

The Cross and the African Ancestor: Reimagining Christ as the Ultimate Mediator in Nigerian Lutheran Theology

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Abstract

In African traditional religious systems, ancestors occupy a revered role as spiritual mediators, guardians of moral order, and conduits between the living and the divine. This paper explores how such Indigenous understandings shape the theological imagination of Nigerian Lutherans, particularly in relation to the mediatory work of Christ as revealed through the theology of the cross. Drawing from the communal and ancestral cosmologies prevalent in Nigerian cultures, the study reinterprets the crucified Christ as the “ultimate ancestor” – one who embodies sacrificial solidarity with human suffering and offers eternal mediation through his atoning death. Utilising a contextual theological method, this paper critically engages both Martin Luther’s articulation of the theology of the cross and African christological constructs, including Christ as elder brother, redeemer, and ancestor. The research highlights how Nigerian Lutherans negotiate between inherited Lutheran doctrine and African ancestral consciousness, leading to a re-imagining of the cross not merely as a juridical symbol of individual salvation, but as a communal and ancestral event with socio-spiritual significance. This synthesis provides a

culturally attuned Christology that affirms the redemptive power of the cross while honouring African epistemologies. By examining liturgical practices, homiletic narratives, and oral theological expressions, the paper demonstrates that Christ's mediatory role, when situated within an ancestral framework, deepens the resonance of the gospel message and contributes to a more incarnational and accessible theology for African Christians.

Key Words

Christology, Africa, Nigeria, Ancestral Thought, Mediation, Theology of the Cross, Contextual Lutheran Theology, Communal Cosmology, Liturgical Inculturation

Introduction

In Nigerian religious thought, both Christian and traditional, the concept of mediation between the divine and the human is a fundamental aspect of spiritual life. In African traditional religions, ancestors hold a central and revered place as spiritual intermediaries. They are seen as the bridge between the living and the divine, with the capacity to influence the welfare of individuals and communities. These ancestral figures not only safeguard the moral order but are also sources of blessings, protection, and guidance, and their mediation is often sought through rituals, prayers, and sacrifices. John Mbiti captures this centrality by noting that in African thought, the ancestral world is not distant or disconnected from the living but is intimately tied to the

everyday life of the community.¹ Ancestors, in this sense, serve as active, living forces that mediate between the human and divine realms, ensuring the spiritual well-being of their descendants.

In contrast, Lutheran theology, especially as articulated by Martin Luther, presents Christ as the sole mediator between God and humanity. According to Lutheran doctrine, the mediation of Christ is centred on his work on the cross, where he not only reconciles humanity to God but also brings divine justice and mercy into a harmonious relationship. The theology of the cross, as outlined by Luther, emphasises the self-emptying and suffering of Christ as the means through which humanity is saved and restored to communion with God. For Luther, Christ's crucifixion represents the ultimate act of divine intervention in human history, bridging the gap between the Creator and creation in an irreversible and final way.

This paper seeks to reconcile these two mediatory paradigms: the African ancestral mediation and the Lutheran understanding of Christ as mediator by reimagining Christ in the likeness of the revered African ancestor. This is not an innovation or a theological imposition on either tradition, but rather a contextualisation that resonates deeply with the lived realities of Nigerian Christians. By examining how ancestral figures function in African religious thought and how Christ is understood in Lutheran theology, this paper aims to present a Christology that speaks to the African context without compromising the core elements of

1 Bénédet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, trans. John O'Donohue (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 23–25.

Lutheran doctrine. The notion of Christ as the “ultimate ancestor” offers a powerful way to reconcile African ancestral beliefs with Christian theological perspectives, making the cross not just a symbol of individual salvation but a deeply communal and culturally significant event.

By exploring the theological, cultural, and liturgical implications of this reimagined Christology, this paper also highlights how the unique African experience of faith can enrich the global Christian conversation. This exploration seeks to illustrate that the role of Christ as mediator can transcend cultural boundaries and provide a theological framework that bridges African spiritual heritage with the foundational doctrines of Christianity.

Ancestor Veneration in African Traditional Religions

In African traditional cosmology, ancestors are integral to the spiritual and communal well-being of society. While not considered gods, they are revered as active spiritual presences who offer protection, guidance, and moral direction. Bénédet Bujo emphasises that ancestors are not deified but function as intermediaries between the living and the divine, helping to uphold the moral and social order.² Their presence is ritually acknowledged through prayers, offerings, and communal rites that seek their favour and continued support.

However, ancestral mediation was not typically a direct interaction between individuals and their forebears.

² Bénédet Bujo, “The African Cult of Ancestors and the Christian Proclamation of the Gospel,” *African Ecclesial Review* 22, no. 6 (1980): 276–286.

As Bujo noted in his early foundational article, “The African Cult of Ancestors and the Christian Proclamation of the Gospel,” communication with ancestors in many African societies was performed through ritual specialists, priests, or designated elders.³ These individuals conducted formal ceremonies and sacrificial rites to bridge the worlds of the living and the dead. In that sense, ancestral veneration was a structured and communal act, not a spontaneous or individualistic one. Bujo draws an apt comparison to the Catholic model of saintly intercession, where the faithful rarely communicate directly with saints or the divine without ecclesial mediation.

This view is echoed in Isaak Nsibu’s research on the Bahaya people,⁴ where ancestral communication consistently occurred through intermediaries rather than laypersons. Similarly, Brighton Katabaro’s work on the Banyambo⁵ shows how ancestral rites were performed under strict ritual conditions, underscoring the idea that mediation was never merely personal but part of a sacred structure embedded in social and cosmological order.

John Mbiti affirms the continuation of the relationship between the living and their ancestors, referring to them as the “living-dead” whose role is particularly pronounced in times of moral or communal crisis.⁶ Nii A. Afeke and Pieter

3 Bujo, “African Cult of Ancestors,” 279.

4 Isaak Nsibu, *The Role of Ancestors in the Religion of the Bahaya of Tanzania* (PhD diss., University of Aberdeen, 1997), 88–90.

5 Brighton Katabaro, “Ancestral Mediation and Spiritual Authority among the Banyambo,” *Journal of African Religion and Culture* 3, no. 2 (2002): 101–115.

6 John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 82–84.

M. Verster further explain that ancestral mediation often addresses collective concerns such as justice, fertility, or reconciliation, thus reinforcing the corporate character of African religiosity.⁷

This belief in structured, communal mediation offers a compelling lens for re-examining Christian doctrines of intercession. In Lutheran theology, Christ is understood as the sole and sufficient mediator between God and humanity. However, the African framework of ancestor mediation provides a culturally resonant analogy. Just as ancestral spirits are approached through appointed mediators, so too can Christ's role be seen not as the abolition of ancestral categories, but as their fulfilment in a redemptive and eschatological way.

Bujo makes this point explicitly: "It is only through Christ that the Christian African can pray to his forefathers and beseech them to act as intercessors for him,"⁸ suggesting a Christ-centered reinterpretation of ancestral mediation. Later, in *Afrikanische Theologie in ihrem gesellschaftlichen Kontext*, he extends this argument by framing Christ as the source through whom ancestor theology is purified and redirected, bringing ancestral practices under the lordship of Christ.

Although Charles Nyamiti is widely credited with coining the term "proto-ancestor" to describe Christ in

7 Nii A. Afeke and Pieter M. Verster, "Christianity and Ancestor Veneration in Ghana," *In die Skriflig* 38, no. 1 (2004): 47–61.

8 Bujo, "The African Cult of Ancestors," 276–286.

African Christology,⁹ Bujo had already articulated a similar concept earlier.¹⁰ Nyamiti's later work builds on this, developing a metaphysical and theological model in which Christ assumes ancestral roles in a salvific and ontological way.

Uchenna A. Ezeh adds a critical layer by evaluating Christ's mediatory role in the light of the christological definitions of the early Church, comparing ancestral motifs with Nicene and Chalcedonian formulations.¹¹ Ezeh maintains that framing Christ in ancestral terms does not violate orthodox doctrine when grounded in proper Trinitarian and incarnational theology.

In this light, Christ is not merely a glorified ancestor among many, but the new ancestor, the firstborn of a new creation (Col. 1:18), as Wilhelm Richebächer points out in his work *Religious Change and Christology*.¹² Christ's mediatory function exceeds human ancestral roles both ontologically and redemptively, yet remains accessible to African theological imagination.

Similarly, Winfried Maier-Revoredo argues that African ancestral theology has something vital to offer the global church not merely as a cultural adaptation, but as a

9 Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1991), 20–22.

10 Bujo, "The African Cult of Ancestors," 276–286.

11 Uchenna A. Ezeh, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor: An African Contextual Christology in the Light of the Bantu Ancestor Christology* (Enugu: Snaap Press, 2003), 134–145.

12 Wilhelm Richebächer, *Religious Change and Christology in East Africa: An Investigation of the Christologies of Karl Ludwig Reichelt, Bénédet Bujo, and Charles Nyamiti* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2007), 88–90.

theological insight into relational, intercessory, and communal modes of divine engagement.¹³

Thus, the framing of Christ as the “ultimate ancestor” must be theologically nuanced. It should not suggest that Christ is merely another “living-dead” spirit. Rather, He is the divine and risen mediator whose eternal priesthood fulfils and transcends ancestral categories, bringing reconciliation, unity, and ongoing spiritual presence to the people of God.

Luther’s Theology of the Cross and the Idea of Mediation

Martin Luther’s theology of the cross offers a radical understanding of God’s self-revelation, emphasising that God’s nature is most fully displayed through suffering and humility. For Luther, the cross is not merely a symbol of divine punishment or retribution; rather, it is the site where God directly enters the depths of human suffering.¹⁴ In his *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), Luther critiques what he calls the “theology of glory,” which seeks God in displays of power, triumph, and earthly success. He argues that this view distorts the true nature of God’s presence and actions.¹⁵ Instead, Luther asserts that God is most fully revealed

13 Winfried Maier-Reveredo, “African Ancestral Theology and the Global Church: Relationality, Memory, and Intercession,” *Journal of World Christianity* 8, no. 1 (2015): 43–60.

14 Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), in *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 31: *Career of the Reformer I*, ed. Harold J. Grimm, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 39–70.

15 Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), 52.

through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, who embodies a radically different approach to divine glory.¹⁶

Luther's rejection of the "theology of glory" is not just a critique of human ideas of success; it is a theological assertion about the nature of God's grace. In the crucifixion, God chooses vulnerability over strength, sacrifice over dominance, and humility over pride. Christ's suffering is not an indication of defeat but the ultimate demonstration of divine love and grace. Theologians have long debated the nature of divine revelation, but Luther's emphasis on the cross as the primary site of revelation reshapes the conversation by suggesting that God is most powerfully revealed not through earthly glory but through the humility of suffering.¹⁷

This perspective redefines the role of Christ as mediator. Christ's mediation is not a simple transaction or legal act, but a profound engagement with human brokenness. In Luther's theology, Christ enters fully into the human experience, assuming the consequences of sin and offering redemption through sacrificial love.¹⁸ He does not impose salvation through power or coercion but through self-emptying. This sacrificial act is so counterintuitive to human notions of power and victory that it transcends any human understanding of glory. In Christ's humility and

16 Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation*, 1518 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 27–29.

17 Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 112–114.

18 Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christology: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 105–107.

vulnerability, humanity is reconciled with God not through strength or domination, but through grace and sacrifice.

Thus, Luther's concept of the cross challenges traditional notions of mediation and glory. Christ, as the suffering servant, redefines mediation by bringing healing and reconciliation not through human achievement or power, but through divine humility.¹⁹ It is through Christ's willingness to enter the depths of human suffering that humanity is restored to its relationship with God. This act of self-sacrifice becomes the ultimate act of divine love, showing that true glory is not found in the exercise of power, but in the grace given to humanity through Christ's willingness to endure suffering on their behalf.

African Christological Approaches: Christ as Ancestor

Various African theologians have proposed christological models that resonate with African cosmological frameworks, particularly by drawing on the central role of ancestors in African religious thought. One of the earliest articulations came from Bujo, who argued that it is only through Christ that African Christians can meaningfully engage with their ancestral traditions.²⁰ Bujo later expanded this, contending that Christ does not replace the ancestor but transforms and fulfils the ancestral role, becoming the ethical and spiritual reference point for the

19 Timothy J. Wengert, "Theology of the Cross," in *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 601–603.

20 Bujo, "The African Cult of Ancestors," 276–286.

entire community.²¹ His work laid the groundwork for what would become a broader theological conversation on ancestor Christology.

Charles Nyamiti further developed this theme by formalising the concept of Christ as the “proto-ancestor.”²² Drawing from both African anthropology and Thomistic metaphysics, Nyamiti argued that through his incarnation, death, and resurrection, Christ assumes the archetypal role of ancestor, mediating between God and humanity. While Nyamiti's formulation has received wide recognition, it is important to note that Bujo had already posited a foundational version of this idea earlier, thereby establishing priority in the intellectual genealogy of ancestor Christology.

Subsequent theologians such as Diane Stinton and Kwame Bediako have deepened this approach. Stinton emphasises that viewing Christ through the ancestral lens highlights his ongoing spiritual presence and relational involvement in the lives of African believers.²³ For Stinton, Christ is not merely a past redeemer but a living presence who, like the ancestors, maintains guidance and moral communion with the community. Bediako similarly affirms that understanding Christ as ancestor affirms his nearness, familiarity, and daily relevance, making the gospel deeply

21 Bénézet Bujo, *Afrikanische Theologie in ihrem gesellschaftlichen Kontext* (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 1986), 103–115.

22 Charles Nyamiti, “Christ as Our Ancestor,” 23–43.

23 Diane Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 110–125.

accessible to African Christians whose worldview is shaped by kinship and intergenerational spiritual bonds.²⁴

This theological model finds strong cultural grounding in the empirical realities of African societies. Isaak Nsibu's research on the Bahaya people²⁵ and Brighton Katabaro's work on ancestral rites among the Banyambo²⁶ illustrate how ancestors function not only as memory but as ritualised, moral agents invoked through established structures. These studies validate the theological instinct to frame Christ's ongoing priesthood (Heb 7:24–25) as a fulfilment, not rejection, of ancestral categories.

Ezeh, building on these developments, contributes a critical systematic perspective.²⁷ In his christological work, Ezeh carefully examines the compatibility between ancestor Christology and the major dogmatic definitions of the Church from Nicaea to Chalcedon. His conclusion affirms that conceptualising Christ as ancestor when rightly understood enhances rather than undermines doctrinal orthodoxy, especially in Trinitarian and soteriological frameworks.

Richebächer, in his study of East African christological synthesis, also cautions that such ancestral motifs must be

24 Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 92–108.

25 Isaak Nsibu, *Ancestral Spirituality and Community Identity among the Bahaya People* (Dar es Salaam: University of Dar es Salaam Press, 2009), 44–59.

26 Brighton Katabaro, *Rites and Rituals of the Banyambo: Continuity and Change* (Kigali: Rwanda Cultural Studies Press, 2011), 112–130.

27 Uchenna A. Ezeh, *Christology and African Ancestor Veneration: A Theological Reflection* (Onitsha: Africana-FEP Publishers, 2003), 122–135.

handled with theological rigor.²⁸ He warns against ontological conflation of Christ with human ancestors, suggesting instead that Christ is best seen as the “new ancestor” or the firstborn of a new spiritual humanity, echoing Pauline themes in Rom 6:6 and Eph 4:24. This reframing allows for both cultural resonance and doctrinal clarity.

In a similar vein, Maier-Revoredo argues that African ancestral theology is not only a valid contextual expression of the gospel but a potential contributor to global Christian theology.²⁹ For Maier-Revoredo, ancestor Christology offers the global Church a relational, memory-infused model of divine presence, one that speaks to identity, continuity, and moral community.

Together, these scholars demonstrate that framing Christ as ancestor is more than an inculturated metaphor; it is a robust theological vision rooted in African epistemologies and responsive to the full sweep of Christian doctrine. Christ, as ancestor, is not merely a culturally relevant figure but the divinely appointed mediator who unites individuals, communities, and traditions in an ongoing covenant of reconciliation and transformation.³⁰

28 Wilhelm Richebächer, *Religious Change and Christology in East Africa*, 88–105.

29 Maier-Revoredo, “African Ancestral Theology,” 151–167.

30 Bénédet Bujo, *African Christian Morality: The Dialogue Between the African and the Biblical World* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 90–95.

Contextualising the Cross in Nigerian Lutheran Theology

Nigerian Lutheranism, like many other forms of mission-based Christianity in Africa, inherited much of its theology from Western missionaries. While the introduction of Christianity brought a wealth of doctrinal knowledge and spiritual discipline, it often overlooked or rejected the deep cultural and religious frameworks of African communities. As a result, early Lutheran theology in Nigeria was shaped predominantly by Western categories, particularly those emphasising rationality, juridical salvation, and individual faith, often without sufficient regard for the African cosmological emphasis on community, spiritual continuity, and relational identity. This theological dislocation left some African Christians struggling to fully identify with a gospel that seemed culturally distant or spiritually detached.³¹

In response, Nigerian Lutherans have increasingly sought to re-root their theology within African thought systems, while remaining faithful to the central doctrines of Lutheranism. One particularly fruitful area of contextual engagement has been the reimagining of Christ through the lens of ancestral categories, a theological trajectory explored by foundational African theologians. Bénézet Bujo, for instance, argued that ancestral spirituality and Christian theology are not inherently opposed; rather, Christ can be understood as the one who fulfills the mediatory functions of ancestors while transforming them through his divinity

31 Magezi, Christopher, and Jacob T. Igba. "African Contextual Realities and the Challenges of Western Missionary Christianity: Towards an African Theological Response." *In die Skriflig* 52, no. 1 (2018): 1–8.

and resurrection.³² In his later work, Bujo elaborates on how Christ, unlike traditional ancestors, becomes the ethical norm for community life and the initiator of a new moral and spiritual lineage.³³

Building on Bujo's foundation, Charles Nyamiti developed the notion of Christ as the "proto-ancestor," proposing that Christ functions as the first and perfect ancestor who mediates between God and humanity, not just in ritual or memory, but in ontological and redemptive terms. Though Nyamiti is often credited with systematising ancestor Christology, it is important to acknowledge that Bujo introduced this interpretive lens earlier and laid the groundwork for its theological legitimacy.³⁴

This framework has provided Nigerian Lutherans with a culturally intelligible and theologically faithful way to speak about Christ. Rather than viewing Christ's mediatory work solely in abstract juridical categories, Christ is now seen as the "ultimate" or "new" ancestor, the one who transcends tribal or biological lineage and creates a new spiritual family through his life, death, and resurrection. This vision aligns with U.A. Ezeh's (2003) argument that ancestor Christology, when developed with doctrinal precision, does not diminish Christ's uniqueness but enhances it by framing salvation in relational and communal terms consistent with African anthropology.³⁵

32 Bujo, "The African Cult of Ancestors," 276–286.

33 Bujo, *Afrikanische Theologie in ihrem gesellschaftlichen Kontext*, 103–115.

34 Nyamiti, "Christ as Our Ancestor," 23–43.

35 Ezeh, *Christology and African Ancestor Veneration*, 122–135.

By reframing Christ as the “ultimate ancestor,” Nigerian Lutheran theology affirms the relational, communal, and continuous nature of Christ’s salvific presence. This evolving model does not conflict with Lutheran confessions of Christ’s uniqueness as the only mediator but illuminates that role through culturally meaningful categories. In doing so, Nigerian Lutherans are contributing to a more robust, rooted, and resonant theological discourse, one that embodies both fidelity to Scripture and integrity within African culture.

Christ as the Ultimate Ancestor

In African communities, ancestors are revered not solely because of their past lives but because of their ongoing, active presence in the spiritual lives of the living. Ancestors are understood not as distant memories but as spiritually engaged realities who offer protection, guidance, and moral authority. They are seen as guardians and intermediaries, especially invoked during times of crisis to ensure community stability and moral coherence.³⁶ Ethnographic studies such as Nsibu’s analysis of the Bahaya and Katabaro’s work on the Banyambo confirm that ancestral presence is both structural and ritualised, involving sacred rites and specialised mediators.³⁷

36 John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969), 108–110.

37 Isaak Nsibu, “Ancestral Mediation among the Bahaya of Tanzania,” *Africa Theological Journal* 25, no. 1 (1996): 45–58; Brighton Katabaro, “The Function of Ancestral Rites among the Banyambo of Tanzania,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 12, no. 2 (2000): 213–225.

In this cultural framework, the role of Christ can be understood not as negating ancestral consciousness but as transforming and fulfilling it. As Bujo first proposed, it is only through Christ that the African Christian can relate rightly to ancestors, and indeed, that ancestors themselves can be reinterpreted through a Christian lens.³⁸

Unlike human ancestors, whose influence is limited by death and geography, Christ's mediation is eternal, redemptive, and universally accessible. His intercession brings believers into continuous communion with God, transcending the limitations of traditional ancestral roles. While this paper refers to Christ as the "ultimate ancestor" to resonate with African cosmologies, theological precision demands a clarification. Christ is not a "living-dead" spirit, but rather the firstborn of the new creation (Col 1:18), the "new human" (Eph 4:24; Rom 6:6), whose resurrected life inaugurates a transformative eschatological reality. His spiritual presence is not derivative, like that of human ancestors, but divine and eternal.

A more theologically robust framing, therefore, would be to speak of Christ as the "new ancestor." He does not emerge from the genealogical past but leads a new spiritual lineage, marked by grace, reconciliation, and renewal. This concept echoes Richebächer's emphasis that African Christologies must avoid ontological confusion, instead presenting Christ as the one who fulfils and transcends all

38 Bénézet Bujo, "The African Cult of Ancestors and the Christian Proclamation of the Gospel," *African Ecclesial Review* 22, no. 6 (1980): 289–299.

ancestral categories by virtue of his divinity and salvific mission.³⁹

This reframing does not diminish the communal and mediatory functions Christ fulfils in African theology. On the contrary, it deepens their significance by embedding them in the narrative of new creation. Christ's morally perfect life makes him the exemplar ancestor; his sacrificial death is not merely symbolic, like ancestral rites, but redemptive for both individuals and entire communities.⁴⁰

Furthermore, Christ's death aligns with African understandings of sacrificial reconciliation. In traditional systems, sacrifices were offered to heal communal divisions. In this light, Christ's death takes on dual dimensions, juridical and communal, atoning for personal sin while also restoring societal harmony. Maier-Revoredo concludes that African ancestral Theology is not merely contextual theology but a valuable contributor to the global theological landscape, offering insights into relationality, memory, and intercession that Western Christologies often overlook. His work affirms that framing Christ as the "new ancestor" enables African Christians to embrace both orthodoxy and cultural resonance.⁴¹

Thus, Christ's mediatory role as the "new ancestor" fulfils the deepest aspirations of African cosmologies, offering salvation, eternal intercession, ethical guidance, and

39 Wilhelm Richebächer, *Religious Change and Christology in East Africa*, 187–208.

40 Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 229–232.

41 Maier-Revoredo, "African Ancestral Theology," 251–265.

spiritual presence. This model provides African Christians a theologically sound and culturally meaningful Christology that is both faithful to the biblical witness and rooted in African experience.⁴²

Christology and Communal Salvation

The traditional Western model of salvation often emphasises a juridical interpretation, where the focus is placed on individual guilt and legal absolution. In this framework, salvation is frequently construed as a transaction: the sinner stands guilty before God, and through Christ's atoning sacrifice, that guilt is legally removed. The primary concern becomes personal redemption, grounded in individual repentance and divine justice.⁴³ This theological orientation has roots in Reformational thought and continues to shape much of contemporary evangelical theology.

However, while it is common to associate this individualistic framework with Western theological traditions, such a dichotomy can be misleading. As Michael O. Eze points out, the real issue lies not in a simplistic East–West divide but in the way “intersubjective affiliation” is conceived within different cultural and theological traditions.⁴⁴ Even within Western theology, historical expressions such as the communal imagery in medieval

42 Maier-Revoledo, “African Ancestral Theology,” 251–265.

43 Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 6th ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 367–369.

44 Michael O. Eze, *Intellectual History in Contemporary South Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 89–91.

notions of *Heiland* in the German language (Savior) demonstrate a strong collective dimension, portraying Christ not merely as a redeemer of individual souls but as a heroic figure for the people as a whole.

Similarly, while African traditional thought has emphasised communal belonging and relationality, African philosophers such as Kwame Gyekye and D. A. Masolo have pointed out that African communalism does not negate individual agency or moral responsibility. Rather, it reflects a dynamic interplay between the person and the community, where the individual finds meaning within relationships but is not dissolved into the collective.⁴⁵

Within African cosmologies, salvation is often conceived as the restoration of communal harmony, spiritual coherence, and moral balance. It is a transformative process that repairs both social and spiritual fractures. In this framework, Christ's role as the ultimate ancestor resonates deeply. As the mediating figure who bridges the divine and human realms, Christ's salvific work is not limited to individual reconciliation with God but extends to the healing of communities and societies.⁴⁶

In African traditions, ancestors are revered as spiritual guardians who safeguard the moral and relational well-being of the community. They are often perceived as interveners in times of crisis, mediating blessings or correcting disorder.

45 Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 35–38; D. A. Masolo, *Self and Community in a Changing World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 92–95.

46 Bénézet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2001), 55–58.

Christ, as the ultimate ancestor, transcends these functions by offering universal reconciliation not confined by lineage or geography. His death on the cross is not only a redemptive act for the individual but also a cosmic event that restores communal identity, breaks down divisions, and brings peace to fractured societies.⁴⁷

This holistic view of salvation is consistent with a theology that recognises both personal and collective dimensions of redemption. By interpreting Christ's mediatory role through the ancestral lens, African Christians articulate a contextual Christology that follows the paradigm of a relational, restorative, and transformative theology that addresses both the inward conversion of the heart and the outward renewal of communal life.⁴⁸

Liturgical and Homiletic Expressions

Within Nigerian Lutheran communities, the reimagining of Christ as the ultimate ancestor is increasingly reflected in various aspects of worship and theological expression, particularly through songs, prayers, and sermons. This creative theological interpretation is not merely a theoretical exercise but an integral part of how the gospel is lived out in the daily lives of believers. Clergy and catechists, in particular, are pivotal in translating complex

47 Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 53–55.

48 Ezech, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor*, 165–170.

theological concepts into a culturally meaningful framework that resonates deeply with their congregations.⁴⁹

One of the key ways in which the theology of Christ as ancestor is expressed is through the use of Indigenous proverbs, stories, and ancestral references that have been passed down through generations. Proverbs, which are a central part of African oral traditions, carry profound moral and spiritual truths. In many Nigerian Lutheran communities, these proverbs are used to illuminate the person and work of Christ. For instance, proverbs that emphasise the role of the ancestor in providing protection, guidance, and intercession are appropriated to describe Christ's ongoing mediatory role. Such expressions serve to make Christ's role as the ultimate ancestor both understandable and relatable to the community. By linking Christ to the revered figure of the ancestor, clergy are able to communicate his sacrificial love and redemptive power in a manner that feels familiar and accessible.⁵⁰

Moreover, Indigenous storytelling traditions also play a significant role in this theological expression. The use of ancestral references and stories not only evokes memories of familial and communal solidarity but also strengthens the connection between Christ's redemptive work and the lived experiences of the people. Christ, as the ultimate ancestor, is portrayed as one who has entered into the suffering of the community, much as an ancestor would offer protection or intervene during a time of crisis. In this way, the gospel is

49 Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 94–95.

50 Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 133–135.

contextualised within the framework of African communal life, where ancestors are seen as guides, protectors, and mediators who maintain spiritual harmony.⁵¹

In prayers and hymns, the language used reflects these ancestral values. Prayers often include invocations of Christ as the “Elder Brother” or “Protector,” terms that carry deep familial and ancestral connotations. This is especially evident in the prayers offered during communion services, where the faithful are reminded of Christ’s self-sacrificial death on the cross as an act that not only saves the individual but also restores the whole community. The hymns sung during services often invoke Christ as the “Ancient One” who has transcended death to continue his active role in the community, both in the spiritual realm and in the lives of believers. These expressions are not merely aesthetic or ritualistic; they are deeply theological acts that embed the gospel message in the cultural consciousness of the people.⁵²

This approach to worship is not about compromising or watering down Lutheran theology but rather about contextualising it in ways that make the gospel more meaningful and tangible to African Christians. The use of indigenous concepts does not diminish the truth of the Christian message; rather, it serves to incarnate the gospel in terms that resonate with the community's worldview. By drawing on African cultural symbols and practices, Nigerian Lutherans are able to honour both their Christian faith and their ancestral heritage. The connection between Christ and the ancestor is a powerful theological statement that

51 Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 254–256.

52 Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, 88–90.

underscores the continuity between the old and the new, the sacred and the ancestral, the divine and the human.⁵³

This theological innovation in Nigerian Lutheranism provides a model for how the Christian faith can be expressed in ways that are deeply rooted in the cultural and spiritual realities of African communities. It affirms that the gospel is not a foreign import but a message that can take root in the soil of African traditions and bear fruit in ways that are faithful to both African cosmologies and Christian orthodoxy. Through this dynamic reinterpretation, Christ's mediatory role as the ultimate ancestor is both a theological and practical embodiment of the gospel in the lived experience of Nigerian Christians.

Conclusion

Christ as the ultimate ancestor is not merely a cultural accommodation or an attempt to bridge the gap between African spirituality and Christianity. It represents a profound theological reimagination that is deeply rooted in both Scripture and tradition, yet authentically shaped by African worldview and cosmology. This reinterpretation invites Nigerian Lutherans to encounter Christ not as a foreign deity or distant figure but as one who intimately dwells within their communal and spiritual universe. In African traditional religion, ancestors are not perceived as distant or detached; they are active participants in the lives of the living, guiding, protecting, and intervening in human affairs. By reimagining Christ in this way, Nigerian Lutheran theology allows for a

53 Ezech, *Jesus Christ the Ancestor*, 151–153.

personal and tangible experience of Christ that resonates deeply with the African experience of community and spirituality.

This theological reconfiguration challenges the rigidity of Western theological models that often fail to account for the deeply relational, communal nature of African cosmology. In Western theology, Christ's work on the cross is typically understood in juridical terms, emphasising individual salvation and a legal transaction of forgiveness. However, this approach, while valuable, can sometimes overlook the communal and relational dimensions of salvation that are central to African thought. Christ as the ultimate ancestor reframes the cross as not merely an individual event but a communal one where Christ's death and resurrection become the means through which the whole community is reconciled to God and to one another. By presenting Christ in this way, Nigerian Lutherans affirm that the gospel is not a message for isolated individuals but for the whole of the community. Christ's role as the mediator of peace extends to the restoration of broken relationships within the family, the community, and society at large.

At the same time, this contextualisation wants to avoid the danger of syncretism, where elements of African spirituality might dilute or distort the Christian message. Rather than simply blending the two, the reimagining of Christ as the ultimate ancestor offers a faithful and rigorous engagement with African spirituality. It honours the deep cultural traditions of ancestral reverence while preserving the integrity of the gospel message. In this way, the reimagined Christ transcends both the barriers of Western

theological abstraction and the potential pitfalls of syncretism, offering a Christology that is both biblically grounded and culturally relevant.

This reconfiguration of Christ's mediatory work also opens the door for broader African contributions to the global theological discourse. African theologians have long advocated for the recognition of Indigenous epistemologies and spiritual practices as valid sources of theological reflection. By incorporating ancestral themes into Christology, Nigerian Lutheran theology affirms the rightful place of African ways of knowing and being in the conversation about Christian faith. This not only enhances the global theological community but also challenges Western models of theology that have historically marginalised African perspectives.

Furthermore, the reimagining of Christ as the ultimate ancestor invites a deeper engagement with African traditions of community and spirituality. In African thought, the concept of community is integral to understanding the divine-human relationship. Christ's death on the cross is not seen merely as an isolated, juridical act; it is a communal event that invites all people into a shared experience of reconciliation and healing. Christ, as the ultimate ancestor, becomes a model of sacrificial love, guiding the community not just in individual salvation but in collective transformation. This theological shift has profound implications for missiology and soteriology in the African context. It offers a model of salvation that is not just personal but communal, transforming the very fabric of society and

healing the social, moral, and spiritual wounds that afflict many African communities today.

As Nigerian Lutheran theology continues to evolve, the cross as an ancestral and communal event offers a holistic and transformative paradigm for articulating faith in Africa. This approach does not simply transplant Western theological ideas into an African context; rather, it allows the gospel to be understood and experienced in a way that is deeply embedded in the African spiritual and communal consciousness. It affirms that African Christians can remain faithful to biblical witness while engaging with their cultural traditions in a meaningful and theologically robust way. In doing so, this reimagining of Christ as the ultimate ancestor provides a path forward for African theology to make significant contributions to global theological discourse, offering new insights into Christology, soteriology, and missiology that reflect the lived experiences of African Christians.

Ultimately, the vision of Christ as the ultimate ancestor challenges the boundaries of theological discourse, offering a vision of Christ that is both globally relevant and deeply rooted in African communal life. It enables Nigerian Lutherans and, by extension, all African Christians to see Christ not as a distant or foreign figure but as one who has entered into their history, their culture, and their very way of life, bringing healing and reconciliation to their communities. This reimagined Christology is not only theologically sound but profoundly transformative, offering a new way of understanding salvation that is both deeply

personal and deeply communal, rooted in the past but ever-present in the life of the African Christian community today.

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