body" and "one spirit" (Eph. 4:4). The life of the Church is not merely of this

world. Within the Church, as the society of those who are to inherit the coming Kingdom of God, physical death does not break the spiritual fellowship of the redeemed which transcends both death and the grave.

In Ephesians 2:19-22, the Church is depicted as one with Christ. Therefore it is the Church which gives completeness to Him, in the sense that it is essential for carrying on the work of revelation and atonement begun during Christ's incarnation. In Galatians 3:28-29 Paul teaches that there are no strangers or foreigners in the Church, as all are one in the family of God. Each individual has a part to play in the Church, and so the Church is the temple of God, in which every member is a stone, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Himself as the chief corner-stone. In this metaphor the Church is the body of Christ, and the Christians members of his body (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 10:16; 12:27). Paul relates this image in turn to the bride and bridegroom when he states that Christ is the head of the body and nourishes and cherishes the Church in the same manner the husbands would care of their wives (Eph. 5:21-32). This implies that Christ is the head in that all our lives and nourishment flow out of him, from him, through him and unto him.

Commenting on the Church as the body of Christ, Hunter (1983:53) attests that:

> All Christians are part of the body of Christ. Each one is a member of the body. While the oneness of the body expresses the unity amongst members, the image of the body also shows that there is a great diversity. There are differences among the members within the unity of the body (Rom. 12:4-5, 1Cor. 12:12, 20). ... The body of Christ is a living, growing organism with Christ at the head and all the members functioning. The people of God are knit and joined together by Christ. When each part of the body works properly, there is bodily growth, and the Church upbuilds itself in love (Eph. 4:16). Internal and external growth are characteristics of the living body called the Church.

This image paints the most comprehensive picture of Christ's redemptive mission. As the human body of Christ is the instrument, or the hand of God, so the Church is his body, and every one of its members the instrument and hand of Christ; "I am the vine; you are the branches" (John 15:5) (Milne 1982:211).

From this we can also argue that Christ is not the redeemer simply because of the grace bestowed on him through some form of special communion with the Father, but that he is the redeemer because he is God in the flesh (Berkhof 1939:557). Thus, the Christian becomes Christ's co-operator in redemption, not because of the individual's consciousness of God, but because he/she is a member of Christ's body. All in all, the Church manifests both the outward expression and the inward purposes and meanings that the Holy Spirit imparts on those men and women who are grafted onto the Body of Christ, members of the Church.

The Church is also depicted as "a temple of God", a place where the Holy Spirit dwells (1 Cor. 3:16). From this perspective, the Church understood as an assembly of people worship God through Christ, it suffices then to say that the bodies of the Christians is God's temple. Subsequently, where God dwells is where the Holy Spirit is, therefore, the Christian Church is the product of the work of the Holy Spirit (Forell 1975:194). Berkhof (1939:557) also argues that the Holy Spirit dwells in those who make up the Church. This means that every individual who professes the Christian faith is a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. In the first epistle of Peter, there is a depiction that God's Spirit resides in this world in the living stones of the temple of God (1 Pet. 2:5).

In sum, the Church is a fellowship of faith and love through Christ. It is a lasting fellowship of faith among those who believe in God, and are reconciled to Him, through Christ. It is by the profession of faith in God through Christ that individuals enter into full membership or fellowship within the Church.

2.6 Conclusion

We may then conclude this chapter by saying that, Christianity is based on a strong belief in the God who revealed himself through Scriptures as the creator of the entire universe and all that fills it, both visible and invisible. This God became "flesh" in the person of Christ in order to redeem mankind, which had fallen short of the glory of God. Through incarnation, God became truly human and remained truly God in Christ. Two natures are united in Christ so as to constitute one person who is both true God and true human. This redemptive mission was culminated by the death of God-man on the cross as a ransom for mankind and His triumphant resurrection on the third day following his death. As a result, sin has lost its power over mankind. Those who have faith, believing in the salvific message of the cross and the resurrection of the God/man, are the Church.

CHAPTER THREE

3.0 THE AFRICAN (BANTU) WORLDVIEW

3.1 The task of this chapter

As the traditional Christian doctrines of christology and ecclesiology were outlined in the previous chapter, so the religious thought-patterns of the Bantu-speaking people will be outlined here. We will look specifically at the religious life of the Bantu from the perspective of dynamistic powers, or "vital force", that the Bantu believe influence their lives. Related to this is their relationship between departed and living members of the community, which will also be discussed, with an emphasis on understanding the roles of ancestors within the community. As we will see in the following chapter, Nyamiti has used these roles in developing his ancestor-based theology, as we will see in proceeding chapter.

This study focuses on the Bantu communities of Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa. The Bantu are the largest group among the peoples of Africa, occupying the majority of lands south of the Sahara. They are identified in part through similarities in language morphology; for example, in most Bantu languages the term 'person' would end in the syllable *'ntu*, such as in the Zulu where the word is *umuntu*. Scholars have also found similarities among these people in their perceptions of the world. For instance, McVeigh (1974:xiii) says that the Bantu perceive the world as "a community of interrelationship of forces of persons and thoughts, animals and things, God and forefathers: a sense of community".

3.2 The concept of dynamistic powers

3.2.1 A sample from central Africa

Placide Tempels (1959) believes that the Bantu worldview is centered on what he calls a "vital force". For Tempels (1959:33-38), Bantu conceptualise 'being' as that which has force, and force is the nature of being. Tempels derives from this that Bantu behaviour is geared towards achieving, or improving, the life force in their favour. Similarly, Smith (1950:18) writes that:

> *Muntu*, 'person', signifies the vital force endowed with intelligence and will; *bintu*, are what we call things in Bantu philosophy, forces not endowed with reason. Above all forces is God, who gives existence and increase to all others. After Him comes the first fathers, who are the founders of all clans, who form the chain binding God and man. These occupy a rank so high that they are no longer considered human. Next to them come the "living dead" of the tribe who are other links in the chain, through which the vital force influences the living generation. The living in turn form their hierarchy according to their vital power. The eldest of a clan is the link between the ancestors and their descendants. The chief, duly appointed and installed according to traditional rules, reinforces the life of his people and all inferior forces, animal, vegetal and organic.

Tempels (1959:39-45) also argues that the Bantu distinguish between forces and being, as forces interact with other forces and may be strengthened or weakened. The universe is thus organized according to the Bantu conception of a hierarchy of forces, having its apex in God the creator. He further depicts life among the Bantu as a web of interacting forces. As a person interacts with other members of his family or tribe, his vital force interacts with other forces of life such as those of the animals or trees, which exist in their own hierarchical orbits (Tempels 1959:36-37).

According to Vecsey (1983:25), for example, the Baluba of Congo, in Central

Africa, believe in the existence of a "power" from which life emanates. The Baluba conceive of this power as the source of vital force. All visible and invisible beings, as well as death, are caused by this power. Vecsey's (1983:25-30) findings depict that life among the Baluba is supported by this vital force, "which supports the body through its functions", as "each person has his or her own unique vital force". This vital force grows as a person ages in life, through to its climax at their deaths, although it can either diminish or increase depending upon the way that one conducts himself/herself within society. When a Muluba (singular for Baluba) dies his/her vital force "continues to exist" in the land of the dead (Vecsey 1983:26). He further writes:

> The deceased's vital force persists into the afterlife, but after death it can no longer increase itself as it can while the person is alive. It-the vital force, the dead person, or the ancestor-relies on the living to maintain its strength, and its eventual fate is almost certain diminishment over time. The dead person, then, consists of a vital force which has reached its peak of strength. It can influence the living, but it has now become independent upon its name, since the living will maintain their ancestor's strength through offerings only as long as they remember the deceased's named identity. (Vecsey 1983:26).

Scholars like Vincent Mulago and Benezet Bujo have also undertaken research among Bantu peoples in the Congo. According to Mulago (1969:138), God, whom Vecsey referred to as "power", is among the Bantu believed to be the ultimate source of all life. Basing his arguments on studies of the Bahema of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Bujo (1992:21) similarly writes that they (Bahema) believe that God produces and supports life. Biological life among the Baluba is transmitted from the Supreme Being through the ancestors to the living in the community. That is why children among the Bahema are understood as being God's property (*Byaruhanga*) (Bujo 1992:19). From this perspective life among the Bahema in particular, can be seen as mystical in concept:

> The head of this mystical body is the founder ancestor. It is from him that the life-force flows into all the members of the

> community, to return them to him, not weakened or diminished by its adventures, but greatly strengthened and renewed through the participation of the individual members (Bujo 1992:23).

Mulago (1969:140) also argues that, according to Bantu cosmology, through his will God transmits his life-being to others who continue it by means of procreation. Procreation according to the Bantu is understood as a being from God. From this perspective, the production of children in the above-noted implies the continuation of God's act of creation.

Mulago (1969:37) maintains that the unity of life among the Bantu is instrumental as far as cohesion and solidarity of family life is concerned. He states that the unity of life involves a long chain of relationships. Mutual relationship of being and life must be maintained between the individual and his/her living descendants and the deceased, and also God. The fact that the unity of life among the Bantu is traced back to the source of power, or God, leads Bujo (1992:20) to argue that "life is participation in God".

Mulago (1969:138) notes that life among the Bantu is celebrated in terms of what is known as 'vital participation'. This implies that life among the Bantu involves the participation of invisible world (spiritual) as well as the visible world. This vital participation and union includes the interactions between a *Muntu,* or person, and society. Daily life, for instance, must be ordered in a religious manner. Here, Mulago (1969:138-139) notes that living in the community means participating in and sharing sacred life with the ancestors. Participation in the sharing of life with the ancestors is a process of preparation of life to be continued by ones descendants as well as anticipation of the life after death.

It is the collective responsibility of every member of the family to maintain and strengthen the vital force or vital union (Bujo 1992:22-23), i.e., sharing of life. Life of an individual among the Bantu is a shared societal life. A person in a Bantu

community is very much aware that he/she does not live for himself/herself alone, but one lives within and with the community. For the Bantu, life without living within and with the community is meaningless. This implies that for life to have a meaning, it must be shared in the community through vital participation (Mulago 1969:139). Insisting upon the concept of life as a shared power, Mulago (1969:139) writes:

> The Bantu believe firmly in a vital communion or life-bond which creates solidarity between members of the same family or clan. The fact of having been born in a particular family, clan, or tribe plunges us into a specific vital current, "incorporates" us into it, fashions us according to this community, "ontically" modifies our whole being, and turns it in the direction of the community's way of life and behaviour. Thus the family, clan or tribe is a whole, of which each member is only a part. The same blood, the same life which is shared by all, which all receive from the first ancestor, the founder of the clan, runs through the veins of all.

This statement explains what Bujo (1992:22) means when he says that "... every member of the community, down to the least significant, shares the responsibility for strengthening the force of the tribe or clan and of each of its members". It also explains the sense of solidarity and unity found among Bantu communities. Bujo (1992:23) explicates that, as a result of the unity between and individual and society, if one breaks a law, or a taboo, the whole tribe will suffer the consequences, while if the law or taboo is maintained every individual in the community will enjoy the blessings that accompany such adherence. From this perspective we learn that a good act increases prosperity of the community, while an evil act causes a community to suffer. Similar to Bujo's argument, Mulago (1969:149) maintains that for the Bantu "... every effort goes to maintaining solidarity between the members of the community, improving the communication and circulation of life, increasing vital force and preventing the diminution of life".

The relationship of being and life which unites all members of a community is also realised through identification with and respect for the hierarchical powers of the society (Mulago 1969:140). This hierarchy comprises both the visible and invisible. The Bantu do not demarcate between the visible world and the invisible. There is an interrelationship between these two worlds (1969:149). Within the 'invisible world' of the Bantu exist God, the power and source of life, the founders of the clan, the spirits of the heroes and the departed members and relatives of the clan. In the visible world, the hierarchy is organized from the king or the queen and all who participate in the royal power down to the clan heads and patriarchs of the clan. From there, the power descends to family heads, most often the father of house, and then finally among the individual members of the different clans and families which make up the bulk of the state's population (Mulago 1969:142-143, Bujo 1992:20). The link between the two hierarchies is clear to all members, as is their own status:

> Everything is thus explained by participation in life. The closer the point at which participation is to the source, the higher one's status. The *muntu's* primary concern is never to interrupt this vital circuit, to give it an ever wider and intenser "magnetic field", to remain united with the first sources and the first channels of life. (Mulago 1969:143).

Bujo (1992:20) also asserts that there is a continuous line of communication between the invisible and visible worlds, and also between the departed and the living, which maintains the life force. This implies that every member of the clan or family is expected to uphold proper relationships with both the living members of the family or clan as well and the departed in order to maintain the vital force. The underlying point of Bujo's (1992:20) argument is that:

> ... ancestors live on in their descendants. It is this principle that structures society at its different levels: family, clan, tribe. At the level of the family, the father is the link with the ancestors. At the level of the clan, the mandate of the ancestors is carried by the head of several families together. In the tribe or nation, it is the chief, or king, who represents the ancestors. Kings and

> chiefs should not be regarded simply as the wielders of secular administrative power. They are connected to the ancestors by a religious bond, they belong to the mystical body of the tribe.

The above quotation shows us that the elders of the community are responsible for ensuring that all members of the community maintain the laws and taboos laid down by the clan founders in the society in order to maintain the life-force.

3.2.2 A sample from Southern Africa

The Pedi are a Bantu-speaking people inhabiting the northern region of South Africa. H.O. Mönnig (1967:48) notes that the Pedi cosmology centers around the belief that the world is "surrounded by various souls, spirits and powers". Thus the Pedi believe in the world of dynamistic powers, which is of crucial importance. As Mönnig (1967:48) states:

> These are the forces they have to contend with, and to which they have to relate their life and activities. They are extant in life and are part of the universe, integrated with the social order and its environment.

Further,

> Pedi religion is not only individual in character, a striving by the individual for a proper relationship with the supernatural, but is also communal in its approach. Although the well-being of the individual depends largely on his daily actions, most of the ritual actions are performed by the community or kin groups as a whole. Belief as such is, therefore, of no importance. Belief is communal and absolute, and never questioned. Life in the hereafter follows in the normal course of events. Supremely important is that the individual and the community as a whole should maintain the correct relation to the supernatural, to ensure prosperity, health and happiness during life. The duty of the individual and of the community is, therefore, to be devout and pious. This is the essence of the Pedi religion (Mönnig 1969: 44).

Mönnig (1967:45-47) also notes, however, that he cannot clearly find among the the Pedi a clear notion about the worship of God. He says that the Pedi do not pray to God although in their religious beliefs and practices they mention God as *Modimo*, and he is named *Kgobe*. He further maintains that the term *Modimo* does not explain distinctively the Supreme being, rather, *Modimo* is just like any other noun, except that it describes an entity:

> I do not want to suggest that he is not essential to Pedi religion. He is the Creator, the beginning of all and therefore the Supreme Being; a sort of figurehead topping the list in the structure of the Supernatural world, but of very little importance to man and his daily relations to this world (Mönnig 1967:47).

According to Mönnig's (1967:47-48) argument, *Modimo* has, in fact, nothing to do with the daily life of the Pedi, although he is believed to be the provider of life and death; he is very far removed from the people themselves. M.P. Moila (1991:63) also points out that *Modimo* is understood among the Pedi as a thing which is not known physically and not manageable. Although not known and manageable, *Modimo* is also believed among the Pedi to be a force which controls all creation (Moila 1991:69-70, Mönnig 1967:45).

Modimo is also associated with natural effects such as lightning, hail storms, rain and wind (Mönnig 1969:46). This highlights the indirect nature of *Modimo's* impact upon the Pedi daily life. Moila (1991:69) writes:

> *Modimo* is present in the elements of nature and in all worldly happenings. For the Pedi, the cosmos reflects the divine essence and the divine wisdom. For them the world itself is a proof of the existence of God. As a result the Pedi take very seriously natural events as God's self-revelation, i.e., wind, rain, hail and lightening. They believe that God controls and guides human actions by talking to human beings through nature.

The conception of human life underscores Pedi religious concepts. A person, *motho*, is believed to consist of three main elements, namely: *mmele* which is the

body, *moya* which is the soul, and *seriti* which is the spirit. These are acquired at birth when the body takes its first breath and casts its shadow in the world (Mönnig 1967: 48, 49). Among the three, *moya* (soul) and *seriti* (spirit) are believed to be the life-force which a person receives from *Modimo* who is the source of life (Mönnig 1967:49). The *moya* is also believed to be an irremovable aspect of the body due to its association with breath. The *seriti* is associated with, "both shadow and reflection", or the spirit form of "a man's personality and his dignity" (Mönnig 1967:50). According to the Pedi, the *seriti* wanders when a person is asleep, and dreams are a result of its travels. As a person's *seriti* can also be manipulated, the Pedi wear amulets to protect their *seriti* from being weakened by other forces which are described to be dangerous. Mönnig (1967:51) writes:

> Upon this principle, logical within its own context, rests much of the Pedi thought patterns concerning the relation between cause and effect. ... This principle rests, naturally, upon the conception that such power, good or bad, can be transferred to one's own *seriti* or to that of another. Coupled with this is the conception of the latent powers residing in natural objects, which can be manipulated by man and transferred to the *seriti.*

Diviners are said to manipulate their *seriti* in order to get information from the *seriti* of others. The diviners can also use other dynamistic forces to weaken the *seriti* of other people, thus causing sickness,

> ... but other people can also affect one's *seriti* - and this usually with harmful intent to weaken it. It is therefore incumbent on all persons continually to strengthen and protect their *seriti* against the onslaught of outside forces, or to strengthen it in such a manner as to enable its possessor to attain any desired effects (Mönnig 1967:51).

What happens to the *mmele, moya* and *seriti* at death? According to Mönning (1967:53):

> At the death of a person, his *moya* and *seriti* depart and leave the body a lifeless thing to decompose. The *moya* and *seriti* continue their existence as a single entity. In the same fashion as the *moya* was bound to the body in life, so it is now bound to the *seriti*. These two entities, as a single unit, continue the existence of the individual, shorn now only of his body.

This quotation highlights another aspect of the Pedi cosmology, namely the belief that life does not stop at death, rather people move from the physical being to leave elsewhere in the form of spirit (Mönnig 1967:53). This belief is similar to the travels of the *seriti* during sleep as we saw above. In death, as the body decomposes the *moya* and *seriti* join together to continue their existence in the spirit form; unified they are believed to attain a supernatural power. Thus the Pedi believe that after death a person continues to exist in a supernatural form. This is the basis of ancestor veneration among the Pedi (Mönnig 1967:54).

The Pedi term for ancestors is *badimo*. Not every-one who dies is able to attain this status of 'ancestor'; as procreation is one of its prerequisites, children, for example, do not become *badimo*, although their *moya* and *seriti* do join together to form a supernatural spirit. It is the progeny that carry out the religious ritual of venerating departed ancestors, and in return *Badimo* are said to have excess powers over their living kin. Although the ancestors and the living kin are thus said to be in mutual communion, there is a demand from the ancestors for recognition by the living kin.

The recognition of the ancestors by the living kin among the Pedi leads to ancestor veneration. Ancestors want to be recognised in the form of respect and honour and thankfulness to them. The recognition of ancestors by their living kin is upheld through rituals performed by family representatives. One example is the pouring of libations of beer, water or milk for the ancestors to enjoy before the living kin themselves partake (Mönnig 1967:54-55).

The living Pedi must thus view the world from both its physical and metaphysical dimensions, and pay homage to the spirit world. There is a belief that the world is inhabited by spiritual powers and forces. Among these powers, there is an interaction going on. These forces and powers are ambivalent, good at some times, evil at others, and even neutral on occasion. These forces and powers can be embodied in stones, animals or caves in the mountains. As a result of the ubiquitous presence of the metaphysical, the Pedi clans and families identify themselves with specific totems which serve as a link with the dynamistic forces in the invisible world. The Pedi seek to link with the dynamistic forces because they (dynamistics forces) are said to be related to life in that they are seen actively in the everyday life of the Pedi (Moila 1991:66).

Life in terms of good health and prosperity among the Pedi depends very much on how an individual in the community balances his/her relationship with the dynamistic forces, i.e., ancestors and the community. Among the Pedi, every member of the community expects to enjoy life to its fullness and anything which disrupts the enjoyment of life in the community is avoided. The keenness of an individual in the community to avoid doing acts which disrupts the enjoyment of life in the community induces social cohesiveness. In community cohesion, the community ensures good relations with the spirit forces in all activities for they play an important part in family affairs. In case there is a breakage connection between the spirit world and the community, harmony can only be restored through ritual (Moila 1991:66-68).

The Pedi further believe that *Modimo* operates within the society through the *badimo,* his agents (Moila 1991:70). While we will later return to a discussion of the role of ancestors in ancestor-venerating societies, it remains at this juncture to examine the nature of the co-operation between the Supreme being and the ancestors within the Pedi societies. Moila (1991:70) maintains that:

> Through the ancestors God rescues his creatures from violent hands, from death, from witches and from persecutors. Thus failure to heed the ancestors is failure to heed God himself. A healthy relationship with God is made possible by a good and healthy relationship with one's own ancestors

When the Pedi venerate their ancestors, therefore, they venerate God as well.

3.3 The role of ancestors in general

As the Bantu worldview focuses on the interaction of powers, the continuity of relations between the dead and the living members of the community is its most decisive element. The living depend on the deceased for life and prosperity because the latter channel their life force. Mulago (1969:138) emphatically asserts that real family life as well as individual life continues after death. He argues that the deceased in the family constitutes the invisible members of the family. The invisible members of the family are handled ritualistically. Similarly, McVeigh (1974:29) attests that a cardinal point of African life and thought is that the living and the dead together form one community whose members are mutually dependent upon each other.

The fact that ancestors remain in communion with the living kin mean that they carry their emotive elements with them to the spiritual plane. According to McVeigh (1974:29), ancestors among the Ila of Zambia behave emotionally like the living members in the community, i.e., they (ancestors) may feel angry or happy. Their (ancestors) emotions depend on the living in the community. Their ambivalence and emotionality thus explains why ancestor veneration is associated with fear. If the ancestors possess the same emotions as the living, then annoyance with kin can be expressed through the infliction of punishment.

Among the Bemba of Zambia, ancestors are believed to be the founders and promoters of the tradition, specifically the laws and taboos, followed by the living members of society. Therefore, the following of these tenets is a sign of

allegiance and obedience to the ancestors, which creates an atmosphere of unity and love between the ancestors and the living within a clan. The tradition is the normative behaviour of the clan and serves as a visible sign of the mutual co-operation which should reign among the surviving kinsfolk. Among the Bemba, tradition becomes security against adverse external and internal elements. Thus, within the bonds of tradition, orphans, the sick, widows, the childless, the aged and the visitors are all able to find a place in the society. Furthermore, the tradition of belief in the ancestors gives the Bemba an identity and relates them to their origins (Mwewa 1977:86).

According to Mulago (1969:147-149), ancestors among the Bantu of the Congo play the vital role of transmitting the vital force that they gain from the source of life (the Supreme Being – God), to their living kin. He argues that the Supreme Being has force which can only be transmitted to the community through ancestors (Mulago 1969:140). This explains why, for the Bantu, the living kin turn to the ancestors to receive the vital force from the Supreme being (Mulago 1969:147). Writing on the role of ancestors, Tempels (1959:43-44) states that, the Bantu ancestors acquire power which they can use to influence their living kin. This also explains the authority invested on the ancestors by their living kin.

Ancestors are also viewed as the guardians and the protectors of traditional morality and social life among the living. Among the Bantu groups of Kenya, ancestors are role models for the living kin, and so play a great role in sustaining the moral standards of their families and the society. Thus, at times, when an elder approaches death, he/she may instruct his/her family to behave in a particular manner that will uphold respect that he/she had earned in the society. (Mugambi and Kirima 1976:113-114). As it is believed that they know both the exigencies of this mortal life and the secrets of the Supreme Being, this places further pressure upon the living to remain in good terms with them and always respect their higher rank in society. The dead retain their affection for those

whom they loved while they were on earth and continue to protect them from the metaphysical plane (Liampawe 1983:121).

For the Pogoro of Tanzania, ancestors unify the community, so that the people experience a co-operative relationship between the dead and the living kin:

> All the members, therefore, enjoy the same communion and communication with the ancestors, which reinforces the unity and cohesion of the ethnic group. Ancestors are the core of their religion and the principle of their present and future life. They are the unity and connection with their Supreme Being and unity among themselves here on earth (Liampawe 1983:19-20).

Similarly, the Pedi believe that ancestors are closer to God, *Modimo*, who is the source of all power, and they are thus expected to utilise this power for the benefit of their living progeny. In this capacity the ancestors become mediators, *batseta*, between humans and God. Because the ancestors are closer to *Modimo* they gain greater understanding of the laws of nature and have a clearer insight into the course of life (Moila 1989:140-143).

Among the Xhosa it is also believed that ancestors act as intermediaries between the living and God. Apart from acting as agents for God, they also take part in the maintenance and control of the universe. Because ancestors live near to God, they are believed to speak to and ask things of Him, and so intercede on behalf of the living (Pauw 1975:218-219). As ancestors possess dynamistic power, they are able to give the living kin proper protection from witches and other supernatural calamities.

Tempels (1959:100-105) points out that one of greatest roles of ancestors is as creators of humanity, in that "new life" is formed through them. To substantiate his point, he states that childless women pray to the ancestors that they may bear children, as the ancestors have the power to cause pregnancy, thus new life.

It is important to note, however, that among the ancestor-venerating societies it is also believed that there are times when ancestors are a problem rather than a blessing. This is evident among the Pedi of South Africa, among whom Mönnig (1967: 54) observes that:

> There are no restrictions to either the chastisement or the blessings that they can confer on their descendants. They have power over life and death, over sickness and health, and over poverty and prosperity. The Pedi say that nothing is impossible for the ancestor spirits. Their main desire is to be remembered by their descendants. If this is done faithfully, they reward the living through good health for themselves and for their live-stock, plentiful rains and good harvests. If, on the other hand, they are forgotten or disregarded, they may withdraw their protection and bring ill-health or death, drought or disease among the crops, and bereave their descendants of their possessions.

Similarly, Bombwe (1983:19) postulates that, like the rest of the communities that venerate ancestors, the Luguru of Tanzania regard ancestors as both protectors of the clan, the family and the individuals and the cause of suffering within society. In their benevolence they ensure family health, human fertility, good harvests, and a large number of livestock. As the Luguru understand that the Supreme Being is the cause of all things, they also believe that the ancestors have the power to afflict, withhold or retard these when angry. The ancestors are believed to be hypersensitive about their dignity and prerogatives. If they are not accorded the homage due to them, both the family and the tribe will suffer the consequences. Yet if affliction occurs, it is purely disciplinary.

Bombwe (1983:19-20) states that ancestors are believed to cause evil for various reasons; either because they wish to remind their descendants to honour them; because they have been improperly buried; because they have been denied libation and sacrifice where it is due; because guardians of orphans have neglected their duties; because they were offended before they died; or because the living failed to carry out instructions given upon the ancestor's death. Their

malevolence can be embodied within the whole field of human suffering, from sickness and death to everyday bad luck, or any other injury for which no other easy explanation is available.

On the same point raised by Bombwe among the Luguru of Tanzania, according to Douglas Dziva (1997:28), the Shona of Zimbabwe also believe that the infliction of misfortune, sterility, disease or poverty is a means for ancestors to castigate their progeny for forsaking them. He offers one such account:

> ...in 1988 there was a drought in Zimbabwe. Traditional diviners and spirit mediums were consulted and they attributed the drought to the ancestral spirits who were angry. Their anger was due to the fact that after the war no traditional rituals were conducted so as to cleanse the land of the blood spilled during the war. The ancestors were angry because no ritual had been conducted to thank them for their support during the liberation struggle (Dziva 1997:28).

At the same time, the ancestors are believed to provide protection for the Shona and facilitate their prosperity and success of their descendants in all their undertakings. It is interesting to note that when the Shona struggled for Zimbabwean independence, they believed themselves to be fighting alongside their ancestors. After their success, it seems that the Shona sat down and relaxed to enjoy the fruits of their struggle and forgot to celebrate their victory with their counterparts – the ancestors. The fact that independence had been gained almost a decade before the drought, which occurred in 1988, demonstrates that both belief in punishment and the ancestral expectation of propriation exist outside of immediate temporal life.

In overseeing their families and the society as whole, the ancestors of the Pedi retain the roles they held before death (Mönnig 1967: 57). He further writes:

> Ancestor spirits retain the characteristics they had during their lives. It is for this reason that women may under certain circumstances be remembered. A woman who acted as regent

> for the chief, or for a lineage head, will retain an influential position in the hereafter. In the male line this principle becomes even of greater importance. A man who, during his life had certain capabilities, for example for the treatment of cattle, will be recalled when there is some sickness among the cattle of his descendants (Mönnig 1967: 57).

As another example, if one individual was a decision-maker in the community before his/her death, he/she will continue to be a decision-maker within the community when he/she enters the spiritual plane. Thus, before any decision is made on crucial issues affecting the society, this ancestor would be consulted to give his/her final decision on the matter. Ancestors in Pogoro society also retain in their former status but are endowed with greater power upon their deaths, believed to be given to them by God.

As we have seen, death is not the end of and individual's existence in Bantu society, as communication between the living and the departed is rather transferred to another medium.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has address African cosmology with specific emphasis on the Bantu-speaking people of Central, Eastern and Southern African. In examining Bantu concepts of being and of the power of the deceased, it was seen that for the Bantu a conceptualised "vital force" is central to the retention of harmony in life. This life force or dynamistic power is obtained from God who is the source of power in the universe and transmitted to humanity via the ancestors, from the elders, to the family heads, and down to the ordinary members of society. Life and being among the Bantu primarily concerns participation with this life force, as through this unity of life is attained and solidarity within the society results.

Our discussion also revealed that death does not mark the end of an individual's existence within the Bantu community. They move instead to a spiritual state,

from which they are able to continue communing and communicating with their living kin. As a result of this ongoing relationship, ancestors take an active interest in human affairs and so play significant roles in everyday life. As example, ancestors are able to mediate between God and their progeny. They also have the power both to protect their living kin, or heal them in times of sickness, and to punish them when they break their bonds of duty.

We are now able to move to an examination of the impact of ancestor veneration on Christian theology in Africa.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.0 NYAMITI'S ANCESTRAL THEOLOGY

4.1 The task of this chapter

Having explored the traditional Christian doctrines of christology and ecclesiology in chapter two and Bantu cosmology in chapter three, we now turn to an examination of Nyamiti's theological construct with questions like: What sort of construction is it? What are its sources and resources? How can it claim continuity with the traditional Christian doctrinal paradigm?

This chapter will not be able to examine in detail all the christological and ecclesiological aspects proposed by Nyamiti, due to the restrictions placed on the depth of this dissertation. Instead the analysis will focus on the main issues raised by this theologian in relation to his ancestor christology and ecclesiology. I have divided this chapter into three sections dealing respectively with Nyamiti's christology, ecclesiology, and the ethical implications of his construct. It should be noted from the outset that as christology and ecclesiology are intertwined it is difficult to formally separate the two. Therefore the two issues will overlap during the course of the discussion.

4.2 Christology

In examining Nyamiti's theological works one soon registers the fact that he relates Christ's function and role in the Church to those of the ancestors in Bantu

society. This correspondence is what prompted Nyamiti (1990:131) to propose his ancestor theology in general and specifically his ancestor christology. Commenting on Nyamiti's (1984) work, Gwinyi Muzorewa (1988:257) notes that:

> Ancestrology is the frame of this Christology. For instance, as our African ancestors heal, serve as prophets and pastoral advisors, and as priests so does Christ except he excels them. Nyamiti takes advantage of the similarities between the African ancestral functions and Christ's pastoral and redemptive functions to draw conclusions that demonstrates how much more the latter can do for us. Then he also uses the dissimilarities and divergencies between the two to prove how superior "the redeemer shines forth as THE brother-Ancestor par excellence, of whom the African ancestors are but faint and poor images.

The African ancestral christology proposed by Nyamiti is "heavily rooted" in Christ's "divinity and humanity" (Nyamiti 1984:25). The fact that this extends christology both 'from above' and 'from below' (Nyamiti 1984:80-81) is an extremely important element of Nyamiti's christological construct. He approaches his christology 'from above' through the divine nature of Christ. He contends that Christ's role as "... brother-ancestor requires, in the first place, a *Christology from above* ... This implies that such a Christology will be bound to start its reflection from the mysteries of the Trinity, Incarnation and Redemption" (Nyamiti 1984:80).

Nyamiti (1984:80) argues for a christology from 'below' because Christ's humanity can be used to elucidate the Christian message for the ancestor venerating Bantu-speaking peoples of Africa. He clearly demonstrated this by stating that a christology related to ancestor veneration requires an approach of Christ from his human nature. He emphasises the use of this approach in doing his theology with another argument that "it is fitting to start from the concrete humanity of Jesus and His terrestrial activities and to show how the divinity was manifested through His humanity and activities" (Nyamiti 1984:80). Through the integration of these two approaches, Nyamiti (1984:24) radically contended that

Christ became an ancestor since his conception. Thus he writes "radically speaking Jesus became our Ancestor through the Incarnation at the moment of his conception in the womb of the Blessed Virgin" (1984:24).

Throughout his theological discourse, Nyamiti (1984:32) attempts to tie the human and divine natures of Christ together as the key to his construction of a christology that relates Christ's function to that of African ancestors. For instance, we have noted that ancestors among the Bantu are regarded as mediators between their progeny and God, and as a source of stability, morality, life, prosperity and community cohesion, or the fulfilment of existence (Nyamiti 1984:19-24).

Nyamiti (1984:19) is also convinced that Christ's close relationship with us should be understand from the fact of his consanguinity with humankind " ... through His Adamite origin". He thus attempts to trace our consanguineous relationship to Christ back via the biblical conception of humanity's origins. As Christ was born of Mary, a descendant of Adam, he is naturally a consanguineous relation of all of humanity by virtue of shared descent, and so by this virtue do all born after his passing become his descendants:

> Considered as *man* Jesus is our natural Brother in Adam, like anyone of us is. It is obvious that when seen from this purely human perspective Christ was like all men a descendant of Adam, and had natural family, clanic and tribal relationships. After His death He became – again like all men – a Brother-Ancestor in Adam. This Brother-Ancestorship is purely natural, it is Christian in origin of all men in Adam. In this case, however, Jesus became the natural Brother-Ancestor only of those who lived on earth after His death (Nyamiti 1984:28).

This understanding of human descent prompts Nyamiti to interpret Christ within the framework of the Bantu concept of ancestorship. Nyamiti develops the term *brother-ancestor to* indicate our common 'sonship' to the shared progenitor Adam. He says that because of Christ's humanity, his interpretation as an

ancestor is connected with Adam. In relation to this, Christ is viewed as an ancestor because of his link with Adam the originator of humanity. From this perspective, all members of the African Christian community are thus conceptualised as descendants of a common ancestor, Christ (Nyamiti 1984:27-28).

Nyamiti (1984:30) furthers this argument to state that as Christ's ancestorship also includes our common sharing of the "Father with us", through worshipping him (Christ) Christians are also 'adopted' as children by the Father; thus Christ becomes our 'brother-ancestor'. For this to hold true, Christ's sharing of his eternal sonship with us must be understood as an implication of the fact that humanity shares a single progenitor, or ancestor, with Christ; in this case, God. As elaborated by Nyamiti 1984:30):

> With regard to the first aspect the very term "brother-ancestor" indicates common sonship to a progenitor of the ancestor and his brother-descendant. In connection with our common filiation with Christ, this is only possible through habitual grace whereby we become adopted sons of the Father and brothers of the Logos. Without this adoption Christ is our Brother-Ancestor only "in principle" but not "in fact". Through His Incarnation, death and resurrection, He saved us in principle and became thereby our true Brother-Ancestor. This is not only because his Incarnation and paschal mystery enabled us to be God's adoptive sons in Him, but also because through Him, *as natural Son of the Father even as man*, humanity was reconciled to God. On the other hand, by our acquiring of habitual grace Christ's brother-Ancestorship no longer remains *principal* (= in principle) but becomes *factual* (= in fact). This is confirmed by the fact that what happens to His members affects Him also as Head.

Noting the responsibility of ancestors as role-models for Bantu society, Nyamiti (1984:31) argues that, as our "brother-ancestor", Christ is the model of Christian behaviour. Nyamiti further notes that Christ, our brother-ancestor, lived an exemplary life which all Christians strive to imitate. Christ was considerate and compassionate, he confronted difficult moments with wisdom, and he taught his

community the way of life. His behaviour, according to Nyamiti (1984:31), validates an understanding of Christ as ancestor within Bantu thought-patterns. Yet he also acknowledges the divine difference between Christ and traditional African ancestors:

> In fact, Christ's exemplarity includes also His quality as our Prototype of divine nature. The reason is because His exemplarity of conduct is based on the fact that we are through Him adopted sons of the Father. As noted earlier our Lord makes us His brother-descendants by communicating His divine life and nature to us and incorporating us into His own Body. This participated divine nature in us intrinsically requires that we live and behave according to His model. We can therefore, say that our Saviour is the Prototype of our Christian behaviour because He is the source of our participated divine nature. ... Consequently, in virtue of His Brother-Ancestorship Christ is our model of behaviour and nature as well (Nyamiti 1984:31).

Nyamiti (1984:81) also takes care to demonstrate the way in which Christ's death enabled his rite of passage to ancestorship according to the traditional African conceptions of this transition. He takes the death of Christ as another point of departure in an interpretation of Christ's ancestorship, as it is indeed through the process of death that African ancestorship is attained. He also notes that this concept is in line with the teachings of the Bible, which state that Christ's death on the cross brought him to glorification by the Father. Christ's death, descent into hell, his triumphant resurrection, and his ascension to the right hand of the Father Almighty, further cement his ancestorship, enabling him to mediate between God and his living kin, the Christian community, as the African ancestors do for theirs (Vahakangas 1997: 173).

As it was noted in chapter three that one of the roles of ancestors among the Bantu is mediation between the Supreme being and the living members of the community, Nyamiti (1984:75) ascribes the same roles to Jesus Christ in order to validate his ancestor christology. He argues that as a true 'brother-ancestor' in

the African understanding, Christ's mediation role is of significant importance for the understanding of his mission in the Bantu context.

Nyamiti (1984:25) continues his argument by emphasising Christ's human nature and that it is due to the fact that Christ is man that makes him to be the mediator between God and us. Thus, Christ is able to become our mediator because he understands the vagaries of human life, even as his own was upstanding. Nyamiti (1984:97) argues that in order for mediation to take place among the Bantu ancestor venerating communities, death of a potential ancestor must take place. In death, a person comes closer to the Supreme being. One point that Nyamiti does leave unresolved, however, is the fact that Jesus' mediation is a God planned mission, unlike the mediation of the Bantu traditional ancestor.

Alongside the function of mediation, Nyamiti (1984:55) also draws connections between the healing abilities of both Christ and the Bantu ancestors. As noted in Chapter Three, there is a general belief among Bantu ancestor-venerating communities that ancestors can not only heal but also protect their progeny from disease; this is, in fact, according to Nyamiti's (:55) explication the most cherished abilities of the ancestors. Nyamiti (:55) goes on saying that from this perspective it becomes "... appropriate and even useful to examine Christ's healing function in connection with His Ancestorship". He notes the prominence given in the Bible to Christ's ability to heal (:55) even as he acknowledges important contrasts between Christ's powers and those of the ancestors, noting that "It is the redemptive aspect of our Lord's healing function that differentiates it most from that of the African ancestor" (Nyamiti 1984:56).

Nyamiti (1984: 39) also sees parallels between Christ's behaviour and that of ancestors in that he also reacts favourably when remembered and honoured, and unfavourably when neglected:

> Already in His juridical and punitive power one can notice the parallels between the characteristics of Christ's Ancestorship

> and that of the African. As our Brother-Ancestor He is entitled to our regular sacred communication with Him. This title implies His right to demand, under pain of punishment, our free compliance to this communication. By punishing those who fail in this regard Christ's action is similar to that of African ancestors who punish their negligent descendants. On the other hand the saviour rewards plentifully His faithful members. Here again His attitude corresponds to that of the African ancestors who are supposed to reward their faithful descendants (Nyamiti 1984: 39).

Thus the authority and power which Christ obtained in death is now exercised upon his descendants, the Christian Church, either in punishment or in blessing, as are those similarly obtained by the Bantu ancestors.

4.3 Ecclesiology

Nyamiti (1993:23) also uses the African conception of ancestorship as the basis of his arguments surrounding the position of the Church in African theology, specifically through attempts to integrate into it the corporatness expressed by the role of ancestors. In developing his African ecclesiology, he emphasises the importance of understanding the role of Christ in the Church in the light of Bantu ancestral functions. As the ancestors are believed to mediate between their progeny and the Supreme Being, the Church is "The extension or prolongation of Christ's Ancestorship to human communities. It is in other words, the organ of His ancestral mediation to Humanity" (Nyamiti 1993:23). Thus it is through the Church that Christ's "ancestral activities par excellence" are realised:

> It is, therefore, not surprising that all the ancestral elements belonging to the Ancestorship of Christ are concentrated to the maximum in the eucharistic sacrifice. Indeed, the Mass is the sacrifice of *Christian brotherhood and divine sonship.* Through it Christ's brotherhood to His descendants, and theirs to Him and to one another, is admirably expressed, deepened and perfected. Being the actualisation of the paschal mystery the Mass is essentially the sacrifice of the Lord's *redemptive and sacerdotal mediation* in which the redeemer, as High Priest of the New Law, applies His redemptive fruits to His descendants.

> By this mediation the Mass enables Christ to manifest Himself as the Archetype of nature and conduct for His descendants. For, these latter have to share intimately in His divine life through the reception of the Eucharist; they have also to relive Christ's mysteries reactualised in the Mass, namely they have to love, forgive, and offer their lives for God and for one another as Christ Himself does in the Eucharist (Nyamiti 1984:53-54).

From this statement, it is clear that Nyamiti interprets the function of the Mass in relation to Christ in parallel with the sacrificial rituals through with ancestors and their progeny commune and communicate. From this perspective, the Mass becomes the highest point of Christ's mediative role (Nyamiti 1984:52):

> When envisaged in the light of African ancestorship the excellence of the Mass as an ancestral ritual shines also with particular clarity. One of the principal ancestral factors is the sacred contact between the African ancestor and his descendants by medium of prayers and ritual offerings, the highest of which is sacrifice. Now the Mass comprises within itself all these elements in an eminent manner. Through it there occurs the most sacred contact between Christ the Ancestor and His earthly descendants (Nyamiti 1984:53).

Nyamiti (1990:139-140) also emphasises that, in the eucharistic sacrifice, the dimensions of the ancestral cult are manifested in the Trinity. He argues that it is through the eucharistic sacrifice of the Mass that we partake of ancestral kinship in the Trinity. He emphasizes the fact that as the shrines of African traditional ancestral veneration demonstrate particular concern for the regular encounter of the living kin with their ancestors, the Eucharist is the "tabernacle par excellence" (Nyamiti 1990:140). Thus Christ the brother-ancestor is regularly encountered at the tabernacle by his descendants, the Christians, through their sacred communion and communication:

> Seen in this light Christ's presence under the sacred species in the tabernacle significantly resembles the presence of ancestors in ancestral shrines. In a certain sense the eucharistic presence is a continuation of the Mass: it is as immolated Victim that the God-man is present in the tabernacle.

> Hence the tabernacle can be called *the Christian shrine par excellence*, in which Christ the Ancestor, the ritual Victim, is perpetually present for the sake of regular sacred communication with His descendants (Nyamiti 1984:54).

This implies that ancestral communion and communication is outwardly maintained and expressed by the living progeny through visible acts such as rituals of offering and sacrifice. In turn, Christ bestows the fullness of life upon His descendants via the elements of communion and communication offered in the Eucharist, the flesh and blood of Christ, through which a deepening of their relationship is realised (Nyamiti 1990:140).

In Nyamiti's (1996:46) articulation of the Trinitarian ancestral relationship Jesus Christ is a descendant of the Father. Thus,

> Apart from the communication of being through begetting, the only form of mutual contact between these two persons is that which takes place through the Holy Spirit. Both the Father and the Son produce Him through spiration and communicate Him to each other as an expression of their mutual love. By its very nature, perfect love implies that the lover gives himself totally and all that he possesses to his loved. Consequently, the mutual love of the Father and the Son (which is infinitely perfect) involves the giving to each other all that they are or possess and, hence also, the Spirit in as far as He belongs to each of them. The Holy Spirit is thus the fruit and expression of their reciprocal love, and as such He is also called Gift.

Nyamiti (1990:130) further argues that God the Father and the Son reciprocate communion and communication through the Holy Spirit, which is an expression of their relationship as experienced in the Church, as both the Father and the Son possess infinite sacred status. The divine ancestorship and descendancy communicated through this reciprocal donation of the divine Spirit is transmitted to the Christian community as a sign of His love for His descendants (Nyamiti 1990:130).

Nyamiti (1990:131) believes that Christ's ancestral attachment to the Christian

community is rooted in the descendancy of the Logos which is immanent in the Trinity. Through Nyamiti's perception of the sacred encounter between man and God that occurs through the grace of adoption achieved through Christ's redemptive work, all people of the Christian faith can be known as the adoptive children of God. As such, we become co-heirs and even co-redemptors alongside Christ, and we are all able to commune in the mystery of the Trinity. According to Vahakangas' (1997:100) analysis of Nyamiti's works, this allows a prolongation of the Trinity among the Christian community. Thus, as one shares the descendancy with Christ through faith, as an adopted child of God, the Holy Spirit becomes the factor which unites the believer to the body of Christ, allowing the Christian faithful to enter into perfect communion with the Trinity.

As ancestors are never far removed from their living kin, so Nyamiti explicates the nearness of the mystery of the Trinity within the Church, as the Christian community communes with the Trinity (Vahakangas1997:109). Nyamiti thus indicates that "African ancestral ecclesiology is inseparable from the idea of the tripartite Church" (Nyamiti 1990:132). The Church here is understood according to Roman Catholic doctrine as the unification of the militant Church on earth, the suffering Church in purgatory and the triumphant Church in the Kingdom of God, all of which hold Christ as their ancestral link. He further explains that:

> The ancestorship of the Father and the Logos incarnate affects each member of the tripartite Church, although in different ways. Christ is the brother-ancestor of all the members of the Church in heaven, in purgatory and on earth; and through Christ the Father, is the parent–ancestor of each of these members (Nyamiti 1990:133).

Therefore, through the Church Christ mediates between God and humanity.
A Roman Catholic theologian, Nyamiti (1990:144-145) speaks strongly on the position in his theological discourse on the Church in Africa, as veneration of saints is a profound practice within the Roman Catholic Church. Thus he states that:

> One of the main tasks of African ancestral ecclesiology is to show the particular importance of the saints (including African Christian ancestors) in the Church. Among the objectives of this effort is to conduce the Church to appreciate and accept what is good in the African traditional cult of ancestors. Another goal is to promote in the Church regular the cult of both African and non-African saints, including the non-canonised African traditional ancestors.

As he notes elsewhere,

> The introduction of African ancestral veneration into the Church cannot be rightly denied and has several advantages. In view of its particular African physiognomy, its acceptance by the Church would be an eloquent sign or proof that the Church really respects African authentic religious values and would make the African feel at home in ecclesiastical communities. Its proper introduction into the liturgy would serve to prevent the ambivalent behaviour of the African Christian believer who goes regularly to Church on Sundays and practices afterwards illicit forms of ancestral veneration (Nyamiti 1990:146-147).

It is evident that through these arguments Nyamiti is attempting to demonstrate the way in which African veneration of ancestors parallels the Roman Catholic veneration of saints.

4.4 Some ethical implications

The ethical implications of Nyamiti's ancestral christology and ecclesiology are founded on the characteristics of the Church, which he coins to suit his construct of African ancestral theology. Nyamiti (1990:162) stresses that "African ancestral ecclesiology should present the Church as the sign and effective instrument (sacrament) of Christ's ancestorship to humanity", as in so doing Christians are able to fulfil their role in the divine descendance shared within the ancestral Trinity. When Christians participate in the sacraments, they become closer to

their God and to their "Brother-Ancestor", in this instance Jesus Christ (Nyamiti 1990:162).

One of the most outstanding and important features of ancestor veneration is the respect paid to ancestors. Nyamiti (1990:162-163) in turn delineates the obedience of every Christian to the leaders of the Church as a condition for membership, and in so doing supports the hierarchical character of the Church. He states, in fact, that submission to and respect for Church leaders has its foundations in Christ our Ancestor.

Nyamiti (1990:164) also holds that the Church should act as a healer in the society as Christ did, as ancestors are believed to do for their communities. Thus he asserts that in order for the Church to be authentically African, as well as an organ of Christ's ancestral mediation, the Church should exercise the healing power. He insists that the African ancestral healing belief should be considered in the process of Christianising African ancestor-venerating societies, even as he expects this process to be founded on a conception of Christ as healer.

Moreover, Nyamiti (1990:165) asserts that ancestor-venerating communities are known for being hospitable, sharing both material items and communal activities in their day to day social process. This can be linked to Christ's hospitality towards downtrodden of his own society, as he ate and interacted with sinners (Mark 2:13-17; Luke 5:29-32) and fed the hungry who gathered around him (Mark 6:31-44; John 6:1-13). As such Nyamiti (1990:166) contends that, "African ecclesiology cannot be authentically ancestral without stressing the importance of Christian hospitality in the Church". This means that the Church as Christ's ancestral organ must carry out hospitality to refugees, strangers and the unfortunate of society.

4.5 Conclusion

Having made a depiction of Nyamiti's christology and ecclesiology, we can now conclude this chapter by saying that, Nyamiti has made an attempt to draw parallels between the role of Christ in the Church and that one of the Bantu traditional ancestor in order to put his theological construct across. In his theological construction, Nyamiti combines the ideas found in chapter two where we looked at the traditional Christian doctrine with the ideas in chapter three of the Bantu thought-patterns to form his christology and ecclesiology.

In the next chapter we are going to look at Nyamiti's christology and ecclesiology in the form of a critical evaluation so as to help us see some strength and weakness of his theological construct.

CHAPTER FIVE

5.0 THEOLOGICAL EVALUATION

5.1 The task of this chapter

In the preceding Chapter, we outlined the manner in which Nyamiti's theological construct is rooted in Bantu belief in and practices of ancestor veneration, specifically in terms of the role and authority of ancestors. We also saw how Nyamiti uses the traditional Christian doctrines in relation to the Bantu thought-patterns in framing his ancestor christology and ecclesiology. Against that background, we now turn to a theological critique and evaluation of his theories. This will then allow us to analyse the validity of his interpretation of Christ as the ancestor of the Church in Africa. But before that, let us quickly review what we tackled in chapters two and three in terms of comparison in order to give us a framework of evaluating Nyamiti's christology and ecclesiology.

5.2 A consideration of the traditional Christian doctrine and the African (Bantu) worldview

In chapter two we considered the classical traditional Christian doctrine with particular reference to christology and ecclesiology, whereas, in chapter three we looked at the African (Bantu) cosmology with particular reference to their existential thought-patterns. I do not want to repeat what we discussed in those chapters, but rather I want to raise some important issues that I learnt resulting from looking at the two worldviews (traditional Christian doctrine and the Bantu thought-patterns).

Although the existence of the Supreme Being whom we can term here in the Christian thought-pattern as God, and in the Bantu thought-pattern, for example among the Pedi, as *Modimo*, the two worldviews have different conceptualisations of the Supreme Being. While reading through chapter two one discovers that the traditional Christian doctrine depicts the true God at work in and through the true human being, Jesus the Christ. The classical Christian doctrine continues saying that God became human in the person of Christ in order to save humanity from sin. Through faith, fellowship with Christ is made possible. Being one with Christ means that we are one with each other, "Body of Christ". This implies that God discloses himself and works out his salvation not only through Christ, but also through us, his Body.

If we look at the Pedi religion for example, *Modimo* (Supreme Being) is not experienced as a person with whom one can have fellowship. Although *Modimo* is believed to be the source of all power in the universe which has impact on life, *Modimo* is far removed from the people as reflected in chapter three. Vital-force according to the Pedi as we saw in chapter three originates from *Modimo* who in turn channels it to humanity through ancestors, then ancestors channel it to their descendants; thus *Modimo* is the source of life. This Bantu spiritual dimension seems to be bound to biological or sociological thought-pattern, while in the Christian counterpart this is not the case. This has already been explained in the preceding paragraphs.

There is quite a big difference between the person of Christ and that of the Bantu ancestors. The Bantu thought-pattern is that once the potential ancestor dies, he/she lives in the spiritual world and never in physical form, but Christ's death and existence in the spiritual realm is of different nature. According to the Christian teaching, Christ died and rose from the dead. His disciples saw him in person after he had resurrected. He lives and reigns in the world in unity with his father and the Holy Spirit one God forever and ever. Ancestors are the products of the community, Christ is not, he is God incarnate. The existence of Christ does

not depend on the community, but ancestors count on the community. That is why ritual sacrifices are made to them. The ancestors among the Bantu as shown in chapter three have greater command over the dynamistic powers. They can use their power to protect and bless, or to punish their descendants. That is why they demand recognition from the living kin. Failure to recognise ancestors leads to hardships in the community. Christ's mission in the community is a mission of deliverance from the power of darkness (hardship inflicted by the enemy-devil to the society). Christians depend on the risen Christ for authentic human existence for he is the true God. He does not get power from anywhere, himself is 'life'.

According to my observation in chapter three concerning ancestors, ancestors are mediators only in the sense that they have a greater share in the dynamistic power emanating from the Supreme Being. In relation to Christ, Christ is himself the divine power in that he is God incarnate. Christ is omniscient and omnipotent, all authority and power is upon him in heaven and on earth. Christ's significance for the Christians also lies in the fact that he is the source of new humanity in which through faith Christians share in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is a parallel to the belief that the ancestors are the source of life force of the community. They are only parallels in a formal sense, but not in terms of contents.

The first chapter of the gospel of John portrays Christ to have been with God from eternity and will ever be with God in eternity. The Bantu ancestors are not said to have existed with the Supreme Being before they came into existence in the community as part and parcel of it. They are just a community's product unlike Christ. Although Christ lived in history, he had pre-existed according to the words postulated in John's gospel (first chapter).

There is also another point to be observed between the traditional Christian doctrine and the Bantu word-view. Christ's function in the Church as postulated

in section 2.5 of chapter two postulates him as a person who bestows the Holy Spirit who unites believers as a sign of love to the Church. He (Christ) does not want any ritual sacrifice from his followers in order to commune with them. In chapter three, the Bantu concept of communion and communication between the ancestors and the living members of the community is highly considered to be a pivotal point of veneration of ancestors. The living members of the community and the deceased are believed to interrelate as a community. Here, the living kin offer rituals and sacrifices in the form of libation to their deceased members of the community to keep the unity and communion. The traditional Christian understanding of Christ's role in the Church is that he nurtures and strengths his Church without reciprocity, i.e, pouring of libation.

Having pinpointed some differences that exist between the two word-views (the traditional Christian doctrine and the Bantu thought-patterns), we now turn to look at the strengths (flaws) and limitations (weaknesses) of Nyamiti's theological construct.

5.3 Strengths of Nyamiti's theological construct

The attempt to utilise African cosmology, especially the Bantu thought-patterns to express the Christian message is entirely legitimate. Therefore the notion of "incarnating" the gospel according to the cosmologies of traditional African communities within the African continent is an important and ever-present issue to theologians. I believe that as long as the African (Bantu) worldviews remain persistent among people, for instance, the notion of ancestor veneration which exalts the power of the deceased, attempts for new concepts for expressing the salvific power of God in Christ is inevitable. I am not suggesting that theology in the African context must be done in a fashion entirely different from that of the traditional Christian doctrine.

Framing of christologies and ecclesiologies through the positioning of Christ as an ancestor in African Christianity as in the case of Nyamiti's depiction of Christ as our "brother-ancestor" is supported by academics. Bediako maintains that "... one of the values of an Ancestor-Christology is precisely that it helps to clarify the place and significance of 'natural' ancestors" (1995:217) among ancestor venerating communities. This clarification in turn creates a 'metaphysical space' within Bantu thought into which an understanding of Christianity can be placed. He stresses that this positioning does not strip Christ of his divine power (interview 10.03.2000), rather it tries to explain who Jesus is in an African way of understanding their world.

Bediako further argues that, if one recognises the fact that metaphors, rather than strict definitions, are used to elaborate the word of God, our perceptions of Christ and our manner of relating to him, then Nyamiti has precedent on his side when he analyses Christ from within 'ancestral' constructs. Bediako (interview 10.03.2000) himself accepts the parallels between Christ's role and those of the ancestors, recognising the ways in which he also oversees the community, intercedes between God and the community, and communicates between the earthly people and the world beyond. In the same stance Emmanuel Milingo (1984:88) writes:

> Marrying Jesus with our ancestors means carrying over the trust our people have in their ancestors into Jesus. They will believe in Jesus and trust Him when they feel close to Him and *experience* that He is alive among them just as their ancestors are. That is why we have to define the ethereal powers possessed by our ancestors which we know Jesus Christ possesses too.

As for the propriety of framing a Christian doctrine according to Bantu thought-patterns, we can turn to the arguments of theorists such as Dulles, who believes that Church doctrine should "... correspond with the religious experience of men" (1974:81). He further states that, "There is nothing to prevent a given theologian from building his own personal theology" (Dulles 1974:185) which can illuminate

the Christian faith to the people. Nyamiti's recognition of this argument has been a key factor in the development of his articulation of christology and ecclesiology in terms of "brother-ancestor". Maurice Wiles (1974:41) also writes that:

> There is no one logically necessary starting-point from which the structure of Christian doctrine can be developed in linear succession. A variety of approaches is called for, and no one has absolute priority over all the others.

It is therefore natural, in the African context, to attempt to develop a framework for the Christian doctrine that reflects local cosmologies such as those of the Bantu-venerating communities.

Yet, due to the Western basis of Christian theology, such an articulation is necessarily coupled with many terms that are difficult for African Christians, with their dual-allegiance, to grasp. For instance, the terms "Lord" or "Messiah", used in addressing Christ, have no direct translations in many Bantu languages. Yet Christ, as the source of Christian faith, must be both introduced and explained to African communities. This conflict may have influenced Nyamiti's development of the term "brother-ancestor", which creates a clearer linkage between Bantu and Christian thought-patterns.

Nyamiti may have also postulated Christ as our "brother-ancestor" because theology in itself is "faith seeking understanding, *fides quaerens intellectum*" (Schreiter 1986:75). Thus all theological discourse must be geared towards bringing a better understanding of the gospel message to the people in their own contexts by taking into consideration people's thought-patterns in interpreting the Christian faith. The most difficult issue for theologians is how to thus translate the paradoxical message contained in the mystery of Christ's mission on earth to the local communities. Dermot A. Lane (1981:21) maintains that "If doctrine is not related to human experience it will inevitably become marginal in the lives of believers", thus perceived as foreign.

Lane (1981:21) also argues that a "Doctrine for the sake of doctrine without reference to experience is burdensome and runs the risk of becoming 'a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal' ", as would an insistence on interpreting Christ as the "Saviour" and nothing else. From my personal perspective as an African Christian, I believe that an interpretation of Christ that parallels the role of the traditional ancestor in wielding spiritual authority, such as Nyamiti's, would ease the incorporation into the Faith of those who uphold ancestral veneration. Lane (1981:21) writes:

> ... doctrine must be able to evoke religious experience in a way that opens up the individual to the ever present gracious mystery of God. A sign of sound doctrine is its ability to communicate some aspect of the inexhaustible reality of God. A close interplay should obtain between theological doctrine and religious experience. This interplay will be both dialectical and creative. Because of the nature of experience there will always be a certain tension between the richness of human experience and the historicity of doctrinal expression. The role of theology is to maintain a critical correspondence between doctrine and experience. A fundamental unity, therefore, should obtain in all instances between experience and doctrine. In this way the credibility of doctrine is advanced by human experience and experience becomes the source of new religious knowledge.

Lane's key point is that doctrine must be compatible with experience, such as is Nyamiti's construction of a christology and ecclesiology based on peoples' experiences of belief in ancestral authority, and practice of rituals of veneration.

Maluleke (interview 15.02.2000) argues that Nyamiti's metaphor of Christ as our "brother-ancestor" is appropriate because it allows societies that still hold to the ancestral veneration to understand Christ's mission and message. As Philip A. Rolnick (1993:76) states, "... analogous terms are useful, even indispensable, precisely due to their flexibility; for they are markers of one of the most important exercises of our human acts of judgement". He continues to postulate that, "The analogy of naming, as based on the analogy of being, expresses lingual relations

which are merely secondary over against the external relations which are named but not really contained within that naming" (1993:239). As Nyamiti's endeavours demonstrate, analogy is indisputably necessary as a tool to simplify complex constructs that cannot be grasped otherwise. But this does not mean that without doing that the gospel cannot take its root among the people.

F.E. George (1990:40) attests that, "a faith which does not become a culture is a faith not fully lived", and "... faith needs to be part of a cultural synthesis". The gradual emergence of a theology that acknowledges the constructs of African culture, reflecting Christian revelation in the light of the ancestral authority of ancestors, is thus a sign of the growth and vitality of Christianity in Africa. As Bediako (1995:217) writes:

> There is, it is true, an obvious Christological dimension to any consideration of the place of ancestors in the spiritual universe of Christian consciousness. When Jesus Christ appears in the world of the distributed power, which I consider the universe of the African primal world to be, some important changes are bound to occur.

Bediako takes the incarnation of the Gospel into the peoples' worldview as a necessity for Christianising missions. Without it, the Gospel cannot be heard in a way that it is truly relevant to an individual's way of life, and so there is less chance of bringing people into the Christian faith. Thus Christian revelation in ancestor-venerating communities must relate to this pre-existing cosmology.

5.4 Limitations of Nyamiti's theological construct

The attempts to utilise the Bantu patterns of thought to express the Christian message is entirely legitimate. However, it is only legitimate if it expresses the meaning of the message appropriately and does not lead to confusion among the hearers of the message. On the other hand, despite the strengths of context-based interpretations of Christian doctrine, we must acknowledge that no

christology or ecclesiology, not even the 'traditional' Western construct, is able to adequately express the depth of Christ's richness. Aylward Shorter (1983:197-198) notes that,

> Since the concept of the traditional African ancestor is sometimes suggested as a Christological parallel, the question of the theological functions of ancestors deserve greater attention. ... To speak, for example, of "Christ our Ancestor" could be misleading if it is intended to convey more than Christ is God, the ancestor and source of all life, and even this meaning requires further clarification in view of Christ's relationship as Son to the Father. As soon as the parallel is more closely defined and a specific form of ancestor veneration is used to illuminate the doctrine of redemption in Christ, the problems are multiplied.

The past few years since Nyamiti has postulated his ancestor-based theology have seen on-going discussion among theologians and their students as to whether or not Christ can truly be understood as a "brother-ancestor" within a doctrine of African Christianity without distorting Christ's meaning and message. One of the reasons why debate remains open is the fact that Nyamiti's proposal is fraught with an avalanche of problems that require resolution. This is a natural occurrence within the evolution of doctrine, for as Robert J. Schreiter (1986:14) states that,

> ... the development of a contextual local theology is often set out as a project, but even more often not carried beyond the first couple of steps. Thus problems may be identified, questions may be addressed to the Christian faith as found in other cultural traditions, but there has not been time to continue the dialogue.

As such, Nyamiti's endeavour has remained an academic one, and has yet to move beyond the realm of theoretical discourse and debate.

At the heart of the debate are conflicts which Nyamiti fails to resolve between Bantu constructions of ancestor veneration and understandings of Christ within

Christian doctrine. For instance, although Nyamiti depicts Christ as "brother-ancestor" in accordance with Bantu cosmology, ancestors are products of their communities unlike Christ, who is God incarnate. Bantu ancestors are also dependent upon the living for their happiness, manifested through the rituals performed by their kin, while the Christian doctrine makes no such claims of Christ. In fact, it is the Church that seeks happiness from Christ rather than the other way round. In addition, ancestors are believed to inhabit the world of the dead, a belief which conflicts with that of Christians in the resurrected Lord, Jesus the Christ, who ascended in heaven lives in heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father Almighty (Maluleke 15.02.2000).

Fundamentally, Nyamiti's christology and ecclesiology fail to demonstrate concretely the meeting point between Bantu ancestral cosmology and the incarnation of God in Christ. Within the survey of Bantu systems of ancestral veneration, no examples were found of societies or individuals who believed that the ancestors died for the sake of 'saving', protecting or preserving the community as was done by Christ. Likewise, there were no instances in the Bantu thought-patterns in which the Supreme Being, or the life-force were believed to have become human member of the society in order to redeem it from evil. From the Christian point of view, Christ's death on the cross for the sake of saving mankind is very fundamental. If this aspect is not well articulated in ancestor christology and ecclesiology, then the suggested ancestor theology misses the target. Nyamiti does not seem to take this issue seriously in that he silently keeps quiet on it.

Nyamiti's articulation of humanity's filial link with Christ is also unclear from the perspective of the traditional Christian understanding of Christ's nature. While, as previously stated, he argues that this link is made possible "... through habitual grace ..." (Nyamiti 1984:30), this remains to me a weak link in his argument as far as christology is concerned. He appears to experience difficulty in establishing how Christ is in fact our actual blood brother, a precondition if

Christ is to be our actual brother in the Bantu sense. Personally, I would be content with an understanding that my relationship with Christ is based on our common humanity, based in turn on a recognition that God is our common creator and consequently, our Father. This would be especially applicable if Christ were to be conceived as the incarnate Word. The Bantu pattern of thought concerning ancestry is biological, while in the Christian counterpart this is not the same at all. Different from the Bantu parallel, Christ is the unambiguously authentic human being who is in complete fellowship with the true God. This cannot be said of the Bantu ancestors.

Thus the true humanity of Christ which makes Him one of us would also make him our blood brother. Yet for many Bantu the concept of life force is directly connected to the fact of blood relation. God, the source of life and power, imparts the life force to the clan founder, who transmits it to the clan ancestors, who in turn pass it on to the family ancestors, and so to the family heads of the families and through them to the general household members.

Furthermore, the idea of establishing Christ as our "brother-ancestor" because of his consanguinity with us through his Adamite origin in the process of constructing a theological concept fit for inculcating Christian doctrine among the Bantu is one that I must disagree with in terms of my analysis of Bantu cosmology. The heart of my reservation lies in Nyamiti's (:1984:28) position that:

> Considered as *man* Jesus is our natural Brother in Adam, like anyone of us is. It is obvious that when seen from this purely human perspective Christ was like all men a descendant of Adam, and had natural family, clanic and tribal relationships. After His death He became – again like all men – a Brother-Ancestor in Adam. This Brother-Ancestorship is purely natural, it is Christian in origin of all men in Adam. In this case, however, Jesus became the natural Brother-Ancestor only of those who lived on earth after His death.

Every man among the Bantu is a brother of those who have a blood relationship of the father, but he can never be a brother of his fathers. What I mean here from the Bantu thought-pattern is that the term "brother-ancestor" does not make sense to the Bantu. Considering the hierarchical relationships among the Bantu thought-pattern concerning channelling of vital-force, Christ cannot channel the life-force because of being "brother-ancestor". The life-force transmitted through the lineage is derived from the Supreme Being in the hierarchical order. The life-force flows from the Supreme Being to the founder members of the clans, then to the ancestors, then the ancestors channel the life-force to their progeny. A deceased brother cannot channel his life-force to his brother, rather he channels it to his progeny. The point I am making here is that Christ does not fit the title of being understood as an ancestor due to the fact that he did/does not have progeny to whom he channels the life-force according to the Bantu worldview.

Also to be noted in the above quotation is the fact of Nyamiti simplifying the issue of Christ's Adamic origin. I think Nyamiti should understand the fact that when Christ is referred back "in Adam", its theological implication means Christ's authentic humanity and not tracing his genealogy. If Christ is a descendant of Adam, he cannot be our source of life as depicted in the New Testament.

The Bantu concept of communion between the ancestors and the living kin is wholly based on the concept of hierarchies of relationship. One cannot venerate or honour ancestors who are junior to oneself within the hierarchical structure of relationships. Thus, a son cannot be an ancestor to a parent, nor can a brother become an ancestor to another, because they are of equal or lesser status within the hierarchies of relationships. It is progeny who venerate their parents, and not the other way round. Even though Nyamiti traces our consanguinity with Christ with a common origin as his point of departure, the fact that he conceives of Christ as brother-ancestor precludes him from veneration in the terms of the Bantu concept of ancestral authority.

Basing the role of Christ in the Church as that of a mediator as explicated by Nyamiti is section three of chapter four (4.3) does not suffice to call Christ "brother-ancestor' in the Church. Basing my argument on section five of chapter two (2.5) of this study, the Church is depicted as united with Christ (Eph. 2:19-22) and also as the body of Christ (Rom. 12:5). With the view that Christ is God incarnate, yet united with the Church, I do not see the point of Nyamiti's far fetched point in intermediary. The Bantu thought-pattern of ancestors mediating between the Supreme Being and their living kin results from the viewpoint that the Supreme Being is far away from the people and they (ancestors) are perceived to be closer to the Supreme Being. Therefore, saying that Christ is a mediator diminishes his authority as God incarnate.

Although Nyamiti's ancestor christology and ecclesiology is constructed from the parallels he found between the roles and authority of traditional ancestors and those of Christ, the culture of ancestor veneration among the Bantu itself as a framework limits both this analogy and its impact. The veneration of ancestors among the Bantu is ambivalent; there is fear of the punishment that may result if the ancestors are offended even as there is hope for the benefits that may be bestowed when they are honoured. Yet the "veneration" of Christ, at least according to the Scriptural teaching, involves no such fear, nor does he "demand" to be venerated as the ancestors do; He invites people to come to Him without threat. To present Christ as an ancestor would thus be to induce a veneration of Christ out of fear for the consequences of doing otherwise, rather than out of love and faith.

In one of his many discussions of the relationship between the Christian doctrine and ancestors, Aylward Shorter (1983:202) concludes that:

> ... in conformity with the Church's teaching, some elements can be detached from traditional "ancestor" veneration and proposed as Christological parallels, but the whole complex of beliefs and practices is inapplicable as such to the mystery of

> Christ and cannot develop or give expression to the doctrine of the Church. Much of the experience is, to say the least, Christologically unhelpful. But whereas the "ancestor" concept does not illuminate or develop our understanding of the person and role of Christ, the person and role of Christ can and does illuminate and redeem the African understanding of the "ancestor".

5.5 Way forward

This dissertation has addressed a crucial issue in African theology whether Christ in African Christianity could be explicated in terms of an ancestor to the Bantu-speaking people who count on the authority of ancestors in the community. In our critical evaluation of Nyamiti's attempt to construct a theology fit for ancestor venerating communities (Bantu-speaking people) we saw its strengths and weaknesses. Here, I would like to offer my own opinions on African theologies based on parallelism between the gospel and African thought-patterns.

Although the trend in developing African Christian theology has been to capitalise on pre-existent cultural aspects, as Nyamiti has done in basing his theological construct on the role and function of ancestors, there is a danger of neglecting the gospel in the process. Theologians in Africa must beware of believing that any local cosmologies that seem to parallel the Christian teachings are the only means by which the gospel can be imparted among the people. Schrieter warns of the danger of romanticising a culture while in process of constructing a theology that will allow its adherents to better understand the Christian message:

> ... the ethnographic approach can become prey in a cultural romanticism, unable to see the sin in its own historical experience. It cannot remain outside the often vigorous dialogue that needs to take place with the gospel values as they have been experienced in other cultures. Dealing with this problem can create enormous difficulties (1986:14).

While I am not against the idea of utilising pre-existent thought-patterns to aid in the illumination of the salvific message in general, I am wary that this current trend will result in the production of innumerable christologies and ecclesiologies designed to individually match the innumerable cosmologies of the many ethnic groups spread throughout the continent of Africa. The debate over Nyamiti's theological construct of Christ as "our brother-ancestor" has highlighted the need for a gospel conceived in terms of people's worldview, but one thing is that it has failed to link adequately with the traditional Christian doctrine. For this case, theologians in African should be keen to respond to the people's needs in the continent (contextualization of the gospel).

With the conviction that the gospel is more powerful than culture, it is high time now that theologians in Africa stopped using peoples' thought-pattern as a means of inculcating Christian faith unto the people. I am convinced that the gospel transcends cultures and it speaks for itself. Looking for parallelism between the gospel and African culture is not sufficient to say that such parallelism can help the Holy Spirit in the work of spreading the gospel. For example, Nyamiti's christology and ecclesiology which results from the parallalism which exist between the role of Christ in his salvific mission and the role of Bantu ancestor is a misnomer. African theologians should not pretend to help the gospel by constructing theologies which might at the end of the day confuse people. The gospel should be left to speak to the cultures other than theologians' engagement of articulating culture to the gospel.

It should be noted also that strong belief in the authority of the ancestors among the Bantu-speaking peoples is a thing which is fading due to movement of people. People in the past decades have moved and are still moving nowadays from traditional communities to go and live in urban areas due to modernisation. As a result, people stay away from traditional communal ritual practices of their traditional religions and become urbanised. Through urbanisation traditional culture is discarded and the urban culture is embraced. From this perspective,

engaging in developing a theology which aims at African traditional communities portrays that theologians in Africa are challenged in their construction of theologies based on African traditional practices and beliefs.

5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have critically evaluated Nyamiti's proposed ancestor christology and ecclesiology from the theological perspective. In so doing we have discussed both the importance of African-based theological constructs in illuminating the gospel message for the people of Africa and their limitations. Yet these obstacles should not lead us to despair or abandon the hope of developing African theologies based on an African viewpoint. Rather, these shortcomings should act as a catalyst for further research and fuller input into a contextualised christology and ecclesiology. Nevertheless, African theologians are encouraged by Karl Barth's (1949:10) words,

> I repeat that dogmatics is not a thing which has fallen from Heaven to earth. And if someone were to say that it would be wonderful if there were such an absolute dogmatics fallen from Heaven, the only possible answer would be: 'Yes, if we were angels'. But since by God's will we are not, it will be good for us to have just a human and earthly dogmatics. The Christian Church does not exist in Heaven, but on earth and in time.

CHAPTER SIX

6.0 SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

This study has offered an analysis of the use of the African concept of ancestor veneration in the Christology and ecclesiology of Charles Nyamiti. As this topic could not be covered in all its dimensions within the limitations of an M.Th thesis, I will offer a summary of the main topics covered.

In order to examine the validity of Nyamiti's interpretation of Christ as the ancestor of the Church in African Christian theology we first had to consider in Chapter One how Christology and ecclesiology is presented, without denominational bias, within the traditional Christian doctrine. Christology, which entails the systematic reflection on the person of Christ, his work and what he does, clearly states that Christ was/is both human and divine. The traditional Christian doctrine postulates that God became human in Christ so as to redeem mankind from the sin that it earned through its revolt in the Garden of Eden. Those who believe in and follow his teachings are collectively known as the "Church". From this perspective, the Church members are postulated as forming the Body of Christ (Rom. 12:12; Cor. 10:16; 12:12).

In Chapter Two we discussed the existential experience of the Bantu-speaking peoples of Central, Eastern and Southern Africa with regard to their cosmology. It was noted that according to Bantu thought-patterns, the Supreme Being is the source of life, or vital force, and of all dynamistic powers. In briefly examining some features of Bantu religious beliefs and practices, we demonstrated that within the societies surveyed, ancestor veneration is deeply rooted in the hearts of the community. This is due to the belief that the Supreme being channels

power to the community through the ancestors who in turn pass it to their living kin. Religious practice of ancestor veneration is centred around the family, thus ensuring familial cohesiveness. These practices also maintain societal hierarchies of power structuring relations within and between families, clans, tribes and nations.

Based on this survey, it is clear that the Bantu depend on the dynamistic powers, manifested by the ancestors, to make life meaningful and authentic, and all that occurs in daily life is associated with ancestral authority. Above all, the ancestors possess the power to affect the lives of their living kin by ensuring prosperity and fertility, looking after their welfare and protecting them against diseases. Through this process, ancestors become the custodians of morality.

Chapter Four, delineated Nyamiti's ancestor-based theology along its three major aspects, namely his Christology, his ecclesiology and the ethical implications of his construct. In the process it was demonstrated that Nyamiti depended on the parallels between traditional Christian doctrines and Bantu cosmological constructs on the role and authority of ancestors in constructing his theology.

In Chapter Five Nyamiti's theories were offered up for critical theological evaluation, during which both strengths and weaknesses were discovered in its relation to the doctrines of the Church. On the positive side, his proposed christology and ecclesiology utilise the worldview of those who believe in the authority of the ancestors in order to explain the significance of Christ to them with familiar and thus easily digestible concepts. Nyamiti made this possible by transcending theological discourse in his christology and ecclesiology in likening the role of Jesus Christ to the functions of the traditional African ancestors. Yet he is unable to fully demonstrate his argument in the context of the universal Church according to the parameters that he has established for himself, so that his constructs are limited to being a 'local theology'.

In the course of developing an African theology, theologians must recognise the fact that, to date, ancestor-based beliefs and practices remain deep-seated in the hearts and minds of Bantu-speaking peoples. With this in mind, I believe that Nyamiti offers a significant contribution to African theological debate through his attempts to involve himself in a dialogue that embraces both his cultural origins and his Christian faith. His work seeks both to identify and elucidate christological concepts from the perspective of his peoples' worldview and contemporary experience. This effort, limited though it may be, offers encouragement to others attempting to interpret Christianity within the framework of ancestor veneration.

The analysis and theological evaluation of Nyamiti's christology and ecclesiology has offered a clear picture of the foundations upon which ancestor theology (christology and ecclesiology) can be constructed in African theology. This study sought to answer some of the complex questions raised by both theologians and students of theology, including myself, concerning the issues raised by attempts to construct African Christian theologies based on Bantu cosmologies, particularly those focusing on the role and function of ancestors.

I therefore conclude that, inasmuch as African (Bantu) cultural thought-patterns for instance, belief in the authority of ancestors is embraced in the society, the incarnation of a radical gospel among the people should be given the priority other than formulating theologies which are not in line with the gospel in terms of context. But this does not deny the fact that Christian revelation in Africa (among the Bantu-speaking peoples) must not relate to the pattern of its culture, institutions, its form of inter-personal relations, and at a more profound level, its values, philosophy and worldview. The most important aspect that theologians in African must be keen of while constructing theologies in consideration of their peoples' worldviews is retaining the salvific message during the process of relating cultural thought-patterns to the gospel; for if it is lost the validity of the doctrine in its totality may be brought into question. In this case, Nyamiti's theological construct has some methodological as well as theological flaws.

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B. list of personalities interviewed, date, and place of interview

Name	**Date**	**Place**
Bediako Kwame	10.03.2000	Pietermaritzburg – Natal University
Tinyiko Sam Maluleke	15.02.2000	Pietermaritzburg – Natal University